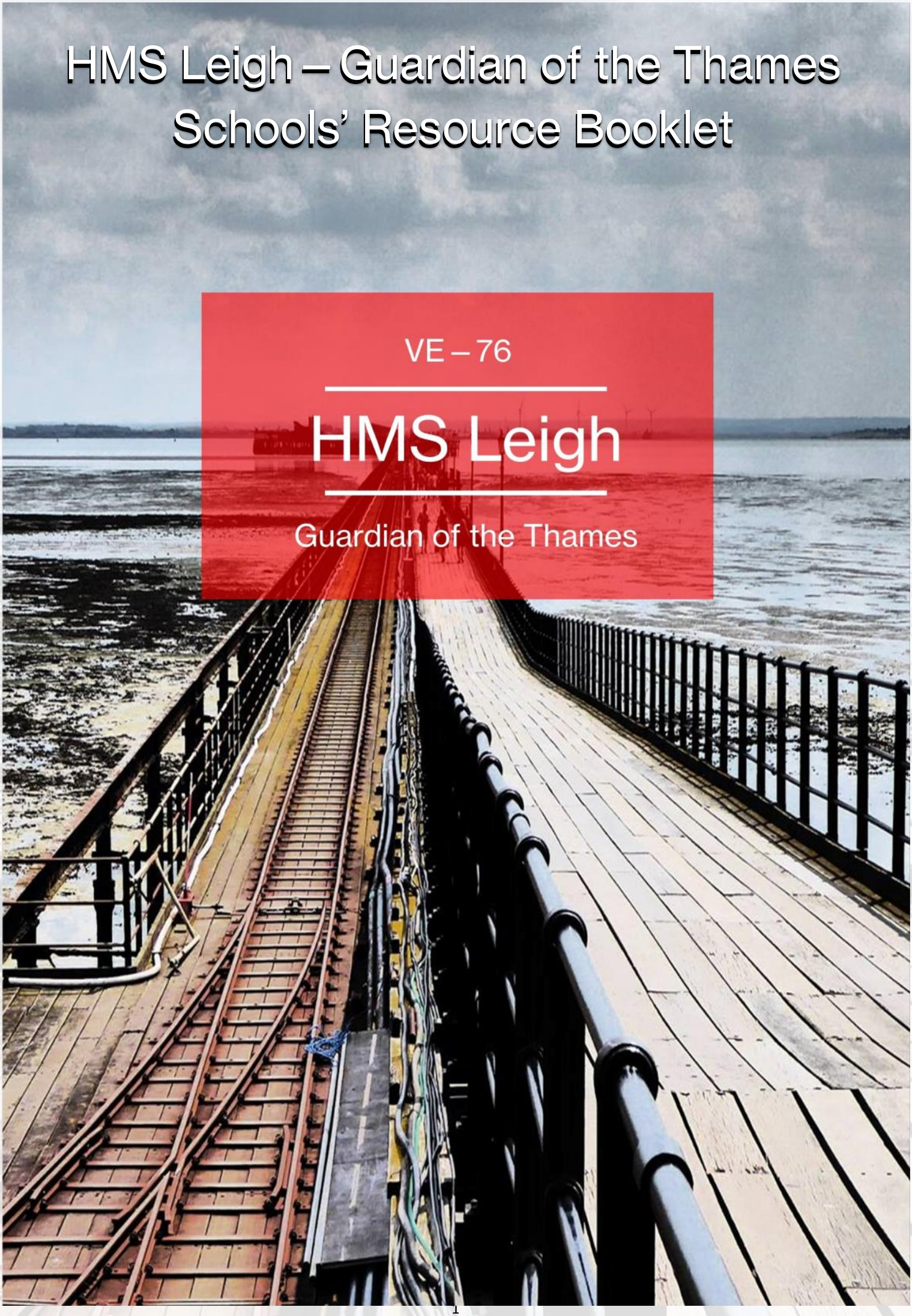
HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames Schools' Resource Booklet



HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames
Schools' Resource Booklet

Welcome to the HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames
Southend WW2 Schools Resource booklet.

"History is about everyone; and everyone matters."

This booklet has been researched and produced so that schools can use HMS Leigh source material, images and information to inspire both in class and online lessons over multiple disciplines for all ages of children to take part in celebrating Victory in Europe Day 2021.

Southend Pier, is famous but few people know much about the crucial role it played in WW2 . This booklet has been produced by the HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames Team with the help of volunteers and contributors from far and wide and has been made possible thanks to National Lottery Heritage and the Arts Council funding awarded to the project to inspire the Southend community to engage with their past and discover the impressive legacy together. Thanks goes to all those players of the National Lottery without whom projects like HMS Leigh would not be possible.

With this booklet comes a special invitation for schools and community organisations to take part in the HMS Leigh – VE 76 Project by producing their own exhibition, films or performances, inspired by the HMS Leigh or Southend legacy that will be a key part of the HMS Leigh VE 76 Event in May 2021 .

All images and source materials have been provided to the HMS Leigh Project by the families of those represented, Southend Museum, the Leigh Society and Southend Pier Museum.

For more information about HMS Leigh, please contact the HMS Leigh Team on 0207 097 3935 or email: schools@hmsleigh.org.uk or visit www.hmsleigh.org.uk

We would love to hear from you.

Blade Education

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HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames
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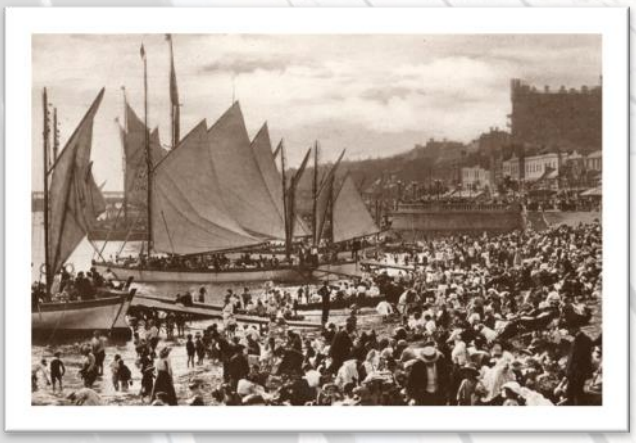
Contents

Southend Pier 1830-1939

Southend Pier is famous for being the longest pleasure pier in the world, stretching for a remarkable 1.34 miles into the sea. Even in the early 19th century, Southend was beginning to be a popular holiday resort, with sea air being promoted as a health benefit. It had, as now, the advantage of being close to London but it had one massive drawback – that the coast at Southend consists of large mudflats, so the water is never deep enough for large boats. This meant that many visitors would sail past Southend to resorts where docking facilities were more easily accessible. What was needed was a Pier long enough to allow large boats to dock.

Local people, led by the former Lord Mayor of the City of London, Sir William Heygate, who lived in Southend, mounted the campaign to build the first pier. Their initiative was helped when the first Pier Act received the Royal Assent May 1829, By 25 July, the Lord Mayor of London ,Sir William Thompson, laid the foundation of the first section. By June 1830 a privately owned 180m wooden pier based on oak piles was opened but this wasn't long enough to allow the profitable ships to dock at low tide. By 1833, it had already been extended to 3 times its original length and by 1848, it was already breaking records as the longest pier in Europe at 2,100m. Despite this, its original owners had to sell the pier in 1846 for £17,000 after getting into financial difficulties.

The London, Tilbury and Southend Railway reached Southend in 1854, which brought more opportunities to make money from holidaymakers. The wooden pier was overwhelmed with visitors and in 1873 it was sold again, this time to the Southend Local Board (the local government in charge of Southend at that time). With impressive bravery, the Southend Local Board decided to replace the wooden pier with a new iron structure. This iron pier was first opened in 1889 but only extended as far as what is now known as the Old Pier Head. It was a huge success, so, in 1898, an extension was built to increase the number of steamboats able to visit the structure. By 1908, it was so popular an upper deck was built.



Pictured 2 postcards of Southend: Right—Southend Pier 1906, Left—Southend Beach looking West

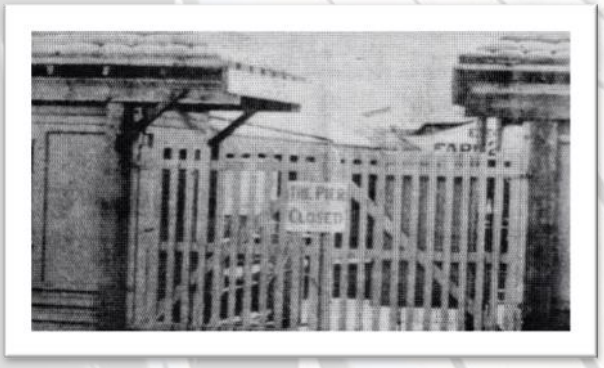
The new Iron Southend Pier was now officially the longest pier in the world at 1.3 miles or 2340 yards long and with the introduction of the Southend Pier Railway in 1890 was now a world class attraction. The early 1900s were certainly a boom time for Southend Pier, with day trippers from London crowding the seafront and the pier on high days and holidays. One of the most notable of these was the visit of the Home and Atlantic Fleet in 1909 which fortunately was recorded on film – https://vimeo.com/403282111

German POWs marching to prison ships on Southend Pier, 1915 © IWM Q 53656

During WW1, Southend Pier was used as a mooring place for 3 passenger ships, the Royal Edward, Invernia and Saxonia holding German Prisoners of War. Reports of the time suggest that conditions were very poor due to overcrowding and lack of sanitary provision. The ships were also targeted by the German Airforce for attacks, although none of the bombs dropped actually hit the ships. In the end the prisoners were removed from the ships to internment camps on the Isle of Man.

The period between the wars was considered a 'Golden Age' by historians and visitors flocked to the resort and made their way to promenade along the world famous Southend Pier. With concerts on the Band Stand and Pier Pavilion, trips to far flung places such as Margate, Clacton and Calais were on sale. In the 1920s visitor numbers topped a million, with a Tussaud's Wax Works in the Pavilion. In the 1930s the Prince George extension allowed boats dock at high and low tide and the new RNLI Lifeboat Station saved lives up and down the Thames. By the late 1930s preparations had begun to use Southend Pier once more as a military asset and was taken over by the Royal Navy in 1939 and renamed HMS Leigh.

The Royal Eagle approaching Southend Pier's Prince George extension. Postcard 1930s.



Southend Pier aka HMS Leigh closed to the public, 1939 Southend Pier Museum

Southend Goes to War


Roland Hayward, 1939.

We have been given access to a wonderful memory of the beginning of World War 2 by Southend boy Roland Hayward. Written in later life it recalls his family and exploits from 1929 to 1946. The following as an excerpt from 1939:

"Sunday September 3rd 1939 was the day war was declared, I knew something big was going to happen because the papers I had been delivering that morning read about a man in Germany called Hitler and a country called Poland, during the previous weeks everybody had been issued with a 'gas mask'.

At about 10-45 on this morning Dad, Mum, Nan, Patsey and I were all seated on the long seat in Dads saloon and the radio was switch on and it said the Prime Minister Mr Neville Chamberlain would speak everybody was very solemn and afraid he said that he had a message from this man Hitler to say that he had invaded Poland and that a state of War was on between England and Germany he went on to say that all pubs, clubs and places of entertainment would be closed and that a state of emergency would exist, with that the wailing of the air raid siren started we put our gas masks on and sat there very, very frightened awaiting the bombers about 5 minutes later the 'all clear' sounded –it was a false alarm!!! So the war had started.

The first days and weeks were strange, nothing happened from any enemy action, but we had been told to carry our gas masks every were we went but that soon was forgotten, we also were told to carry our identity cards about with us.
All the street lighting was switched off and all properties had to have all windows and doors provided with screens or curtains that would not show any light through, wardens patrolled the street to ensure that the regulations were strictly enforced, vehicles including bicycles had to be fitted with special 'light dimmer's'.

All the food and sweet shops had to start using the ration books that had been issued and everybody who was the right age had to register for different war work rescue workers, air raid wardens, fireman.

The declaration of war meant that local and national government departments were given many powers, many of the large houses in Victoria Avenue were taken over and used different ministries, the Blue Boar pub's car park and snooker hall was taken over by the fire service as was the Bell pub as an auxiliary fire station.

The Strand cinema was converted into a large NAFFI canteen for the army, navy and air force personal now stationed in the town. The Westcliff area south of the railway line from Chalkwell Avenue to Manor Road was evacuated and taken over as 'HMS Westcliff'. The sea front from Chalkwall railway station to Shoeburyness was closed off and large six foot square anti tank blocks with barbwire was built along parts of it and it was said that other parts were land mined.

Southend seafront being fortified in 1939.
Courtesy of Southend Museum

The Aerodrome at Rochford was converted into a RAF Fighter base surrounded with barbwire, concrete gun emplacements and areas were the Spitfires and Hurricanes were dispersed.

The whole of Southend pier was painted a dark colour and was fortified with various gun emplacements. Royal Terrace at the top of pier hill was commandeered and became 'HMS Leigh' controlling all that went on in the whole of the Thames Estuary.

As a young 10/11-year-old all the above was a big adventure tinged with the unknown, Dad, Mum and Nan kept the shop open within the restrains of rationing of sweets cigarettes and tobacco, I still had my newspapers to deliver (and read!!!) morning and evenings these told stories and showed pictures of ships being sunk some warships and passenger ships by U-boats and airplanes, there were the 'good' stories about a battle between three navy ships and a German battleship which they sunk.

Air raids did take place and sometimes the German bomber and or fighter were here before the warning sirens sounded which was very scary and frightening some of the raids were when they tried to lay mines in the convoy assembly area in the estuary other times they attacked the town or the airport.

If you were at school at the time you had to dive for cover under your desk, but at St Marys we had no air raid shelter to go to any way!!! "

Roland Harry Hayward

His Life and Memories

1929 - 1946

HMS Leigh

Even before World War 2 had officially begun in September 1939, Southend Pier was taken over by the Admiralty on Friday 25th August 1939. For the first few weeks it remained open to the public despite convoys of ships assembling and departing. It was officially closed to the public on September 9th 1939.

The original plan was for the Thames to be controlled from an office on Tower Hill, London, however it soon became clear that this was impractical and houses in Royal Parade, over looking the pier, were commandeered and used as the HQ for the operations of HMS Leigh.


The Wrens of HMS Leigh with Cdre J.P Champion, taken in front of Royal Terrance, Southend.

Officially, HMS Leigh was the vessel which flew the pennant of the NCIO, Southend, Thames and Medway. This could be a boat, ship or shore establishment. Southend Pier became known as HMS Leigh as this was where the NCIO spent more of his time and so the name stuck regardless of whether the pennant flew from Royal Terrace or the Pier Head. According to the records when HMS Leigh was established as the HQ of the Thames and Medway Control, Captain E. H. Martin was appointed as N.O.I.C. (Naval Officer In Command) and Captain R. V. Alison. D.S.O, R.N, was the first NCS (Naval Control Service) Officer. Captain J. P. Champion. C.B.E., D.S.O, R.N, became N.C.S. Officer, Thames and Medway, on 14th October and in December assumed the role of NOIC. The Secretary, Lieut-Commander (S) N. Baird, O.B.E, R.N, was in post from the beginning in 1939 to the paying off in 1945.


Commodore John Pelham Champion, CBE, DSO, RN

HMS Leigh was to play a crucial role in many of the great events of World War 2, including Dunkirk and D-Day but the day to day task of supplying both London and the convoys with food, fuel, water ammunition and supplies went on 24hr a day 365 days a year. Even when under attack the Pier was kept running by its intrepid staff. An amazing achievement by anyone's standards.

HMS Leigh

From the account of A.P Herbert in his book, The War Story of Southend Pier, it seems as HMS Leigh was a control centre, supply station and hospital for the 84,297 ships that sailed between September 1939 and VE-Day,

" All ships from 1942 had "kite" (small sausage) balloons to keep 'the dive-bombers away. More than half of these were inflated on Southend Pier and taken to the ships by small craft. When the traffic was held up by fog, mines or other cause, the small coasters would run out of food or water and must be supplied. Seamen would fall sick of appendicitis or pneumonia at the last moment and must be taken off, or treated aboard, before the convoy sailed. One ship had a Mohammedan crew who refused to sail, the day being a feast day, until they had sacrificed a sheep, according to ritual. Naval Control secured a live sheep from London and sent it aboard in a tug called the "Shepherd Lad." The ship sailed on time. After the conference all the Masters must be put aboard their ships again, perhaps four or five miles away, in dark and dirty weather by small craft. The Pier railway ran all hours of the night. No captain through all the war was not safely put aboard in time."

HMS Leigh was vital to both the supply of London and the wider war effort. If it had been knocked out there would have been no easy way to provide all of the services and operational controls that she provided.

HMS Westcliff


Landing Craft—Tank off HMS Leigh

As Southend Pier was HMS Leigh, so Western Esplanade was HMS Westcliff. Our clearest explanation of HMS Westcliff comes from the memoirs of Roland Hayward: **"The Westcliff area south of the railway line from Chalkwell Avenue to Manor Road was evacuated and taken over as 'HMS Westcliff'. "**

HMS Westcliff was a highly restricted establishment that had a number of functions and was designated as a Combined Operations Training Establishment for flotilla formation, landing craft training and Royal Marines landing operations – it played a vital part in the D-Day preparations.

Convoys

From the early days of World War 2 Britain depended on supplies of food, raw materials and equipment from the USA and countries of the British Empire. This was carried in thousands of unarmed merchant ships full of supplies that needed protection, so they were grouped into convoys with escorts, making them hard to find and difficult to attack.

Merchant shipping was placed under Admiralty control on 26 August 1939 and the first convoys of WW2 assembled in the waters off Southend on September 2nd 1939 under the control of the Commodore at HMS Leigh and 4 days later, the first regular series of convoys began – all of this while the pier was still open to the public.


A Convoy assembly off HMS Leigh

Convoy FS-1 sailed from Southend on September 2nd, heading for the Firth of Forth in Scotland and the route was aimed at protecting the coal supply routes along Britain's east coast that served London. On 7th September, Atlantic convoys were launched from the River Thames, under the command of HMS Leigh.


WW2 Convoy © IWM TR 1509

Convoys were introduced from the start of World War 2, unlike World War 1 when it took 2 years for the Admiralty to realise it was necessary to provide protection for the Merchant Navy ships.

The Convoys leaving from HMS Leigh were made up of between 10 to 60 merchant ships protected by a number of Royal Navy warships. Convoys were able to assemble off HMS Leigh due to the large space, the easy accessibility of food, water and fuel from HMS Leigh and the relative protection offered by the Thames Estuary.

Lieutenant Commander Frederick Hunter was posted to HMS Leigh in November 1940, was soon promoted to Commander and became Commodore of Convoys. Apart from making sure that Convoys arrived safely at their destinations, one of Commander Hunter's duties was to give speeches to factory workers to boost morale and let them know that their work was, "as vital to the war effort as being on the front line."

Convoys

In 1943, Commander Hunter gave a speech to factory workers in and around Manchester, and his family has very kindly allowed HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames to share his notes. "The other day I arrived in from the Channel and was asked if I would like to visit factories in Manchester and district. My reply was an emphatic "Yes"! I have decided that this informal talk should be about Convoys and the part the services play in running them. The Royal Navy, the RAF but probably much nearer to Manchester, the Merchant Navy. I have been on this job as Commodore of Convoys for two and a half years and I must say that the system works remarkably well. Commodore of Convoys sounds rather a grand title but I have wondered at times whether or not the job is a cross between a Pilot and a Commercial Traveller - that and ashore a man who is forever carrying and living out of a suitcase. The Commodore flies a Broad Pennant at the masthead (that is a white flag with tails and a Blue Cross on it). This I have viewed with doubt because the if the tails were cut off its meaning would be "Junior Officers may take over while this flag is flying" To proceed with our Convoy. Having selected the most suitable ship for the Commodore & his staff of W/Tel signalmen a Vice Commodore is appointed from among the Merchant Captains. He is a sort of lance Corporal unpaid and takes over should the Commodore's ship meet with a mishap. At the appointed time all ships weigh anchor at two minute intervals and steam out of the port to take up respective stations. 50/60 ships. The speed is decreased for this evolution and when all are reported closed up by the rear destroyer the convoy speed is set until the final port is reached (only it is not quite as easy as that). During the voyage vessels drop off and proceed into the Humber or North Country ports while others meet at certain rendezvous and join and so a constant steam of traffic is rounding our coast. At this moment and in fact every moment of the day or night there are probably 20 convoys representing something like 500/800 ships keeping the wheels of industry turning. Quite a large percentage are Colliers. When we had a shortage of coal down south recently I was asked why the coal could not be sent down by rail. If we take 20 Colliers carrying 1000 apiece daily we get 20,000 tons. This would mean that a train would have to pull 2,000 trucks - but not only should we have these 2,000 trucks loaded we should want 2,000 empties going back 2,000 being loaded & 2000 being discharged. As they say on the BBC I fear we should have a delay due to a technical hitch. The difficulties in Convoy work are of course the weather and strong tides that sweep across the fairways. I estimate that during the past 2 years I have had 4,000 ships in my coastal convoys and have lost 2 to bombing, 7 to mines and one by stranding, all this fortunately with the loss of only one life. Some time ago Southend published figures for convoy number 1000 - the shipping casualties were one half of one percent. I think you will agree that these figures give proof that ships should sail together whatever the size or speed protecting themselves with their own armament & being escorted by men of war."


Cdr Frederick Hunter, DSC, RN

The Dunkirk Evacuation

Dunkirk is a small town in Northern France that in 1940 was the site of a huge evacuation of the 'British Expeditionary Force' (BEF) and French Army from the beaches around the town.

The BEF was the British Expeditionary Force, which was an army sent to northern France by the British Government after Germany invaded Poland in 1939. The BEF began arriving in France on 9 September 1939 and spent the cold winter training to be ready to fight the Germans. By May 1940, it numbered over 390,000 men. This consisted of five regular and five Territorial divisions stationed on the Belgian frontier where the main German attack was expected.

On 10 May 1940, the Germans invaded the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Using the 'Blitzkrieg' technique of fast moving armoured formations supported by ground-attack aircraft, mobile artillery and mechanised infantry, they quickly overwhelmed the Dutch and Belgian armies.

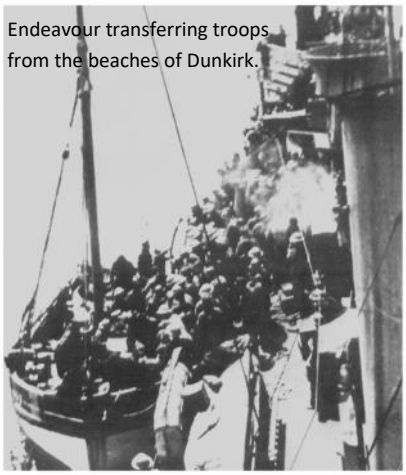
The British and French forces had moved into Belgium to meet the attack. However, the main German effort was directed further south. German tanks crossed the River Meuse at Sedan on 13 May 1940, outflanking the Maginot Line. Breaking through the weak French forces there, they raced towards the channel coast, reaching Abbeville on 19 May and cutting off the Allied troops in Belgium. On the same day, an improvised counter-attack by the British tanks temporarily halted the 7th Panzer Division at Arras. But on 26 May, with the Germans pressing northwards and with Belgian resistance collapsing, the commander of the British forces, Lord Gort was ordered to evacuate through Dunkirk as much of the BEF as he could.

The BEF was ordered to head for the beaches of Dunkirk and then to dig in and repel any attacks while waiting for evacuation back to Britain. The town of Dunkirk was chosen for its location relative to the bulk of the retreating troops and because it had a small harbour, large enough to take small to medium ships to evacuate troops.

The beaches at Dunkirk are many miles long, wide enough at low and high tide to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of soldiers and airmen who headed there, and shallow so that the men could wade out to the waiting ships.

The Endeavour

On 14th May 1940 the Admiralty, on behalf of the Government, made an order requesting all owners of self-propelled craft between 30ft and 100ft in length to send 'all particulars' to the Admiralty within 14 days if they have not already been offered or requisitioned. The owners of the craft were given the option of handing their boats over for the Royal Navy to sail but most of them made the decision to sail their own ships on the operation as they were all individual and their crews knew how to handle them best. It was said later that one reason the captains opted to stay aboard their vessels was that they were pretty sure that if they didn't they wouldn't see them again.


Endeavour transferring troops from the beaches of Dunkirk.

6 Boats from Leigh-on-Sea were requisitioned: Defender, Endeavour , Letitia, Reliance, Renown and Resolute. They were part of a flotilla of smaller craft gathered for the evacuation of Dunkirk known as the "Little Ships".

The Leigh-on-Sea little ships gathered at Southend Pier Head at 9 am on 31st May 1940 along with other ships from along the Thames shoreline. The skippers and crew completed forms enrolling into the Royal Navy and all crew were signed as Naval Auxillary Personnel, with the skippers being paid £4 and crew members paid £3 for their service. Each ship was provided with fuel and corn beef sandwiches. According to the men who served on the ships, no specific orders were given only that the success of the mission was heavily dependent on the weather.

The crossing was rough, especially for boats built for the Thames rather than a sea crossing. The Endeavour and her sisters first evacuated soldiers from the beach at Dunkirk and then, as the tide went out and threatened to strand them the Leigh boats began rescuing men from the north-eastern side of the 'Mole' in Dunkirk harbour and from here they operated a shuttle service, collecting men and ferrying them to the larger ships out at sea. The boats operated throughout the night, until the final trip at 6 am when they were ordered to return to Ramsgate with a full load of soldiers. 180 men were brought back on the Leigh boats to Ramsgate. Records indicate that 1,000 men were ferried out to the larger ships by the Leigh cockle boats.

Sadly one boat did not return. The Renown struck a mine while being towed after her rudder was damaged and all hands were lost. 230 Little Ships sailed to the rescue of the British Expeditionary Force, 29 did not return.

(Images courtesy of the Leigh-on-Sea Endeavour Trust)

The Evacuation of Southend

In June 1940 Operation Pier Piper came to Southend-on-Sea.

"The Government have decided as Holland and parts of Belgium and Northern France are now in enemy occupation arrangements are being made for those children in the Southend area whose parents wish them to go to be sent from these areas to safer districts in the Midlands. The movement will start by special trains leaving next Sunday. With only just over forty eight hours to work the Education Department at Southend has registered roughly 8,500 children about 62 per cent of the child population of the town. With teachers and helpers it means that when the evacuation begins some 9,300 adults and children will embark for the reception areas."
(Southend Standard 30th May 1940)

Evacuated children from Earls Hall School, *courtesy of Southend Museum*

Image of children waiting to be evacuated from Southend station, courtesy of Southend Museum

Most of those evacuated from Southend found themselves in small villages across the Peak District and Derbyshire.

The effect the evacuation of Southend had on families was very mixed and the experiences of both children and adults ranged massively. Some families returned to Southend before the end of 1940 once the threat of invasion was lessened, but some children did not see their parents until 1945.

Thanks to the generous donation of memories from our community we do have an insight into the ups and downs of the evacuation. This was sent to us by Tracey at Southend Insight:

"My Dad Robert Finch (Bob) and his sister June were evacuated from Westcliff to Kent. My Aunt had special needs and it was Bob's responsibility to look after his sister. Dad recalled feeling he was embarking on an adventure when he, his sister and hundreds of other children boarded the train.

The Evacuation of Southend

When they arrived, they were lined up in a hall and selected presumably by visual preference. Due to June's appearance they were last to be chosen, which in itself must have been upsetting. They were to stay with a couple who had an older son whom from the onset made it clear that they were not wanted.

The son forced them both into an empty bath, threw pepper over them and put the lid down on top of them. He teased my Aunt relentlessly and hit my Dad when he defended his sister. This continued at School and the boy encouraged others to pick on Bob & June – they were seen as outsiders.

Bob and June with other children during the evacuation in 1940.

My Dad was fiercely protective of his sister so often got involved in scraps. On one occasion the son punched Bob so he retaliated and got the better of the bully. When they got home the lady asked what had happened. Bob said that her son had hit him first but her son denied this and so Bob got punished.

His parents were uncaring and neglected the evacuees – they often went hungry and on one occasion June and Bob slept in a field because the couple, who enjoyed a drink, got so drunk they locked them out. My Dad woke up that morning with a cow licking his face.

They were both so unhappy and desperate to return home. Bob decided to write a letter to his Mum. He did this every week but never heard back – after three or four weeks it dawned on him that the lady where they were staying had not posted the letters.

Dad had the common sense to speak to his teacher who suggested he write again and this time give her the letter to post. This she did and within a week my Nan and Grandad came to collect them. That was a very happy day."

Southend Pier Railway

Southend Pier Railway has existed since the 1850s in the days of the wooden pier, when a horse drawn tram was pulled by a pair of blinkered horses up and down a single set of narrow gauge tracks primarily to transport heavy freight from the end of the pier to the old Gothic entrance. From the postcards of the time there does seem to be some seating for tired passengers, too.


Horse-drawn tram Postcard by Southend Pier Museum

When the new Iron Pier was finally opened in 1890 an electric railway was built on the 0.7 miles from the Pavilion to the Pier Head and this was upgraded to run the full length of the pier in following year. With upgrades and improvements to the service and more cars being added, by the time World War 2 came around there were 4 trains of 7 cars running on a 2 track railway.


Southend Pier Railway 1890
Postcard by Southend Museum

Southend Pier Railway is said to have played a hugely important role in the success of the war effort and the convoy system. In his book The War Story of Southend Pier, the noted author, playwright and only MP to serve during the war as an NCO, AP Herbert described the its role.

"Throughout the war, from the very first day, the Pier Electric Railways was operated by the Pier staff, day and night, despite frequent enemy action. Vessels often collided with the Pier. Nevertheless, 'the trains always ran through," covering over 300,000 train miles, carrying 1,500,00 Service men and women, including many sick, wounded and survivors. For the conveyance of the sick and wounded a number of the train coaches were especially adapted for stretcher cases.

During these six eventful years very considerable quantities of food, stores and ammunition , and 'special equipment' were carried on the railways. Acute shortages of staff and materials made maintenance difficult in the extreme, but this vital link never failed."

Food, Glorious Food!

If you think about food for the forces in WW2 then one name come immediately to mind, the NAAFI – Navy, Army and Air Force Institute which was – and still is to some extent, found wherever British service men and women were based. Of course HMS Leigh as a Royal Naval did have a NAAFI, but being Southend Pier it had to do things its own way. The problem was that the NAAFI has certain rules, one of those was that they could only supply food and goods to service personnel – and a lot of those who needed sustenance when they docked, or waited at HMS Leigh were officially civilians.

So the catering on HMS Leigh was carried out by a contracting company that bought in their own team to work on HMS Leigh delivering food to all who needed it.

For a testament to their work we have to look no further that AP Herbert, who was glowing in his praise of this dedicated group of men and women.

HMS Leigh Catering Staff, courtesy of Southend Museum.

"We must remember the catering contractor on the Pier, who. through all the war, kept the cafe and food stores going, supplied the Pier Head and, at need, the ships, and as one high officer said, "made all things possible." He was supported by the good lady affectionately known as " Mona" to Masters of the Merchant Navy all over the world. for her efficient handling of the feeding arrangements in the cafe. On one occasion there were fifty ships off the Pier for five days, held up by mining outside, and short of food. On this, and other occasions, as when the little ships were calling at Southend Pier en route for Dunkirk, the catering staff worked night and day and rendered an indispensable service. N.A.A.F.I., of course, could not be employed as they cannot serve civilians."

Southend Pier—WRNS

HMS Leigh had service personnel from the Army, Royal Air Force and the British Royal Navy and part of that contingent were around 25 WRNS Officers – or Wrens as they became known. The Wrens of HMS Leigh were conscripted young women who from 1941 worked a part of the administration staff of the Thames and Medway HQ and the Convoy system that ran from Southend to all parts of the world.

One of those Wrens was Leading Wren 2858, Joyce Palmer. Joyce's family shared her story with the HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames project:


Leading Wren, Joyce Palmer

"Joyce joined the W.R.N.S. on 13th December 1939 aged 19 and served for the entire duration of World War 2 and was officially discharged on 26th Nov 1945. During her time serving, she was a messenger, a typist and a writer (which was general office duties). She was awarded 4 war chevrons on 27th March 1944 and a good conduct badge on 13th December 1942. Her employment record showed her as a conscientious worker, steady and reliable.

Whilst working for H.M.S. Westcliff on the clifftops Joyce had to take messages weekly to the R.A.F. office which was situated at the pier head. Travelling on the pier train on which she was often the only passenger she delivered her messages and took back any orders for supplies or parts the R.A.F. needed.


Sgt Ernest 'Paul' Rawling, RAF

The family story goes that one day after delivering her messages, she was asked by an R.A.F. Sergeant if she could do some typing for him. Her reply was in the manner of "Certainly not. Get one of your W.A.A.F.s to do it" and walked off to catch the train back.

The R.A.F. officer, Sergeant Ernest Rawlinson (known as Paul) ran after her and asked her out on a date."

Southend Pier—WRNS

"Unfortunately, their courtship was cut short as Sergeant Rawlinson (who was a member of the 952 squadron R.A.F. Balloon command which was involved in the barrage balloons protecting the pier and shipping in the estuary from bombing raids) was involved in the Dieppe raid in August 1942 and was captured. He became a P.O.W. and held in Stalag 8B prison camp.

After a few anxious months of not knowing whether Paul was alive, Joyce eventually heard from him and they corresponded as much as was possible during the war, sometimes going many weeks without any news.

When the war ended and Paul eventually came home, they got married and were to live in Prittlewell for 62 years.

One of Joyce's memories of her time as a W.R.E.N. was running for cover when bombs were dropping in Southend High Street and The London Hotel was hit."

Mulberry Harbour

In 1942 the failed Operation Jubilee raid on Dieppe showed the Allied High Command that re-taking the major ports of Northern France would have to happen after the main advance of any Allied invasion of Europe.


Allied prisoners rest by the roadside, guarded by Germans, Dieppe. © IWM HU 1895

The most likely place to launch any assault on the German's Atlantic Wall was though to be in the Pas-de-Calais – which was the closest point between Britain and the continent, or towards any of the major French ports from where the German Army had planned to invade Britain in 1940.


Mulbery Harbour sections being built on the banks of the Thames, 1943.

So Allied High Command after much debate identified the Normandy coast as their most favoured point for an invasion. Unfortunately this stretch of coast has no deep water harbours to allow large ships to bring in heavy vehicles and weapons to support the invasion.

After a great deal of discussion, it was decided that if there weren't harbours available then they would need to provided, and so started one of the largest engineering projects of World War 2 – the Mulberry Harbours.

In shipyards and docks along the coast of Britain the various sections were constructed, from the huge outer walls of the harbours to the smaller pontoons that formed a roadway from the sea to the shore. Many of the engineering companies based along the Thames contributed to the operation with engineers and facilities as well as site for the construction of the floating sections for 2 harbours for Operation Overlord.

The progress was watched by HMS Leigh, **" the first beginnings' of a "Phoenix" one of the vast blocks of concrete that made part of the Mulberry. The method had the simplicity of genius. They took an empty part of the bank behind the River wall, dug down, made the concrete bottom of the Phoenix, cut away the river wall, towed the Phoenix out at high water and finished it off in dock. "**

Mulberry Harbour

With the relative success of Operation Overlord on the 6th and 7th June 1944, the scene was set for the construction of 2 massive artificial harbours off the beaches – Mulberry Harbour A was off Vierville Saint Laurence and Mulberry Harbour B off Arromanches.


Mulbery Harbour off Arromanches 1944

400 components made of concrete and steel were towed across the channel. With the huge Cassons – called Phoenixes – making up the wall of the harbours, and pier heads and pontoon sections (Whales) forming roadways (Beetles) for heavy weapons and vehicles to disembark their transports. The Allies landed 2.5 million men, 500,000 vehicles and 4 million tons of goods using the Mulberry Harbours in the 10 months they were used.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the operation was the level of secrecy that was maintained as remarked on at the time, "I never said a word about it-not till the news was recently disclosed. That is not remarkable; for I was not merely a non-commissioned officer in the Navy, but a Member of Parliament, and reticence was very much my duty. What was remarkable was the reticence of so many riverside citizens, so many workmen in the docks at Tilbury, who had no such formal obligations.

Here, in the roads off Southend Pier, these mysteries and monsters were always a mile or more from the shore. All Southend people, lovers of the River Thames, were strictly forbidden to use their field glasses; and loyally, I know, they observed the order. But in the narrow reach between Gravesend and Tilbury, through which all the mysteries and monsters had to pass, no magnifying glasses were necessary. The public 'ferry boats passed close to them. Thousands could see them from the shore; thousands knew the secrets of them-or enough to be dangerous; and yet the secrets never seemed to get about." AP Herbert


Beached section of Mulbery Harbour off Southend Pier.

(Images from Wikipedia Creative Commons)

D-Day

D-Day was one of the most important turning points of World War 2 and was the largest amphibious landing in history as well as the largest single movement of men and machinery – and everything that came from the Thames came though HMS Leigh.

The preparations for D-Day had a major effect on Southend and the whole of the surrounding area. The A127 was a 'motorway for tanks, lorries and heavy weapons' heading to the coast and stretches of it were car parks for military vehicles. Soldiers were billeted in houses requisitioned by the Ministry of War throughout the town and many of them in the closed zone of HMS Westcliff.


Landing Craft—Tank off HMS Leigh

The U.S military was in evidence on land and at sea, with the stars and stripes often outnumbering the white ensign. It was said that the United States had invaded the Thames. The very large Landing Craft Tank (LCT) were assembled at the point under HMS Leigh, each carrying up to 30 tanks ready to be deployed to the beaches of Normandy.

Operation Overlord was delayed by the weather as originally D-Day was set for June 5th 1944 rather than June 6th. This meant that all of the ships, large and small had to be supplied with food, water, fuel and supplies from the thin lifeline that was HMS Leigh. The small boats of the Royal Naval Auxiliary Patrol were seen scurrying between them all carrying everything needed to keep the ships and men at a state of readiness throughout the 11 days it took them all to muster before they sailed.

Of course throughout this the day to day responsibility of HMS Leigh to keep London fed and fuelled did not lessen. So the convoys had to keep assembling and sailing but, had to be kept several miles off of the pier to give everyone the room they needed, but as ever the men and women of HMS Leigh were up to the task.

D-Day

There were of course many Southend people involved with D-Day, one of them was Harry Noakes, a Lance Corporal with the 2nd battalion Essex Regiment, the Pompadours. "Going over there we were rolling about and I came out on deck, in fact I think I stopped mainly out on deck because sleep was out of the question as we knew we were going in. I looked back towards England and I can only think of it as an Armada of ships as far as the eye could see."

John Cooper was Able Seaman Gunner first class on a Landing Craft Tank. His LCT was in the forefront of the invasion fleet approaching Juno Beach. "We started getting ready and we were ahead of rocket ships. They are firing over the top of us on the beach and we were firing at them, and behind us is all the heavy battle wagons all firing, you can imagine the noise. It was terrific, the whole beach was alight! Terrific, massive, massive." "My gun placement was right on the starboard side, and I looked over and there's all these British soldiers there and you could do nothing else just run other them, they was dead anyway.
So brave lads, so brave. "

British troops and American sailors man gun positions on board USS LST-25, a tank landing ship. They are watching landing craft head towards Gold beach on D-Day. © IWM A 23894

John Cooper described the first landing of his LCT on Juno beach,
"We all turned about and then do the same thing – firing over the top and then this time we went in fine. We landed and we thought 'there can't be anybody alive' and the ramp went down on the landing craft first, so go gun went off – got hit straightaway and the second one had to push it out of the way so the rest could get off which they did.

I never thought anybody would still be alive we found out afterwards why they were still alive because they had such defensive pullbacks. They had trenches going right back. So as soon it was finished. They all came forward again and fill their positions and the 88 millimeter guns and mortars started firing on us. It was tremendous, tremendous."

Germany Surrenders

World War 2 in Europe ended when General Alfred Jodl of the German High signed the unconditional surrender of all German forces, at Reims, in north-eastern France on the 7th May 1945. There was an issue with the surrender as the General only wanted to surrender forces fighting the Allies in the West and not those facing Soviet forces in the East. However General Eisenhower demanded complete surrender of all German forces. If this demand was not met, Eisenhower was prepared to seal off the Western front, preventing Germans from fleeing to the West in order to surrender, thereby leaving them in the hands of the enveloping Soviet forces. General Jodl consulted with Grand Admiral Donitz, Hitler's successor, who ordered him to sign.


Surrender of Germany 1945© IWM EA 65715

At 3pm 8th May, VE-Day, Prime Minister, Winston Churchill made a speech to the Nation.
He began, "**Yesterday at 2.41am at General Eisenhower's Headquarters, General Jodl, the representative of the German High Command sighed the act of Unconditional surrender of all land, air and sea forces in Europe to the Allied Expeditionary Force and simultaneously to the Soviet high command.**"
He continued, "**Hostilities will end officially at 1 min after midnight tonight, Tues 8th May, but in the interest of saving lives the ceasefire began yesterday, to be sounded all along the front and our dead Channel Islands are also to be freed today.**"


Churchill waves to crowds in Whitehall - © IWM H 41849

Churchill finished his speech reminding the listeners that there was further work to do. "**Japan with all her treachery and greed remains unsubdued, the injuries she has inflicted on Great Britain, the United States and other countries and her detestable cruelties call for justice and retribution. We must now devote all our strength and resources to the completion of our task both at home and abroad. Advance Britannia! Long live the cause of freedom. God save the King.**"

VE-Day

The 8th May was declared a public holiday and all manner of events ever organised. Daphne Arthur from Rochford took part in preparing her local street party. **"All the people in the streets had done al the food, they had collections for a few weeks when they could see it was going to be victory, and anyone who could spare the rations just put together and did things, coz remember everyone had to bring everything out, they had chairs to make tables with planks of wood and they could put sheets over them, anything. Because all of the things you would have now we didn't have, they were either destroyed or gone. They all had flags all flying about, games, music – old fashioned music, pianos in the street and anyone who could play played and everyone was singing, all happy, all celebrating VE Day."**


A VE-Day Street Party in Leigh-on-Sea courtesy of Southend Museum

VE-Day was a huge celebration across the country, but as Churchill said in his speech, we had won our freedom in Europe, but not in the Far East. Daphne Arthur went to London on VE Day, to see off her fiancé Charlie, who had to return to his ship bound for the Pacific.

"Everyone was just going mad, the streets were just full of people. Everyone was happy and everyone wanted to speak to you, you know, and shaking hands. Quite a lot like us on the station saying goodbye, so I imagine a lot them were going to that other war. He was going to go onboard the Glory and going out east to the Japanese war to join the American 8th Fleet and, well I did cry, I cried a lot coming home, but you just prayed that everything would be alright and you would see him again, just did that, all the people round you were celebrating and all trying to talk to you but I was in a world of my own really, I was upset, very upset and of course after that when you heard all about the fighting out there, can you imagine, ships being blown up, I was petrified. You wait for the letters. You might get 8 all at once and they didn't tell you anything about the war, not allowed to, so you were still scared until it was over, that's when I celebrated, when that day came you know, really celebrated, thought well its over now, he'll come home, thank goodness. "

Courtesy of Chris Izod, Southend Oral Historian.

HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames Schools' Resource Booklet

The HMS Leigh – Guardian of the Thames Schools' Resource Pack was compiled from multiple sources and huge thanks to go all of those who have contributed their personal histories to be able to share with future generations.

We hope that this booklet is helpful with bringing the heritage of Southend Pier to life for pupils of all ages and if you would like to take part in the project or would like specific materials please contact us at:

schools@hmsleigh.org.uk

Blade Education

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