

FORMATION OF THE HOMEGUARD, THORNTON, BRADFORD

Film ID: 1214 **Year:** 1939-1945

Formation Of The Homeguard is one of many films held at the YFA relating to the Second World War. The film was made towards the end of the war in 1944. The parts that go back to the formation of the Home Guard in 1940 are reconstructions – as may be evidenced by the mirth which accompanies some scenes (which may reflect the easing of tension with the end of war in sight). Despite the absence of a commentary, the intertitles make much of the film self-explanatory, even though the Second World War may seem a dim and distant time to many younger people today. The YFA has other films showing the Homeguard, including Home Guard Manoeuvres, filmed in Sheffield in 1951.

Some information on the background to the film has been supplied by Rob Brown, who was 10 at the time. Rob is the son of Major Brown who appears in the film and who succeeded Norbert Durrant as Commanding Officer of the Thornton Home Guard. Rob Brown has posted a fascinating story on the BBC People's War Archive. In this he states that the film was made by Sgt Harold Whitehead (of Julius Whitehead & Sons, makers of pottery sanitary ware), an experienced amateur cine filmmaker and member of the Bradford Cine Circle. Rob's father paid for the colour film.

The film contains many interesting features of the time. At the beginning the couple in the film are reading *Picture Post*, which only begun publication in 1938, but which within months was selling over a million copies. Tom Hopkinson, who took over as editor in Britain in 1940, published a 'Plan for Britain' in 1941, a forerunner of the Beveridge Report, and, along with Bradford born J.B. Priestley, was involved in setting up the 1941 Committee, which also advocated state control of major industry and elements of a welfare state.

However, the main source of information for most of the population at the time was the radio. On September 1st the BBC acted quickly to close its television service from Alexandra Palace, for fear of the German air force being able to use the television signals for direction finding. The National and Regional Programmes were replaced with one Home Service programme transmitted on two frequencies. In 1938 some 8.5 million licences were issued, and virtually everyone had access to a radio. Note how large the wireless is: in 1941 still only two-thirds of the population had mains electricity, so wirelesses had large batteries which needed recharging.

The couple hear Anthony Eden, the then Minister of War – Churchill later reassigned him to the Foreign Office – make his national announcement on the radio on May 14th to establish Local Defence Volunteers (the film shows Eden speaking to a meeting, in daytime, when the announcement was at 9 pm. The film also quotes Eden as giving 16 as the lower age limit, when in fact he stated 17). From the day war was declared, 3rd September 1939, all men aged between 18 and 40 became legally liable for call-up, raised to 51 at the end of 1941. The impetus for setting up the LDV was the fact that people were spontaneously arming themselves, something the Government obviously wanted to control.

The government had expected 150,000 volunteers in total, but within 24 hours of Anthony Eden's radio broadcast, 250,000 had joined. Within 6 weeks of the announcement by Eden, ten times more men had volunteered than the War Office had expected in total. By the end of May the total number of volunteers had risen to between 300,000 and 400,000, and by the end of the following month it exceeded 1,400,000 - around 1,200,000 more than anticipated. Churchill disallowed women from combat duty, although some MPs pushed for this (see Gardiner); but they could join the Civil Defence or Womens' Voluntary Service, and later the Womens Home Guard Auxiliaries for administrative duties. Edith Summerskill MP set up the unofficial, and illegal, Women's Home Defence League in 1940, which recruited 20,000 women and trained them to use arms (see Summerfield and Peniston-Bird).

At first the facilities weren't available to accommodate the number of volunteers; hence the civilian clothing and the wooden rifles in the first part of the film. To begin with the LDV were issued with 250,000 pikes - bayonets welded onto metal poles. The rifles unpacked on the film were probably a supply of 1917 pattern American "Springfield" rifles, with a .300 calibre, making them incompatible with the British service rifle, the .303 Lee Enfield Mk 4.

Training too was absent at first. In the beginning there was little guidance from the War Office as to training, and it was left to each individual Home Guard to develop their own tactics that would be relevant to their own locality: resulting in members of the Home Guard being four times as likely to die in an accident during training than a regular soldier. In fact the first training was started by Tom Wintringham in June 1940. Born in Grimsby in 1898, Wintringham was heavily involved in the 1926 General Strike and fought in the Spanish Civil War. He passed on his knowledge of guerrilla fighting at a training base in Osterley Park, West London, before the army stepped in, setting up other training camps on similar lines.

Churchill had the name changed to the Home Guard in July 1940. Most people today will associate the Home Guard with the TV comedy series *Dad's Army*, set in 1942, written by Jimmy Perry and David Croft; Perry himself serving in the Home Guard. Although the comedy series portrays the HG as being somewhat incompetent, this film shows them to be a highly trained and professional outfit. One member of the Home Guard, Eddie North, interviewed for the ITV series *The Way We Were*, notes that the nickname of the LDV, 'Look, Duck and Vanish', was an appropriate one, as this was their instructions on spotting any German parachuters: to immediately report it without being seen.

However, once the threat of a German invasion receded, after the Battle of Britain, the HG was seen less as a defence force than as helping out

the other volunteer organisations in civil and war duties at home. One of these organisations, the Civil Defence Wardens, is shown in the film. Others, including the Womens' Voluntary Service, all worked together in fighting fires, clearing rubble, guarding damaged buildings, and assisting in rescue work. Women could join the Civil Defence or Womens' Voluntary Service – which had one million members by 1943 – and later the Women's Home Guard Auxiliaries for administrative duties. There was also the Auxiliary Territorial Service, which by July 1942 had 217,000 women members. In April 1937, an Air Raid Wardens' Service was created. By the middle of 1938 about 200,000 people were involved, with another half a million enrolling during the Munich Crisis of September 1938. By the outbreak of war there were more than 1.5 million in the ARP (Air Raid Precautions), or Civil Defence as it was later re-named. However, Bradford itself was only bombed once, on 31 August 1940 (see Price, References).

At its peak the HG had numbered 1,793,000, with 1,206 either killed on duty or dying from wounds. Four received posthumous awards, three for bravery – losing their lives – during grenade practice. The HG were finally dissolved in December 1944, when absenteeism was already high, although only officially disbanded the following December – the men being allowed to keep their battle dress and boots.

Another organisation featured in the film are the "Kilties' Band", the bagpipes and drums of the Hazley Mansfield Pipe Band, who often accompanied the company on their long trek to Oxenhope (see Rob Brown). Rob Brown also informs us that one of the motorcycle riders in the film is none other than Allan Jefferies, who was a champion motorcyclist, and whose family set up a motorcycle shop in Saltaire Road, Shipley in 1917, and which is still going strong as the major UK dealer in BMW motorcycles.

Not many of the places or businesses in the film are still going strong, but one that is is the White Horse Inn, owned by the Yorkshire brewers Timothy Tailors.

References

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The True Story of the Bombing of Bradford, [P. W. Price, BBC Archives](#)

[Rob Brown's Story](#), BBC Archives:

[Second World War films at the YFA](#)

['Dad's Army' and the Home Guard](#)

Details of other films about the Home Guard, [moving history](#) and [home-guard](#)

Further Information

Robert MacKay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain During the Second World War*, Manchester University Press, 2003.

Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War*, Manchester university Press, 2007.