

The Home Guard in Selmeston

The 20th Sussex (Hailsham) Battalion Home Guard was formed at a meeting held at Hailsham police station in May 1940. It was given the official title of 'B' Battalion Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) and was one of twenty-four similar units in Sussex.

Parades often took place with the volunteers using broom handles fixed with bayonets, along with pitchforks to be used with rifles. The Village Hall was often used for these parades and briefings. In December 1940 the name of the battalion was changed to the *20th Sussex (Hailsham) Battalion Home Guard*, Winston Churchill expressing the view that the original name was uninspiring.

During the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, German aircrew who had landed by parachute were quickly made prisoners of war by the Home Guard. In April 1943, the Home Guard were given permission to recruit women, known as 'Home Guard auxiliaries', and they were employed mainly on intelligence, signal and driving duties. Fifty-six women were recruited in this district.

On November 1, 1944 the battalion was 'stood down' from its duties, and by December 3 had paraded in all the local villages in a final farewell. The battalion personnel received one MBE along with nine commander-in-chief awards for gallantry and good service during WWII.



No 17 Platoon 20th Sussex Battalion Home Guard

Left to right

*Front row: 1 DORIS BAKER (women's land army) 2 LOGAN THOMPSON 4 H.A. DAVIES 5 JACK STANDING 6 LAKER 7 GEORGE CATCHPOLE 8 MAVIS HEMMINGS (women's land army)
Second row: 1 BECKET STANDING 3 BILL WEST 5 GILBERT WEST 6 DANE MOCKETT 7 WALTER HIGGINS Third row: 1 BERT PRODGER 3 DICK TICEHURST 5 ERIC MOORE 8 REG BOYS*

Recollections of a Home Guard

Len Pike lived at Culverake in Selmeston 1955 - 2021, the year he married his late wife Margaret (nee Davis). Culverake had been her family home since 1938, the year the house was built. Her father, Harold, was an officer in the 20th Sussex Battalion Home Guard, and used the house as an armoury for the local platoon. Len remembers Margaret telling him that almost every room was stocked up with some form of armament or explosive throughout the war years until late 1944. This could have been disastrous, as two bombs jettisoned by the Luftwaffe one night on their route home exploded in both the front and back gardens.

In 1943, Len was sixteen years old and living in Langley with his parents, whilst working at Hankham Hall Farm in Hankham. His father was a local builder and amongst other things helped to erect the four metal lattice pylons used in the radar at RAF Wartling which played a prominent part in the Battle of Britain. Len recalls his time in the home guard at Hankham:

*I worked on the farm with several other farmhands, who were either too young to volunteer for the services, or classed as being in a reserved occupation, but they had all volunteered for the home guard and encouraged me to do the same. I enlisted at Eastbourne in the 21st Battalion, and they wanted me to be attached at Langley, but because I worked at Hankham and knew the area, I joined that platoon (about thirty men). We were given a battledress uniform and trained to use the Lee Enfield P14 and No 4 rifle. Every Sunday we would have to go to the woods at Laughton and shoot off ten rounds apiece at a target. The locals knew not to go there, and I think someone did put up a red flag on the footpath, in order to warn any walkers. Anyway, I became quite good at shooting and was classed as a 'marksman' and allowed to sew a badge of crossed rifles on the lower left sleeve of my uniform (I had to pay for the badge). We didn't do any marching practise as our officer said that if the Germans came we would be in a slit trench somewhere firing our rifles, with no need to look smart marching! My main duty was in signals and I attended a course at our headquarters at Polegate where I was instructed to read Morse Code and other types of signals. As a result of that, I had to report to our officers' house in Hankham for duty with another recruit from 7pm until 7am, where a telephone was installed with our radio. This was known as 'sleeper guard duty' : just waiting for a call to come through from another post, and relaying that on. Being a pair, one of us had the opportunity to sleep, but we didn't. I had weekends off and came over to Selmeston by bus in order to see Margaret. She later joined the WAAF and worked as a mechanic on Lancaster aircraft in Yorkshire, which made it impossible to see each other. Our platoon were finally stood down in November 1944, and our last parade was at Pevensey Castle. Many years after the war I found out that Tom Dinnis from Mays Farm in Selmeston, and Tom Smith from Firle, were part of the highly secret auxiliary unit of the home guard (known as 203 Battalion). **



21st Battalion Sussex Home Guard – Len Pike's platoon, at Hankham

* This was one of the best-kept secrets of WWII. In May 1940 Colonel Colin Gubbins was instructed to form a 'British Resistance' in order to cause havoc for any invading German army (Operation Sealion). These auxiliary units were highly trained in unarmed combat and the use of weapons and explosives, and were formed (most secretly) within the framework of the home guard. The official Auxiliary Unit Training Manual was disguised as *The Countryman's Diary* and contained instructions such as how to make explosives, and remaining clandestine. The units were organised into small localised patrols, and they were instructed that if the invasion occurred, the recruits would lie hidden in deep underground bunkers (known as operational base), only coming out at night to blow up roads, bridges and railway lines. These hideouts were equipped with explosives and firearms, along with food and rum to last only two weeks, as this would be their life expectancy after invasion. One of the hideouts for the Bishopstone Patrol (Badger 1) was located inside a large disused water storage tank on Hobb's Heath near Rathfinney Farm at Alfriston. Tom Dinnis was the leader of a seven-member group known as the Abbot's Wood Patrol near Arlington; access to their hideout was by way of a trapdoor attached to a log on top. Tom Smith was part of the four-man group known as the Firle Patrol (Badger 2), operating from a hideout constructed in the Firle plantation wood, just south of the village. Their trapdoor also had a log on top. Between them they were expected to blow up any enemy transport using the A27, along with destroying the main railway line and 'sniping' at any troops. There were 139 men in Sussex enrolled into these units, and they have never been officially recognised by the government-their files remain locked until 2020.



MACHINE GUN AND TEAM



SMITH GUN AND TEAM

20 Bn. Sussex H. G. - Company Commanders



20th Bn. HOME GUARD PERSONALITIES





Final photograph before disbandment in November 1944.

GOOD-BYE

In 1940 we answered the call
Reporting at once to our local Town Hall.
Sundays and weekdays we mustered and trained
And are now quite proud of the knowledge we've gained.
We've drilled and marched and as shots we're quite good,
And can make a neat job of clearing a wood.
We have carried out schemes right to the dawn
To end feeling washed out and partially worn.
Along the coast road we mounted patrol
Which was one more duty to add to our role.
We have done our night guards night after night
Just hoping one day to be "in" on the fight ;
But the Hun never gave us a chance to settle
What a Home Guard can do with good British "mettle"—
Maybe he knew that it wasn't worth while
To try to set foot upon England's fair Isle.
Now it's decided we're needed no more
Because Hitler won't try to land on this shore.
We've made some good friends ; we're pleased about that
(Though some of us don't like the new "bowler hat.")
Through the years to be this friendship will stay—
The Home Guard good feeling has pointed the way.



Information and Images from *The Secret Sussex Resistance* by Stewart Angell (Middleton Press)