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Wartime Bestwood

The importance of Bestwood's coal industry made it a target for Zeppelin airship bombing raids during the World War One conflict of 1914-18.

After the 11th Duke of St Albans died in 1934, his son Osborne de Vere inherited the Lodge and park. This inheritance brought with it crippling death duties and he decided to sell the estate in 1939. But nationally, larger issues were appearing that would affect some of that plan.

On September 3rd 1939 war was declared on Germany, and Bestwood like many large estates, was quickly taken over for military use by the War Office. Bestwood Lodge became *Army Headquarters of the Northern Command* and areas of the park were turned into a military campsite and base.

In June 1940, the remaining unsold lots of the estate were put up for sale by Public Auction at the Black Boy Hotel Nottingham. The 1940 sale catalogue describes the Bestwood Lodge on all its grand splendour right down to its 19 bedrooms and 60 acre grounds, and that the surrounding estate was 3,485 acres and included 15 farms for sale as separate lots.

The sale of the Lodge was affected for a time by its military use, but Nottingham Corporation bought most of the farm lots on the southern side of the park in order to build housing. Arnold's Urban Council bought land on the south east side, also for housing.

Besides the Bestwood auction, June 1940, also saw trainloads of exhausted soldiers arrive at the nearby small station of Daybrook. Road transport brought them into camps at Bestwood where they received badly needed rest and recuperation. Part of the ground floor of the Lodge was turned into a hospital to treat any casualties.

The soldiers were from the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) who had been shipped out to France to help stop the rapid German advance across Europe. Weeks later they were surrounded by the German army, and being evacuated from the French port of Dunkirk and nearby beaches and coastal areas, in an amazing rescue.

Between 27th May and the 4th June, over 800 naval ships and privately owned boats of all sizes, sailed across the English Channel, to bring the soldiers back. It was called *Operation Dynamo*, and around 338,226 British and Allied soldiers were saved from imminent capture.

A lesser known, and further extension of this rescue was *Operation Cycle*, which took place between 10th to the 13th June. This saw the rescue of a further 11,059 British and Allied soldiers from the French port of Le Havre.

The soldiers at Bestwood were eventually re-equipped and sent back to their various units.

Throughout 1939 to 1945 infantry and anti-tank training regularly took place at Bestwood. This training involved not only regular army units, but also those of the newly formed Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) who soon became known as the Home Guard (HG) – later more affectionately known as ‘Dad’s Army’.

A variety of army vehicles were used and based on-site including lorries, petrol tankers and Bren gun carriers. These 6 man vehicles were often seen tearing up and down through parts of the park. Underground petrol tanks were built around the Lodge to supply the army units with fuel. The fuel lines were set into brick tunnels and led away towards the Lodge stables.

A nearby soldiers’ bathhouse was also built. It was used on a 24 hour basis. Water pipes were lead to standpipes on the tented camp areas, and concrete plinths built for large wooden army huts, used for soldier’s accommodation during training exercises.

Barbed wire was laid, surrounding the key training areas. These included two rifle ranges, a grenade throwing area, and a battlefield defensive practise area which contained a complete layout of trenches and sandbagged defence works.

Sentry posts were placed at these key areas around the park, and access was strictly controlled. If you did not have the correct pass, paperwork or permission, you didn’t get in. Air raid shelters were built, including one near a sentry post on Warren Hill. It is thought an anti-aircraft site, either a searchlight or gun, was placed in the hills to east of Alexandra Lodge.

A 4.5 inch anti-aircraft gun stood on a reinforced banking in Goosedale, with two nearby Nissan metal huts for the gunners and the munitions areas where the shells were stored. This gun would also have helped defend Hucknall airfield from enemy air raids. (von Werra/Hucknall ‘the one that got away’ story here?)

From 1940 onwards vast areas of Sherwood Forest were used as areas for Ammunition Sub Depots (ASDs). Specially laid roads, loading platforms and narrow gauge railways were built under cover of the forested areas, to improve the movement of the very large quantities of ammunition involved. For example, even by 1949, the Birklands area of Sherwood, near Edwinstowe, still contained 100,000tons of munitions stored there.

In Bestwood itself, the village hall was used as temporary accommodation for people whose homes had been destroyed, until they could be re-housed. This was during the times when German bombers were regularly attacking the

large industrial towns of Nottingham, Sheffield and Birmingham. During the Nottingham Blitz of 8-9 May 1941, Bestwood miners going on night shift could see the sky turn bright red with the glow of burning buildings only a few miles away.

During the early months of 1944, Bestwood like all other military camps saw a gradual but very large build up of men, machines and supplies. Late May, early June saw Bestwood Park virtually empty overnight, as fleets of lorries, and trains carried the whole camps south. They became part of 'D-Day' on June 6th, the start of the allied invasion of Europe, which saw a massive seaborne invasion onto the beaches of Normandy in Northern France.

Bestwood Lodge stayed under military ownership after the end of the war in 1945. It became *East Midlands District Army Headquarters*. New houses were built nearby for more permanent accommodation for officers and men. The yearly Open Day and associated sporting events that army organised on the nearby fields became a major attraction in the area.

During the 1950s and 60s, the 49th Infantry Brigade (The Polar Bears) had their headquarters at the Lodge.

The army finally left Bestwood Park in March 1973. In 1973 the Lodge, its gardens and some nearby parkland was handed over to Gedling Borough Council, although the Regimental pay office of the Royal Army Pay Corps (RAPC) based in Bestwood Lodge didn't leave until 1977.

Many residential houses to the south of Bestwood Lodge are former army houses. The former soldiers' canteen or NAAFI, became a children's day nursery. The Lodge would remain empty and neglected for some years until being converted into a comfortable and modern hotel in the 1980s.

Contacts:

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