

# #SHAREYOURSTORY

## JOHN VAN HERWAARDEN

*Occupation of Guernsey 1940–1945*

*by John van Herwaarden (died 2008 - aged 94).*

*John learnt his profession of horticulture in Holland (his birthplace) then at the Palace of Versailles and Tunbridge Wells. He came to Guernsey in 1938 and finding the light was near perfect for growing, became a well-known grower of tomatoes and flowers.*

*Although he and his wife Ruth occupied several homes in Guernsey, they both eventually lived with their daughter, Stephanie, in Torteval. He died in 2008, eight years after the death of Ruth. Both are buried in the Torteval cemetery. These are some of John's memories of the Occupation which he wrote, and they have been provided by his daughter Stephanie Nickolls-Torteval.*


**'The Island is now Occupied'**

The Occupation of Guernsey itself was quite a simple affair.

On Sunday 29 July 1940 three German planes landed unopposed at the Airport. The occupants asked a taxi driver to be taken to the Island's Authorities, to whom they declare, "the Island is now occupied". At the time I was not married and was boarding with a Mrs. Mahy, who lived at the Military Road. That afternoon I went out with my then-girlfriend, Ruth. We saw the German planes landing, but not taking off again, and both knew what had happened. That evening I went back to my lodgings, all sad and dejected, not knowing what was going to happen.

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When I came back to my lodging place my landlady, who was called Min, greeted me with, "Well John, it has been a nice day." I was dumbstruck, and said to her, "Don't you know what has happened?" She replied, "No, what is it?". I replied, "We are occupied." She said to her husband, Edwin, "Is it true?" and his answer was, "Yes Min, I am afraid that it is true".

*Before the Occupation, there had been a lot of discussion amongst families either to go to England or to stay. There were yellow placards out saying: 'Don't be Yellow, stay at home. A friend of mine who lived in Queens Road finally decided on that Sunday to evacuate. The husband, Ernie, was going to go to the harbour the next morning to see about availability and times of departure. He was only just outside the door of his house when he saw a German on a motorbike. Bewildered he went back home and told his wife, Tilly, "We are too late, the so and so's are here!"*

*A lot has been written about fraternizing with the Germans, mostly by people who were miles away from here. They had no idea what it was like to live here during the Occupation. Even our own States were accused of being pro-German. But it was a very muddled and difficult situation. The Germans had the upper hand and would have their own way in any case.*

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### Rations and Radios

Food was a matter of great concern, but you had to help yourself to survive. I was lucky to rent a piece of land in Pont Vaillant; land that was well out of sight. This was important as one had a better chance to keep the produce hidden. Besides my vegetables, I also grew a lot of tobacco, not because I was a heavy smoker, but to make cigarettes. Bucktrouts had a machine making cigarettes. These cigarettes came in packets of 20 with 20 packets to the carton they were called 'Island Gems'. They were more used as a currency than anything else, as the person who took your cigs probably exchanged them for something else. It was a question of knowing the right people. From a baker a few pounds of flour and from a farmer some eggs, milk, or butter.


I hate to admit this, but my late wife's wedding ring was obtained by barter for cigarettes.

Of course, there was severe rationing. Footwear, clothes, and medicines were all in short supply. In our worst week of rationing, we had just one box of matches. But relief came when the Red Cross ship Vega arrived in January 1945 carrying flour and other essentials.

We also received food parcels, some from Canada, Australia, and I think New Zealand. They contained tea, coffee, chocolate biscuits, and cigarettes. In those days smoking was good for you, it steadied the nerves. It must be said that the Germans never touched any of our food. By 1945 they were hungry themselves and were going through dustbins in search of food. Even dogs and cats were not safe and were eaten by them.

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One day my wife was visiting her dressmaker; the purpose was to have a coat made out of a white blanket. Clothes were sold out long ago, and it was a case of make do and mend. Curtain material was very popular for making dresses. I remember the coat well, it had blue edging. At the time all radio sets had to be handed in. Most people had crystal sets, which were small and easy to hide. However, Mrs. Pridem, the dressmaker, had a rather large wooden set on the floor of her room. The room we were sitting in was below street level, and we saw a German ringing the doorbell. We all knew the purpose of his visit. My wife, who was heavily pregnant at the time with Stephanie, quickly grabbed a tablecloth, threw it over the radio set, and sat upon it. The German was let in and asked if there was a radio set about. My wife kept a straight face and in fact, the German touched the set with his leg. He went away satisfied that there was no set in the house.

### Bombings


The R.A.F. made several bombing raids on the Island. I witnessed one whilst cycling along the Esplanade. I first heard the planes coming. Then bombs dropping in the harbour. The planes nipped over the sea wall and made their escape at a low level over the sea. The Germans could only look on as all the anti-aircraft guns were pointing upwards and could not fire at a low level.

At the Fort field, which is now a residential area, the Germans were stationed. They built some radar instruments there. Just before the invasion of Normandy, these were continuously attacked.



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Mostly at four o'clock so the anti-aircraft gunners had the sun in their eyes. The bombing had to be very accurate, as only a direct hit at the base would put these out of action. Out of all the bombs dropped only one fell outside its target area. All Church services in all denominations continued, but all Masonic activities were barred and Lodges closed down.

### Slave Workers and Sawdust

Few people eating out at a well-known establishment today will realise that this was built and owned by a former slave worker from Holland. He was picked up by the Germans in his hometown of S'Hertigenbosch to work either in a factory in Germany or the defence wall in France. So he landed here. The slave workers had very little food and were ill-treated. If they could support themselves and could find somewhere to sleep they were fortunate but many of them disappeared. One of this man's first jobs was to build a salt and syrup factory. He got hold of some coppers, in which people used to boil their clothes. Fuel was obtained by pinching it from the Germans. Then it was off to sea with a cart and some zinc baths. These were half-filled with seawater and floating planks to avoid spilling, and then boil the water, until the salt remained. The pulp of the sugar beet was used to make the syrup. At least it was something on the bread! After the War, he stayed and married here.

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I bought a wood stove and a dozen chicken huts. Not to keep chickens, but to saw up the wood for fuel. Many people had sawdust tins. An old biscuit tin with a hole at the top and on the side filled with sawdust. With a broomstick, you connect the two holes and light it for slow-burning. Pan on top.

*These are some of my reminiscences of the War. Memories keep flooding back. I remember going to town on Liberation morning. In the afternoon I was lying on my bed and all of a sudden a light came on. It was such a joy to me, as we had had no electricity for years. The war was a special part of our lives, but any person who was here during the Occupation will never waste food or see it wasted. They cannot throw it away like other people do newspapers; we can remember what hunger was.*