

James Tobin, *Hook Norton at War 1939-1945*, Hook Norton: Hook Norton Local History Group, 2023, 80 pp, £10.

Combining a thematic and chronological approach, *Hook Norton at War 1939-1945* looks at each stage of the Second World War in Britain through the prism of Hook Norton. Hook Norton is a small Oxfordshire village which rather remarkably can date its existence to records from the tenth century, when it faced Viking raids. It is mentioned in the Domesday Book (when it had a population of just under five hundred) and had one of Henry VIII's deer parks. Hook Norton is probably best known today for the Hook Norton Brewery, which is an important example of a Victorian tower brewery. It currently has a population of 2,357, while in 1939 its population was 1,250. The author pulls no punches from the get go, stating that 'the Hook Norton of 1939 was a backward and primitive place, even by the depressed and deprived standards of the East End', so there are no rose tinted glasses here. The village had limited electricity, no sewage system and no piped water.

The book's slant of exploring each aspect of the Second World War from the point of view of a small rural village, such as the threat of invasion, the Home Front and the airborne Battle of Britain, is an engaging method of looking at such an enormous twentieth century event in a way that can be relatable. This experience, that affected all Britons but in such different ways, cannot be summed up from the understanding of one family or one area. For example, the author acknowledges that Hook Norton did not have bomb raids, which famously other British cities faced, but the bombing elsewhere still had an impact locally. An attempt to bomb the Northern Aluminium factory in Banbury led to two unexploded mines between Hook Norton and Wigginton which could 'have seriously damaged half of this village'. While Hook Norton 'stood on the margins of "this war in the air"', there were 24 aircraft crashes in the local area from the many training flights taking off from the airfields that were created near Oxford.

The book starts with the arrival of 130 evacuees to Hook Norton from East London on 1st September 1939, so the reader is thrust straight into the immediate impact of the declaration of war and the increase of the village population by 10 per cent. You do rather feel sorry for Arthur Miller, the new village school headmaster who had started on 1st August and then took a short camping holiday, only to be called back to face the unprecedented situation of the evacuation of London. He had prepared for 150 pupils at the start of the academic year and ended up with 296! Any teachers reading this book will be delighted that, despite the challenge to provide an education for these students with a complete lack of resources, from physical space and furniture to juggling the timetable and holiday provision to keep these children out of mischief, the school received very positive inspections and subsequent reports on what a great job they did under difficult circumstances.

Hook Norton at War explains that most local workers were judged to have reserved occupations, exempt from military service, as they were quarrying ironstone for ore for munitions or working on the railways. In my experience, many histories on the 1940s focus on the experiences of soldiers or pilots. This direct look at the contribution of men and women at home (the book includes the contributions of Women's Voluntary Service) feels more balanced and realistic for many in Britain, especially as it also includes the highs and lows of these local industries through the war and afterwards. The population also did their part in the Home Guard and Volunteer Fire Service, preparing to protect their land against

invasion or a fifth column as best as they could. There is a lovely story about the Special Branch visiting the village cobbler!

Which is not to say the book lacks its fair share of soldiers. C Company of the Durham Light Infantry were billeted at the Brewery in October 1939, in transit to Belgium. The quote from local historian David Eddershaw that some locals thought the troops ‘had been sent to protect the brewery, while others thought the brewery stocks of beer needed protecting from them!’ is rather charming. 2024 is the 80th anniversary of the D Day landings so it felt timely to be reading of the preparations, with the delivery and storage of ammunition and the arrival of American soldiers. There were two units of the U.S. Army who arrived from September 1943, to unload and arrange vast supplies of ammunition for ground forces to use in France after the invasion.

One of the focuses of the book is the ‘Hooky Race Riots’ – this certainly added an international element to an otherwise very English book. Having predominantly studied the Second World War from an European angle, I was unaware of the segregation and racial restrictions of the American Army. The chapter on the Hook Norton Race Riot, as the book readily admits, does not have many of the expected elements of a riot, being more a drunken pub brawl. However, it showed the simmering tensions of an army who were meant to be fighting a common enemy rather than each other.

I found the use of the local school as a repeated focal point a useful anchor to the overarching themes. As I wrote earlier, the home front is related via the experiences of the head teacher, the impact of the flood of evacuee children needing schooling, then later the use of the building as a refuge and the children having time from lessons to watch the troops and tanks rumble through the village. A school is something all readers have experience of, have memories of and will relate to, so the inclusion here is an excellent way of engaging us with the history. For example in Chapter 3, discussing the aircraft above Hook Norton and the air raid warnings, I smiled at the image of one hundred children scattering into local fields at the siren and the put-upon teachers trying to round them up almost like farmyard chickens.

As a curator of a local history museum, I am biased and value the recounting of national and international history via local stories. Why? Because these personal accounts bring abstract historical records to life. What may feel like small scale experiences actually point at the bigger societal changes. The book ends by looking at the impact of the war, from the improved health, education and housing provision to the impact on the ironstone production and the local railway. It is a thought-provoking finish, how a negative situation was turned to an advantage but also had long-term repercussions on the local industry and population.

One small issue is that a map of Hook Norton and the surrounding areas at the front of the book would have been really useful. There are lots of descriptions and directions given for locations and properties and the majority of the readers may recognise these places. However, for those of us who are less local, a map with road names and house names would be helpful. The preface mentions the *Mappa Hookey* which can be purchased from the Hook Norton Local History Group but something more readily available during reading would be beneficial. Something much like the rough map created to show the location of several evacuees in Chapter 1.

Despite this, a book which takes such pride in its local connections, uses local resources and keeps local stories at its heart is a pleasure to read, even for an outsider. Hook Norton Local

History Group should rightly be proud at the hard work which has gone into it. When I received my review copy, I was told that a reprint had been ordered after only two months so it has obviously been well received.

I look forward to reading more books by local history groups, with their unique and valuable resources providing a rich exploration of historic occasions.

Marie-Louise Kerr, [Curator Without Museum](#), February 2024