

WW2 civilian deaths in and from the Battle district

Records show that 17 civilians in or from the Battle district died as a result of enemy action in the Second World War.

This otherwise peaceful area had no industries worth bombing but nevertheless suffered along with the rest of the country – though to a much lesser extent than most of the cities and large towns. If in the First World War those who stayed behind in the Battle district were in negligible danger of an early death this would not be true of the later war: nowhere in the UK was safe from enemy attack, regardless of age – and our own dead ranged from 14 months to 77 years.

Details are hard to find because the newspapers of the day were properly restrained from reporting anything that would give help to the enemy or harm local morale. However, the overall position is known from a report of August 1945 which, being unofficial, may not be wholly accurate.¹ For the area with which this account is concerned the bombing was, in brief:

Notes: HE = high explosive; unexpl = unexploded; MG = machine gun. Blank = 0.

| | V1 | High explosive | | Incendiary | Oil etc | MG attacks | Civilians | |
|---------------|------------|----------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| | | Dropped | Unexpl | | | | Killed | Injured |
| Ashburnham | 7 | 67 | 3 | 740 | 3 | 2 | | 3 |
| Battle | 27 | 69 | 32 | 55 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 32 |
| Catsfield | 5 | 16 | 2 | 720 | 4 | | | 5 |
| Crowhurst | 4 | 20 | 14 | 602 | | | 4 | 18 |
| Dallington | 10 | 31 | 4 | 176 | | | | 4 |
| Mountfield | 19 | 24 | | 1066 | 1 | | | 14 |
| Penhurst | 1 | | | | | | | |
| Ninfield * | | | | | | | | |
| Robertsbridge | 10 | 22 | 1 | | | | 2 | 5 |
| Sedlescombe | 7 | 18 | 2 | 886 | | | | 2 |
| Westfield | 12 | 20 | 4 | 33 | | | | 6 |
| Whatlington | 3 | 21 | 16 | 900 | | | | 6 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>105</i> | <i>308</i> | <i>78</i> | <i>5178</i> | <i>13</i> | <i>3</i> | <i>8</i> | <i>95</i> |

Ninfield does not appear in the list in this source. But on another page of the source document it says that the parish received 18 HE bombs and 55 incendiaries. No deaths have been recorded there.

The above table conflicts with the details of the deaths given in the official account of civilian war deaths, accessible through www.ancestry.co.uk, which provides the following table:

| | Civilians Killed |
|---------------|------------------|
| Ashburnham | |
| Battle | 2 |
| Catsfield | |
| Crowhurst | 3 |
| Dallington | |
| Mountfield | |
| Ninfield | |
| Penhurst | |
| Robertsbridge | 1 |
| Sedlescombe | |
| Westfield | 3 |
| Whatlington | |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>9</i> |

The discrepancy may also demonstrate a question of attribution to parish, but for Westfield in particular it is clearly inaccurate. Unfortunately it also omits one Dallington man who was a passenger on board a Swedish merchantman sunk by a U-boat, and others there and elsewhere.

The bombing figures, even if they are also inaccurate, show clearly what an onslaught was made on this rural area, what a high proportion of the HE bombs did not explode (highly variable among the parishes but a mean of just over a quarter) and how low – in retrospect – the casualty rate was. Had the bombs exploded things would have been much worse.

From the numbers of dead in the wider area it is clear that the Germans were specifically aiming at the larger target of Hastings, and indeed the town was badly hit and seriously damaged although it had only a very marginal strategic value after the decision of the Germans not to invade. This decision was made definitive when they invaded the USSR in 1941 and soon caught something a lot worse than a bad cold. Of the seventeen known civilian deaths connected with the rural area as defined above, two occurred in Hastings, both of women who did not live there.

Of the others, one was in London (an arguably Sussex woman) but the rest were scattered among the smaller places: Battle (2), Dallington (2, including one civilian who died elsewhere), Eastbourne (a Battle man), Crowhurst (5), Westfield (3), Salehurst (1), and Hellingly (a Battle man, again arguably).

The Hastings deaths were both at St Leonards. The first was Margaret Redhead. She was 77, having been born at Lyndhurst in Hampshire in 1865. Her father Theodore John Redhead (c1831-1918) was a clergyman, and records suggest that at the time he was Perpetual Curate of Emery Down, just outside Lyndhurst.² Her mother Helen (Crane), born at Chelsea in 1838, had died as long ago as 1882.

Margaret Redhead's home address was Forewood Lodge in Forewood Lane, Crowhurst, but she died at 9 Grosvenor Gardens, St Leonards on 9 September 1942. This is the terrace running away from the sea and facing Hastings across the green at the western end of the promenade. It is not known where Margaret Redhead was at the time. It is possible that she was seriously injured and brought indoors.

The second death was in the very heavy raid of 23 May 1943. This is commemorated today in the plaque and gardens on the site of the Swan Hotel in the Old Town. The same commentator as above reports:

At 12.59pm on Sunday 23 May, 10 Focke-Wulf 190s swept in at rooftop height, machine-gunning the town at the same as releasing 25 bombs, which scored direct hits on five public houses and two hotels filled with diners. Twenty-five people were killed in this Hastings raid, 30 seriously injured and 55 slightly injured. The High Street in the Old Town suffered particularly badly, with many of the deaths occurring at the *Swan Hotel*, which was packed with lunchtime customers. For John Bristow, who was in town with a friend when the attack occurred the events still remain crystal clear in his mind: 'There was a god-almighty explosion and we went into the passage by The Havelock pub and we dived onto the ground and lay there looking out before a bomb hit what was the old Royal Oak Hotel. Along by Woolworth's there was a car going by and it was sent up into the air by the bomb and over and over. While we lay there, there was another terrific explosion down the side of Plummer's and I'll never forget seeing a huge lump of yellow coloured masonry coming over and land on the tram wires...'³

It is not correct to say that only two hotels were hit, because there were two deaths at the Warrior House Hotel on the south-eastern corner of Warrior Square, one of them a member of its staff. The other was Daisy Congdon. She had been born at Chatham in 1897 and her home address was at Watton-at-Stone in Hertfordshire, but she had very strong connections with Battle. Her mother Mary (Hollingsworth) had been born in Uckham Lane and had married Henry George Congdon, a professional soldier who on retirement from the army had become the landlord of the White Hart at Fifield in Berkshire, near Bray. When the First World War began he re-enlisted in the Royal Engineers, rising to be temporary Regimental Sergeant Major and being awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre. He was killed near Albert in May 1918 and his name is on the war memorials at Battle. By then, almost certainly, Mary and her daughters had come to live in Battle, where she died in 1922. Daisy did not marry.

Both of the Hastings deaths look accidental in the sense that neither woman was a resident of the town but happened to be there on the day.

Another relevant death outside the Battle district was on 11 May 1941, in Bermondsey. This was in what was the worst night of bombing in all the blitz. The London Fire Brigade recorded at least 2136 fires, nine at 'conflagration' level, eight 'major' outbreaks (rating over 30 pumps), 43 serious (up to 30 pumps), 280 medium (up to 10 pumps) and at least 1796 small. About 1436 people were killed and 1800 seriously injured. The fires resulted in 700 acres of destruction - about double that of the Great Fire of London.⁴

Another report reads:

505 bombers flew to London on the night of 10 May, the full moon lighting their snaking path along the Thames. The German pilots had 15 minutes to locate and bomb their targets once they reached London, but still the bombing lasted nearly seven hours, starting at 11pm on 10 May and continuing until the all-clear sounded at 5.50am the next morning. British anti-aircraft batteries and RAF nightfighters managed to shoot down 33 planes, but despite their best efforts 10-11 May 1941 was one of the most destructive raids of the war.⁵

Among those many places hit was the St John's Estate, an LCC creation on the north-eastern corner where the South Eastern railway crosses Tower Bridge Road. The woman killed was Maud Waters. Her connection with Battle is that her mother lived at the Garden Flat in Senlac House. Her mother (c1878-1967) was a Londoner with three marriages already behind her, the last to Luther Grainger. Maud was a product of the second marriage, to František Kouba, from what is now the Czech Republic but was then part of Austria.

Maud had been born at Shepherd's Bush in 1906 and had married John Albert Waters at Hastings in 1931. She had two children: Daphne in 1932 and Peter in 1935. Her family survived. Public records do not reveal with any certainty what happened to them or to her husband.

There was also a death at Eastbourne, which has been officially named the most bombed town in south-east England. Things were particularly bad there in May and June 1943, with a series of hit and run attacks from northern France. For 4 June a German pilot wrote:

We attacked Eastbourne again about noon today, with heavy forces, flying low level, doing considerable damage, although the flak was shooting significantly better than usual. I received a 2 cm direct hit behind the motor, putting a hole all the way through the plane. Several of my instruments quit working and I got a little splinter in my right lower thigh which remains there, someplace. First I felt a violent impact, and after that I had enough to worry about just with my wound, but I was able to get home safely.⁶

The raids on that day seriously damaged the technical institute⁷ and destroyed an air raid shelter, with loss of life, and no doubt caused further damage and casualties. The death relevant to this account was of a Home Guard member injured that day, who died on 12 June at the Princess Alice Hospital there. He was William Freeman, born at Battle in 1895. His family had lived at Starr's Green, and all the family was born at Battle: mother Fanny was born Fuller, and father Henry was a stone quarryman and later a roadman for the urban district council. Fanny died early in 1944.

William joined the Royal Navy in 1907 and served to 1925. In the First World War he was Stoker K21052. William married Ellen Ray (1899-1987) at Eastbourne in 1923. In 1943 they were living at 2 Duly's Cottages, Priory Road, Langney.

The last outlier from the near-Battle area was John Sanders Bacon. He is in this account because his widow lived at Lucentio, Hastings Road, Battle, where she died on 18 February 1953; it is not known when she moved there on her own or whether Bacon ever lived there.

Bacon had been born in 1883; the 1901 census says South Norwood (Surrey). His father John was born at West Dulwich about 1853, and was described as a farmer in the 1901 and 1902 census, when he was at South Norwood; he died at his nursery at North Havant, Hampshire, in 1927. Bacon's mother Clara (Sanders), born in South Australia about 1854, died on or very close to the date of her husband's death, also at North Havant.

In 1901 John is described as a tanner, and in 1911 as a tanyard manager living at 84 West Street, Bridport, with his wife Helena (Perrott), whom he married at Bridport on 23 November 1908. They had one son, born at Bridport and dying at Bournemouth.

Bacon died at Camberlot Farm, Hellingly on 23 July 1944. This farm is just south of the A22 close to Lower Dicker. The precise circumstances are lost, but it is known that this area lay under one of the busier German aerial routes into – and perhaps more tellingly – out of England.

It is likely that Bacon served in the First World War but the records are insufficient to be certain. A John S Bacon was a Corporal in the Middlesex Regiment, sent to France on 17 November 1915.

The remaining deaths were all in or around Battle itself.

The two deaths in Battle are well-known locally, though at least one local publication gives the wrong surname despite its being accurately commemorated on a plaque outside the newsagents in Battle High Street.

The air raid in question, on 2 February 1943, looks like one of those occasions when a plane returning from a bigger place found that it had three bombs left and needed to do something destructive with them. One bomb bounced behind the George Hotel and went in to the fields beyond. Another went through the Abbey gateway, narrowly missing a Canadian soldier on guard there, and failed to explode: just as well, because the gatehouse was full of high explosive and if it had gone up much of Battle – not to mention the historic Abbey – would have been destroyed. The third landed on Tickner's newsagents and demolished it, in the process badly damaging the house adjoining to its north. Tom and Gladys Giles died there.

Tom was 45 and a firewatcher. Gladys, of the same age, had been born the daughter of Charles Sargent and his wife Annie (Smith). He was the waterworks engineer for the Battle UDC and the family lived at the water works. Gladys married Sydney W Tickner at Battle in 1923 but he died in 1935; she married Tom Giles early in 1941. Annie and the two children were all born at Catsfield, though Charles was a Battle man. Annie died at Battle in 1938 and Charles survived his daughter, dying there in 1946. Tom's mother was Tryphena, who in 1901 was living at Underwood, Plympton with her nine children; she was a widow aged 41. It appears to be the same person who in 1911 is Josephine, a widow aged 51 living in the same place with Tom and three brothers who appeared with her in 1901. Tom is described rather unfortunately as an 'errant boy' for a baker and as having been born at Plympton. The father Thomas died at Plympton in B1899. Tom left £5008 8s 3d.

There was one death at Salehurst: George Harold Anstey, a farmer originally from South Molton in Devon. He died while working on his Poppinghole Farm on 27 June 1944, aged 40. This was at the time that V1s were falling, and it is more than likely that Anstey's death resulted from one of these. He left £46725 10s 11d, very comfortable sum for that day. Poppinghole Farm is in Poppinghole Lane. The nearest settlement is John's Cross but there is no direct road to it. His name is on the memorial at Sedlescombe.

Anstey's father John (1869-1957) was a farmer too. He and George's mother Louise (1884-1950) both moved from Devon to Sussex and died at Lurgashall. George married Elsie Euphemia Carver at Petworth in 1928. Their son John was born in the Battle area in D1929.

That leaves three deaths each in Westfield and Crowhurst and two from Dallington.

In Westfield there were three incidents.

On 7 December 1942 Joan Primrose Beeching died at the Buchanan Hospital of injuries received on the same day at Plumtree Cottages, Spray's Bridge. This was not from bombing but from gunfire: a German aeroplane flew low over the area and fired at the ground. Sprays Bridge is on the minor road between Sedlescombe and Westfield, nearer the latter. The 1066 path passes just to its north.

Joan had been born in the Battle area in 1914; he father was George Eade from Sturry in Kent and her mother Florence Playford from Sedlescombe. They married at roughly the time of Joan's birth.

Joan married William Henry Beeching in the Battle area in 1935. William had been born at Peasmarsh in October 1909. They had one child, Basil, born in 1936. William was to die at Hastings in 1971.

Ten days later, on 17 December 1942, there was another attack on Westfield and another death on the same day at Buchanan Hospital. This time it was a baby. Joyce Elizabeth Lewry was only 14 months old, having been born at Brede on 10 September 1941. She was the daughter of Violet Patricia Lewry, née Cruttenden, born in March 1914. Records suggest that the father was the much older Robert John Lewry (c1879-1951), a quarryman at Brede who was on his second marriage. There were two children other than Joyce, one born in 1934 and one in 1946. 1938 records⁸ put them at Laurel Cottage, Westfield; in 1942 the couple were living at Hare Farm Cottage, Brede. A few months after Robert's death Violet married Reginald Carey at Hastings. She would live to November 1995.

The incident that led to Joyce's death seems to have been recorded nowhere.

The third Westfield death was on 4 July 1944, following a V1 attack on the previous day. The first V1 bombs were aimed at Britain on 13 June 1944, and ultimately some thousands were launched. They were pilotless aircraft flying at speeds greater than that attainable by fighter planes and for a short time the RAF and Anti-Aircraft crews were baffled as to how to deal with them. V1s made a characteristic sound and when their engines cut off they were about to drop. Each carried up to a tonne of high explosive, which caused immense damage wherever it fell to ground.

One fell at Westfield on 3 July. Doris Lynch was the daughter of the Taylors of Sedlescombe, born at Brighton in A1921. She had married Alfred George Lynch in the Battle district earlier in the year. She was now six months pregnant, and was buried under the wreckage of her house, Spring Cottage. She died at Buchanan Hospital the next day. Doris was buried in Westfield churchyard.

Alfred remarried in 1947, to Marjorie Banks, and they had children. He died at Ashford in A1996.

The Dallington toll is two. The first was Christopher Guy Tristram, who was a passenger on the Swedish merchant vessel *Vaalaren*. On 5 April 1943 this vessel was in convoy on its way from New York to Swansea. For some reason it left the convoy – presumably to be seen as a neutral – but was torpedoed by U-220. It sank at 05.09 hours, and there were no survivors from the 45 people it carried.

The *Vaalaren* was part of convoy HX231, also known as the *Crisis Convoy*, given the critical stage of the Battle of the Atlantic. It comprised 61 ships and six armed escorts. It appears that the *Vaalaren* left the convoy after the attack rather than during it.⁹

Tristram had been born at Steyning in 1925. His father was Guy Henry Tristram and his mother Ruth Mary Cardew; they had married in Kensington in 1919; Guy was a Major in the Royal Field Artillery, and he had served in France in the last year of the war. His 1920 address is given as Campbellpore in India. They had three sons, the youngest being Christopher. Ruth died at Cox's Mill, Dallington (presumably the family home) in October 1950. Cox's Mill is an isolated property in Dallington Forest, north of the village. Guy remarried and died at Boar's Head, Crowborough, in 1963.

The second death was in an air raid of 7 July 1944. The victim was Ada Smith, of Prinkle Cottage, Prinkle Lane. She was the wife of Alfred Douglas Smith. Unfortunately nothing clear has yet emerged about her or her husband.

The last four deaths were all at Crowhurst which, taking into account Margaret Redhead's death, had a total of five fatalities, much the highest in the district.

The first to go was James David Cante, who died at his house, the Bungalow, Blacklands, on 19 March 1941. He had served in the First World War as a Private, at first with the 5th Bedfordshires, then the Dorsetshires and finally – after being wounded – with the Labour Corps. He suffered gunshot wounds on 15 April 1917 and was invalided out, returning to France in July. He was discharged on 22 February 1919. Now, in the Second World War, he was a member of the Home Guard.

Cante was a Gloucestershire man, born in 1878 at Almondsbury, a little north of Bristol. His father, also James, was a railway labourer. In 1909 he married Ruth Ralph in the Battle area, and in 1911 they are recorded as living at Wheathampstead in Hertfordshire, with James working as a domestic gardener. Their daughter Gwendoline was born in the St Albans area in 1914, and a second daughter Isabel in Kent in 1917. Ruth survived to die in Cornwall in 1978, at the age of 95. Neither daughter married. Gwendoline died, also in Cornwall, in 2000 and Isabel in Kent six years later.

The area was not badly bombed in 1941, and it is possible that the German pilot was going home and getting rid of unused bombs; to return without dropping all of them would have been a serious matter.

Blacklands is just off the minor road between Telham and Crowhurst, opposite Pye's Farm at the northern end of Crowhurst, still today a rural residential area.

The next attack led to three deaths. Bombs fell on Crowhurst on 16 October 1943. A survivor reported much later:

On the 16th October 1943 there was bombing. There were pictures of the devastation in the local newspapers, but no location was given due to the secrecy at that time. It was a Saturday evening and my brother Robin who is a bit older than me, was doing his homework. We had the blackouts up & this loud explosion came and we all ducked under the table (we didn't have a reinforced table at that time). My

father was away in the forces at this time so there were us 2 children and my mother. The windows came in and we ended up with glass in our hair. We had to leave the house because the roof had come in. We went up to my Gran and Granddad Stone, my mother's parents who lived in Crowhurst near the Station, within walking distance of our house, thankfully. They managed to get most of the glass out of our hair which was very difficult. We were given a little 'tot of whisky'. We stayed there the night and the next morning my mother went up to our house and found that we couldn't go back there so she gathered together a few things and returned to her mum's house. We were soon allocated another Council House.

My Granddad, Jessie Stone (born in the late 1800's and a Kentish man) was having a drink. At The Plough Inn when a bomb dropped. Thankfully he was uninjured but he lost his spectacles as the explosion caused the lights to go out. He went back the next day and found them on the floor and amazingly they were undamaged!¹⁰

A husband and wife died in this day's attack. They were Arthur Charles Parks and his wife Adelaide Wood. Both were older than most casualties: they were both 75. Arthur had been born at Netherfield and Adelaide elsewhere in the Battle area. They had married in 1885 and had had nine children.

They died at Black Cottage, Adams Farm, Crowhurst. Arthur left £425 18s 5d.

Adams Farm is at the south end of the village, at the end of a lane parallel to the disused branch line to Bexhill and now very close to the link road opened in 2015.

Another death occurred on the same day. Frank Hardy Wigglesworth was 40, from a merchant family that was presumably well off. His father was Francis, born in Belfast about 1868, with addresses in South Kensington and then in Mayfair and Surrey; he came from a linen-making family and became a woollen merchant. Frank's mother was Mary Hardy, from Tipperary. Francis died in 1945; a record of Mary's death has proved elusive.

There is little in the records about Frank. He married Mary Guthrie Truscott at St Martin in the Fields in 1929. She had been born at Redhill in 1890, and by the time of her first marriage, in 1915, her father had been Lord Mayor of London and made a baronet. She had at least one child by that marriage. She died on the Isle of Wight in 1979. Frank left England for Canada in 1940 but must have returned. When he died he was Deputy Controller of Factories for the Board of Trade.¹¹ He was described as NFS (a member of the National Fire Service) in one report of his death.¹² His address was 64 Ennismore Gardens, South Kensington.

The last war death of all occurred on 19 August 1947. Its cause is not yet known. It was at Crowhurst Hospital.

John Foulds Petyt had been a fire warden. He had been born at Bingley in the West Riding in 1897. In 1911 his father Henry (c1864-1951) was a foreman for a gas engine maker and his mother was Emily Foulds (c1864-1950), with the same birthplace. They married at Keighley in 1889.

We do not know John's occupation or whether he served in the First World War, which is likely (though close to its end). He married Alice Rosina Kate Jones at Lambeth in 1923. She had been born at Southwark in 1900 and was to die at Lambeth in C1986. They had three children and lived at 6 Denny Crescent, Kennington; they are recorded there on the London electoral roll in 1946, and Alice is there in 1947 and thereafter. Of the children, one did not marry and a second married but had no children; but Cecil, born at Lambeth in 1926, had two children, each of whom in turn married and has children. But none of them appear to have any connection with Sussex – as indeed is the case for John, except for his death.

The assumption must be that Petyt was injured in a bombing raid and died of his injuries. He may well have come to Sussex much earlier than 1947, despite there being more than two years between the end of the war in Europe and his death; or he might have suffered later injuries from the explosion of a bomb that was recovered but then exploded. At present we do not know.

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With assistance from Kevin Regan

¹ The war in east Sussex (Sussex Express and County Herald).

² Crockford's Clerical Directory for 1874.

³ Trams had been abandoned in 1929. He must have meant trolleybus wires (1929-59).

⁴ <http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/history-of-the-battle-of-britain/the-blitz-the-hardest-night.aspx>

⁵ <http://www.westendatwar.org.uk/index.aspx>

⁶ <http://carolynyeager.net/leopold-wengers-letters-france-january-june-1943>

⁷ <http://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/epw000751>

⁸ Pike's Directory of Sussex.

⁹ <https://dallington.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/dallington-a-village-at-war.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/31/a7100731.shtml>

¹¹ http://cranleigh-ww1.daisy.websds.net/RollofHonour.aspx?RecID=143&TableName=ta_rollofhonourwwii&BrowseID=1103

¹² A tale to tell (undated and no author given), in ESRO