

Local History County Yarns

David Arnold would like to hear from readers of *County Yarns* who have stories and illustrations about Sussex to share with us. Email david.arnold@me.com or write to him at 14 St John Street, Lewes, East Sussex BN7 2QE.

Lewes schoolboys had warm welcome in Nazi Germany

Remembrance Sunday is not far away. It's a very significant one in 2018 marking as it does a century since the end of the Great War, hailed at the time as the "war to end all wars".

We who are living today know, of course, how mistaken that statement proved to be when, a matter of just two decades later, Hitler and his perverted Nazi ideology plunged the world into another terrible conflagration.

The privilege of hindsight allows us to chart the relentless rise of fascism in Europe and it is easy for us with our grandstand view of unfolding history to be contemptuous of the politics of appeasement.

Yet the pre-war reality of the time was different. There is fascinating evidence for this to be found in copies of Lewes Grammar School for Boys magazine, "The Barbican". This is from the 1935 edition: "In August a party of 43 went to Germany. Oberwesel is a picturesque walled town beside the beautiful banks of the Rhine. Alongside the camp was the town sports ground. Such grounds are now common all over Germany. At Oberwesel there is space for every kind of athletics and it was easy to see why Britain cuts so poor a figure in international sports meetings.

"The journey took nearly 24 hours, and the school party arrived exhausted at noon in scorching heat. Even the sight of the Union Jack, which our hosts were flying side by side with the Swastika at the camp entrance, only raised a mild interest. When we arrived, Oberwesel was agog with preparations for its annual river carnival and the place was bedecked with the Swastika. A Nazi newspaper welcomed us as 'honoured English guests'.

"At Oberwesel lives Herr Fischer, an important local National Socialist. At his old house, we enjoyed his hospitality and toured his marvelous wine cellars. There we toasted Herr Hitler and King George, and we left with bottles of his choicest vintage.

"There was an inevitable challenge from the boys of the Oberwesel Hitler Youth to a football match. Though Lewes put up a first-class show we lost by two goals to nil. We were not able to teach our opponents anything in the way of sportsmanship. A penalty was given against us for accidental hands, but the German who took it merely tapped the ball to our goalkeeper.

"Upon our departure, the Mayor presented us with a letter: "The citizens of Oberwesel bid you a hearty farewell. We hope that your visit has contributed to promoting better mutual understanding between Great Britain and Germany. With German greetings, Heil Hitler!"



A year later "Barbican" carried an anonymous pupil's story of a summer break in the Fatherland. Again I quote: "Most people know that every German youth, upon leaving school, must attend a Labour Camp for six months. This is about all they do know. During a holiday in Germany I enjoyed the privilege of staying at a Labour Camp at Coblenz. The men work just six hours a day and enjoy sport and entertainments. The food was wonderful and there was a great spirit of comradeship. On the dormitory walls under a huge photograph of Hitler they chalk slogans, such as: "Our country first, right or wrong."

The "Barbican" Editor added a cautionary footnote to this Labour Camp eulogy, posing the question: "Would you subscribe to the doctrine 'My country, right or wrong'? It's a very convenient slogan for dictators, removing, as it does, the right of the individual to think for himself."

I'm sure the Editor in question was Neville C. Bradshaw, Headmaster of the Grammar School since it opened in 1930. He had lived through the Great War so knew of the horrors of conflict. With uncanny prescience he had written in the very first "Barbican" of 1931: "We are a young School and have no traditions. As yet no boards of honour hang upon our walls to record the achievements of those who have gone before us. We lack the constant reminder of nobility and self-sacrifice afforded by a school war memorial. But here in these pages of our own 'Barbican' magazine will be preserved the names of all those who

Above: Five Lewes Grammar School boys are in this wartime photograph. Front row, left to right, are John Amos, Tony Thompsett, Jim Essex and Ken Hills. Back row, second from right, is Bruce Tindale. He died when his ship was torpedoed in 1943 and is one of 55 former pupils who were killed on active service. Below: Grammar School Headmaster Neville Bradshaw is at the centre of this 1937 photograph. Most of the lads pictured will have joined the armed forces in the Second World War.

pass through this school. Here too will be found the account of our successes and our failures. When the 'Barbican' is revisited in the future, happy will he be who then can say, 'I was not found wanting'."

A dozen years after penning the above, Bradshaw was horrified to confront a growing list of his former pupils who were dying at an alarming rate in military service during the Second World War. In 1942 he determined that they should be remembered in a Memorial Chapel in the school grounds.

The eventual toll was 55 young

men. It took nearly 20 years for Neville Bradshaw's vision to become reality when the building opened in July 1960. At 11am on Sunday 11th November 2018 those men and, indeed, all victims of war, will be remembered in what is now the Priory School Chapel in Mountfield Road, Lewes, in a symbolic service open to everyone.

Copies of "The Fifty Five: A Story Set In Stone" relating the epic tale of the Memorial Chapel and the men it commemorates are now on sale at Skylark Books in The Needlemakers, Lewes, priced at £18.

