

## Elwick Village Atlas

# Elwick in World War II





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**By David Self**

## **Introduction**

The information in this study was compiled by David Self, Brian Footitt and a number of other members of the Elwick Village Atlas project during 2013 and 2014. We would like to record our thanks to all who helped and particularly those who contributed their personal memories of the period.

## **The Threat of Invasion**

The threatened invasion of Elwick during the period 1939-1940 in the early part of World War II brought a great change in the rural life of the village.

Because of the success of the German forces in Europe (which allowed them to mass on the coast) there was a serious threat to the east coast of England, which would be in the forefront of any invasion by Hitler.

As a result plans were drawn up to create two lines of coastal defences. The first was on the actual coastline, landing beaches, etc., and the second was a few miles inland to act as a buffer zone should the coastal area be overrun, also it would protect defences against paratroopers landing inland and attacking from the rear. Elwick came into the second support zone.

In 1940 the threat was so great that action was taken to resist and delay and as a result roadblocks and pillboxes were set up. These were followed by the formation of The Home Guard, younger readers who have watched the TV programme "Dads Army" and thought it was just a comic spoof should now look at their grandfathers in a new light!



The  
defences  
in Elwick

comprised two pillboxes, one at Sturrock's farm (Home Farm) and the other between the Elwick Hall and the A19. These brick buildings were used by local

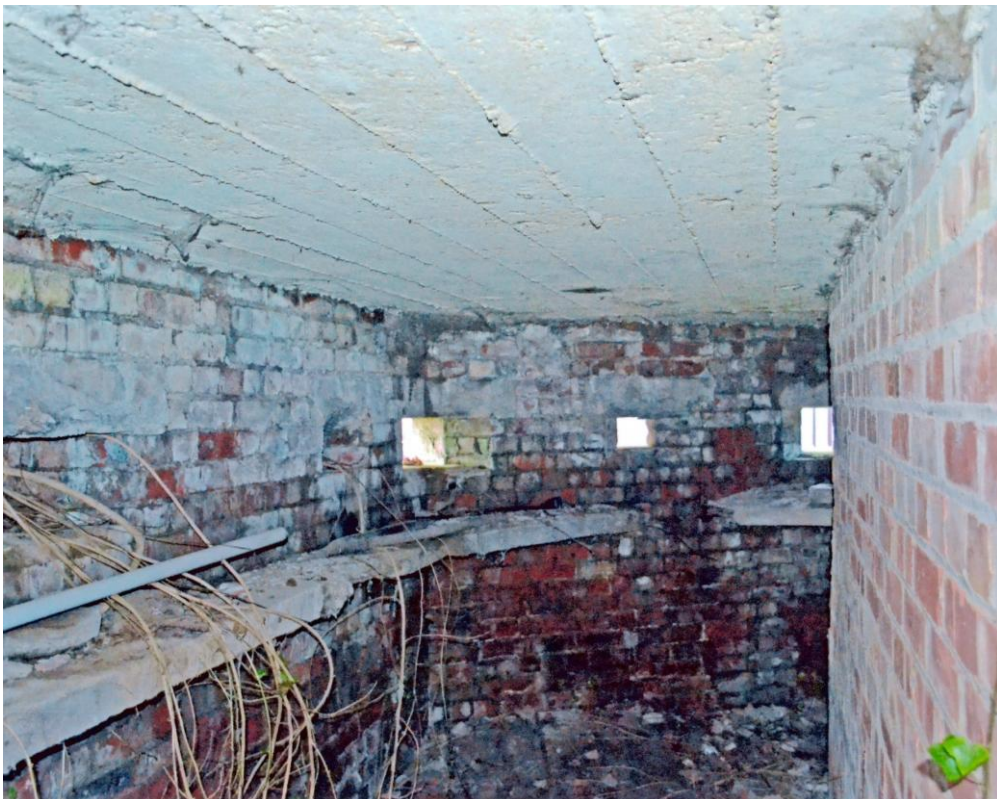


soldiers armed with rifles and machine guns which could fire through the small slits at enemy soldiers and vehicles.

*Fig 1: Sturrock's Farm Pillbox (photo D Self)*



*Fig 2: Internal Blast wall, Sturrock's Farm Pillbox (photo D Self)*



*Fig 3: Interior Sturrock's Farm Pillbox, showing concrete slab roof and concrete firing shelves for resting rifles.*





*Fig 4: Fishponds Pillbox*

The roads into and out of the village were protected by road blocks to slow down or stop vehicles. They comprised a large concrete block approximately one metre high and one metre wide on either side of the road. Large oil drums, filled with concrete, were kept nearby and these could be rolled into position across the road. Being a rural area farm implements such as hay rakes were also used, much to the delight of school children who would roll them into the road much to the annoyance of the school teachers.

The roadblocks were situated near the stream on Craggan Bank and in the west at the bottom of Church Bank. In addition trenches were dug alongside so that



tanks etc. would be funnelled into a narrow gap where they were easier to attack. The ditches were dug by 13 Royal Engineers using a dragline excavator. The men were billeted at Rudby House whilst the Sergeant was lodged with Mrs Witty (the postmistress).

*Fig 5: Ruston Bucyrus Excavator of the type used in World War II*

Two gun pits were dug at Grieves Farm (Dovecote Farm). These defences remained until the end of the war although the threat of invasion faded in 1941, due in no small part to Germany taking on Russia and therefore not having the man power to fight on two fronts. The usefulness of our tactics was a bone of contention in later years and probably would not have provided more than an irritation to an advancing army, it did however have the effect of being a psychological boost to the population who would feel they were doing their bit to keep the home fires burning.

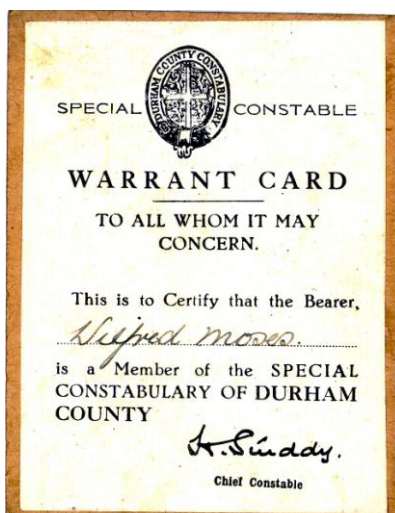
### Local Forces

The Home Guard was made up of local men, at the beginning they were armed with whatever they had from shotguns, clubs and broom sticks. Later arms were provided together with helmets and uniforms.



The Old Mill on Benknowle Lane was used as a lookout point. The Home Guard Unit comprised :-  
John Proud, Captain;  
Tommy Warrant,  
Sergeant; Tommy  
Alton, Sgt Major; Arnold  
Musgrave, Matt  
Hutchinson, Jack  
Hodgson, Bill Raw, Percy  
Hutchinson.

*Fig 6: The Old Mill, Benknowle Lane, used as lookout post*



The following were also 'volunteered'  
Alf Moses      Air Raid Warden  
Fred Grieves      Fire Watch (walk round three  
times a week looking for fires but the job never  
really materialised) and  
Wilfred Moses      Special Constable

*Fig 7: Special Constable Warrant Card, Wilfrid Moses*



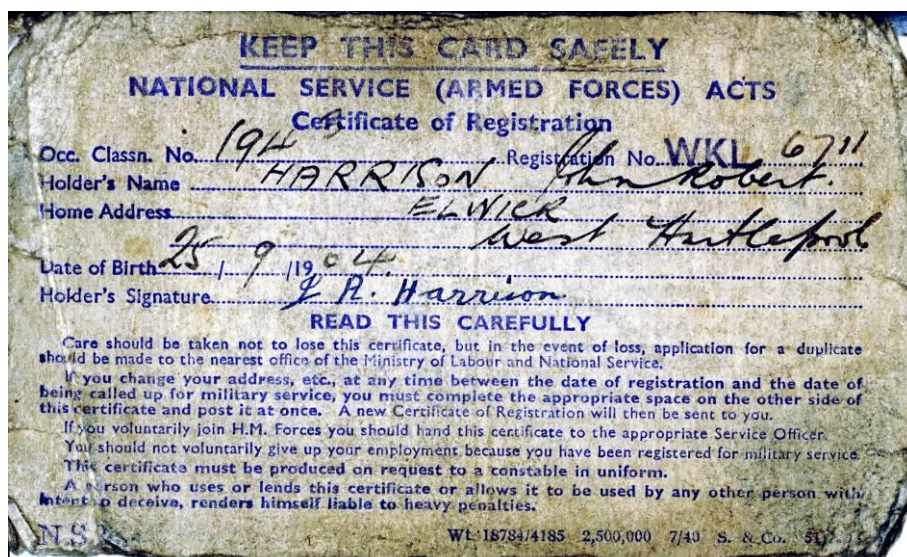


Fig 8: National Service, Certificate of Registration

People who were on reserved occupations were given Identity Cards to show exemption from the forces (Fig 8).

### Casualty Hospital

It was expected in 1940 that there would be a large number of casualties resulting from the invasion so the army requisitioned Naisberry Farm which together with a tented complex formed a casualty clearing station manned by the RAMC 115 Field Ambulance Unit under Captain David Miller. This left in late 1940 when the threat didn't come about: It is believed the Unit went to North Africa which would be considerably warmer than Hartlepool even in the summer.

### Bombing

The threat of bombing was an ever-present one due to the proximity of ICI Billingham, the shipbuilding at Haverton Hill and the docks at Hartlepool.

The bombs themselves were mainly of the incendiary type intended to set fire to buildings rather than blowing them up. It was usual for bombers returning from a sortie to get rid of unused bombs anywhere on the way home, which would probably account for some being dropped in rural areas as against military targets.

Records show that a number of bombs fell locally e.g.

**4.08.1941** 5 High Explosive bombs dropped in a field at High Stotfold Farm – no damage.

**17/18.12.1941** A farmhouse and two cottages were badly damaged and four people slightly injured.

**6/7.07.1942** Slight damage to Dovecote Farm caused by the tube of a rocket shell

**11/12.12.1942** A single High Explosive bomb fell in a stubble field at Elwick and failed to explode.



**3/4.02.1943** Two large explosive bombs fell on Crookfoot Reservoir causing damage to the stone embankment; six smaller bombs fell nearby causing slight damage to the meter house.



*Fig 9: Newspaper cutting about bomb find in Elwick*

One of the first bombs dropped, demolished Darling's Farm at Gunners Vale. Hearing the sirens the family went to the air raid shelter, fortunately they remembered the baby they had left sleeping in the bedroom and took her into the shelter just before the house collapsed!

## Air-Raid Shelters

The Air Raid Precaution Act of 1937 gave a statutory duty to local authorities to provide shelter and anti-gas precautions for their community. The law allowed for protection by personal gas masks and domestic air raid shelters, most commonly Anderson shelters. Large bomb-proof underground air raid shelters of the trench variety or single-storey surface shelters were constructed to provide refuge for school children, those living in terrace housing, workers, or those caught away from home.

In addition to shelters, local government was also responsible for siren warnings, first aid and rescue services, firefighting, gas decontamination and enforcement of blackout regulations by ARP wardens and civil police. These provisions were served either by adapted or purpose-built structures. Fire, first aid, ambulance and rescue services used a variety of council and requisitioned civilian buildings

Anderson shelters comprised corrugated iron sheeting curved to form a roof



when bolted together with a door at one end and about four feet underground. They were large enough to hold a family and were generally to be found in back gardens. A more deluxe model was concrete built, underground with an earth mound on top

*Fig 10: Interior of Anderson Shelter, Hart Station*

The Old School on Church Bank had a large shelter for the children while a public shelter was situated on the north of the Green outside Jack Harrison's cottage (no. 3 The Green).

This communal shelter was largely underground and for some reason it contained a collection box, whether this was voluntary for its upkeep isn't known but it is known that two youths from Hartlepool stole the money it contained 9d (four pence in new money!). They were caught and the money returned. The shelter was demolished and grassed over in 1946.



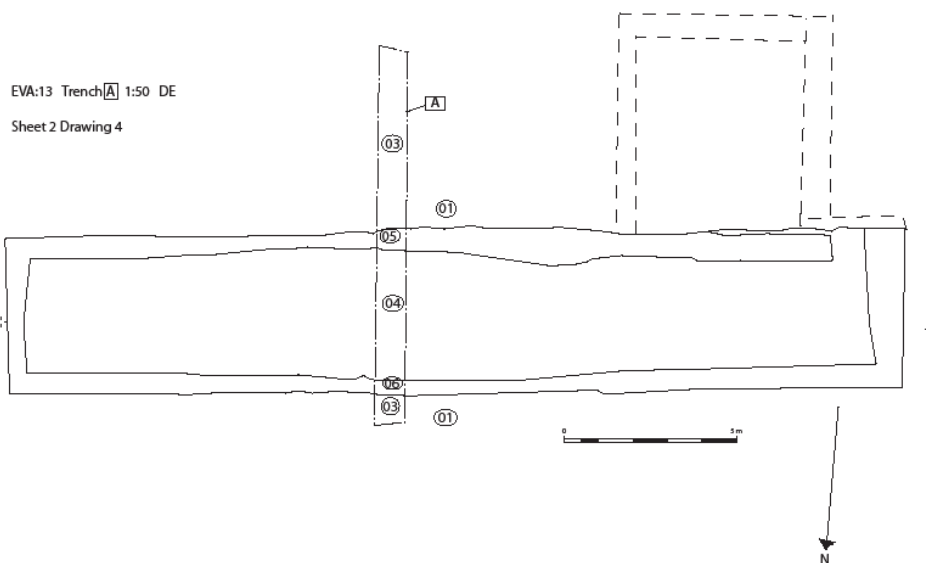


*Fig 11: Site of Air Raid Shelter at the west end of Elwick Green on the north side. A water tank to put out fires was sited just behind the bus shelter.*



*Fig 12: Concrete walls of the Air Raid Shelter, partially excavated in Summer 2013.*





*Fig 13: Plan of the air raid shelter based on visible earthworks and the excavations.*

It was not unknown for people to hide under the stairs or even under the kitchen table when the air-raid siren sounded in Billingham. The village Church Bells were reserved for warning of an invasion only. Also on the Green approximately behind the present bus shelter was a Static Water Tank measuring about 30' x 30' x 5', which was used to store water in case of fires. Local children found it highly amusing to fling their caps on to the top, climb up to retrieve them and be told off by Mrs Witty.

### **Anti-Aircraft Defences**

Enemy bombers were engaged by fighter aircraft based at Catterick which also had an outstation at Greatham. The ground defence consisted of Ack Ack guns and searchlights – Billingham being a more important target because of the chemical works had guns and barrage balloons; while there were smoke pots in most streets that would be lit to cause smoke over the area.

In Elwick there was an Ack Ack emplacement near High Barns Farm, Coal Lane on the Trimdon, A19 crossroads. Search lights would try and pick up the planes in a cross and the guns, usually Bofors would fire at it. It wasn't always realized that the shells were made to explode at a pre-set height and it was the shrapnel that caused the damage. Small boys taken outside to watch the action soon learnt that what went up came back down and hurriedly ran back indoors when the shrapnel pattered around them. One Ack Ack gun was kept in the old gravel pit east of the village, and pulled out when required. Its usual position was on the green on the north side, opposite the W.I. Hall. When it was firing the noise and vibration was such that it caused the ornaments and crockery on the shelves to

shake and threaten to fall off – a worry for mothers but exciting for the children. Health and Safety hadn't been invented in those days.

One story is that a flashing light on wheels was moved around the High Barnes Farm area to attract enemy bombers, I don't think local farmers appreciated the idea if the story is true.

### **Auxiliary Force**

In the event of German occupation a resistance network was set up to harass the enemy and support the regular forces.

The units were six man strong made up of locals generally well versed in country life i.e. farmers, gamekeepers etc. The groups were given priority as regards weapons, sub machine guns, explosives and hand-to-hand fighting equipment such as knives. Instruction was given in hand-to-hand fighting and also radio transmitting. All members were sworn to secrecy and information about them only became available in 1990. They operated from carefully hidden underground bunkers usually in small copse. They would have one hidden entrance and one escape exit usually where the copse met the field. The base contained weapons, explosives, food, radio etc.



The Elwick Unit comprised the following:-  
Sergeant W Rowe  
Corporal A Bird  
Private W Smith  
Private T.H. Platts  
Private R Lewis  
Private N Proud  
Private W Stonehouse

The Patrol was part of No 2 Area with Captain T H Robson as Area Commander. The Elwick base was in a copse west of Benknowle Farm adjoining Penk's Moor. The writer was shown it 30 years ago by a small child know as "Wilkie".

*Fig 14: Elwick Auxiliar Base, looking in to area of the main chamber*



*Fig 15: Elwick Auxiliaries Base, looking from main chamber towards the exit*

### **Land Army Girls**

With many farm hands being called up into the army extra help was needed on the land and the Land Army was formed to enrol girls from the towns to help out by living either in a hostel or on the farm itself. Their duties were the same as for any man and involved milking, harvesting, hedge cutting, tractor work and livestock; it was hard manual labour.

The Elwick Land Army girls lived in a hostel at Eldon Grove, Hartlepool and were able to go to Miss Tucker's dancing class, usually with the farmers' sons, complete with boots. Matron kept an eye on them!

It is not surprising then that about 15 married into farming families in the Elwick area.

Blanche Hutchinson  
Gwen Hutchinson  
Evelyn Hutchinson  
Mary Hutchinson  
Peggy Pounder



Aileen Pounder  
Sylvia Pounder  
Nellie Grieves  
Hilda Grieves  
Mary Grieves  
Ada Hutchinson  
Ada Proctor  
Jessie Musgrave  
Sally Bird  
Janet Irvine

There was also a hostel at Wolviston, with a Matron, this was purpose built and some of the girls from Eldon Grove were transferred. Some reports say that they travelled to the farms by bus others were driven in. After the war and until 1999 there was an annual re-union in Wolviston where they relived their wartime memories.

### **Prisoners of War**

The fighting in Africa, Tripoli, etc. resulted in a large number of Italian prisoners being brought to England as POW's, while the invasion of Europe resulted in great numbers of German POW's whilst the Channel Isles also had numbers of POW's but usually older men.

It was a voluntary decision by the POW's to work on the farms and they received the going rate of pay. On the whole they worked well and became integrated into the farmer's family which resulted in them eating with the family which meant they did not have to eat the two inch thick cheese sandwich they were normally given at the camp to eat at lunch time.

The POW camp was at Rift House in Hartlepool and they would cycle up to Elwick daily, another camp was at Wolviston. It was not unknown for them to send a wedding card to any Land Army girl getting married or carry messages between the girls and their farming boyfriends.

The POW's would make wooden toys and photo frames to sell and make some extra money. Gordon Swain from Hart, has a painted chalet photo frame and strangely Eddie Moses of Elwick has the exact same object. I think that like Napoleonic prisoners who made bone models there must have been one man at the camp talented enough to turn them out in bulk for other POW's to sell.

Joe Jobson can remember having a wooden duck "made" by their POW but it was left in the loft when the farm was sold.



*Fig 16: Wooden Photoframe made by a Prisoner of War*

Gordon Swain also has a letter in German from their POW when he left them to go to the POW camp in Thirsk in 1947. He describes the terrible conditions his wife and children were undergoing in Germany, no money or food and could Mr Hutchinson, Gordon Swain's father-in-law, send him some money.

One POW married a local girl and stayed on in Elwick, he is buried in the new cemetery and left a wife and son who still live in Hartlepool.

### **Elwick School**

A number of evacuees attended the School, which was next to the Church, and were housed in the village.

When the air-raid siren sounded the children were taken into the air-raid shelter in the school garden, if they were down for more than an hour they were given a barley sugar sweet nobody heard the all clear siren till at least an hour had passed! Sweets of course were rationed, so a barley sugar was well worth suffering for plus you missed arithmetic lessons.

In 1945, the village opened a Welcome Home Fund and money was raised by running concerts and other events in the Old School Hall.

F.5.

## WAR CHARITIES ACT, 1940

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### It is hereby Certified

that the Charity called \_\_\_\_\_

ELWICK WELCOME HOME FUND

was on the 4th day of April 1945

**exempted** by the \_\_\_\_\_

DURHAM COUNTY Council

from registration under the above-mentioned Act.

Delete if not required. \_\_\_\_\_

Signed, \_\_\_\_\_

Shire Hall,  
Durham.

Clerk of the County Council.  
For and on behalf of  
the above-named Council.

(43649) M01100/1726 2/41 1,000(1) L.W.L.ed. 4(6)

Fig 17: Certificate of Exemption for 'Elwick Welcome Home Fund'

### Service in the Armed Forces

The following inhabitants of Elwick served in the armed forces.

Fred Claughan – RAF  
 Ronnie Witty – Tank Corp.  
 John Warrand – RAF  
 Ted Hall – Marines  
 Mary Hall – RAF  
 John Athol Burnett – RN

John (Jack) Athol Burnett was the son of John Burnett who took over as headmaster from Mr Sample and lived at The Hawthorns on the A19.

John was the first Senior Meteorological Officer at RNAS Hatston in the Orkney Isles with a rank of Instructor Lieutenant Commander RN. In those days the navy only had three weather stations and it was their task to take daily readings of temperature and humidity for upper air data. Gathering this information involved flying up to 14,000 ft in old Fairey Swordfish planes, these did not have an enclosed cockpit so the conditions were horrendous. John later became Director of the Naval Weather Service, by all reports he was a very strong character and did not hesitate to make his views known to higher ups in the navy when the need arrived.

He was given the CBE by the Queen in 1963. In 1974 he returned from London to live in Lanchester and died in 1993 aged 85 years. In conclusion it must be said





*Fig 18: Fairey Swordfish of the meteorological flight based at Hatston in Orkney*

that John was probably the most famous and highest ranking serviceman in Elwick. The writer has always had an interest in him having met in 1974 when we bought The Hawthorns. D.S.

All who served returned safely.

### **Victory**

A VE (Victory in Europe) celebration party was held on the 8<sup>th</sup> June 1945 with a bonfire on the green, a dance in the W.I. Hall followed next day by a children's tea party and sports.



*Fig 19: Victory Concert Elwick*





# Limestone Landscapes

