

# Stoke Gabriel Remembers VE Day



A Memorial  
Record of the  
Celebratory  
Events in and  
around the  
Parish

## Stoke Gabriel Remembers VE Day

The unconditional surrender by Nazi Germany of their armed forces to the Allies took place on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> May 1945, thus bringing an end to the European conflict in World War II. The surrender document was signed late in the day and gave effect to peace the next day, the 8<sup>th</sup>, known as Victory in Europe (VE) Day. The government granted a national holiday "Plus-1" to mark the event and Stoke Gabriel was ready to celebrate.

### VE Day Preparations

There had been an expectation of Germany's surrender for some weeks and plans for celebrating the event were being made across the land. In April, Stoke Gabriel Church Council had discussed the need to prepare the flag staff in readiness for the day and within a week a new staff and cord had been installed on the tower. A request from the Home Office for local courts to consider an extension of licensing hours once hostilities had ceased had been favourably received. The courts suggested that the Licensed Victuallers Association might apply on behalf of their members with the suggestion that the extension be until 11.00 pm. While the troops would not be returning until after the VE Day celebrations had concluded, fund-raising events were also being planned to enable parishes to provide a fitting welcome home for them. Stoke Gabriel Parish Council had decided that a day would be set aside in early August for the purpose.



Contemporary View of Church Walk & Church House Inn

As for the practicalities of VE Day itself, the broadcast to the nation by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was planned for the afternoon and the broadcast by King George VI and the church services of thanksgiving were planned for later in the day. Street parties, musical entertainment and bonfires were organised around these planned events. Householders themselves helped by hanging flags and bunting above the streets from their houses and by displaying pictures of the King and Queen and the Prime Minister in their windows.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill's announcement of Germany's capitulation had been



Contemporary View of Stoke Gabriel

expected on the afternoon of Monday the 7<sup>th</sup>. There was disappointment when it became apparent that it would not come until the next day. But this was offset by the enthusiastic rush to finalise plans for the celebrations and to put the finishing touches to decorations. Like the rest of the country, Stoke Gabriel village was "gaily bedecked with flags" and the children of the Council School, which included evacuees, were given two days of holiday for the celebrations. Everywhere there were feelings of relief and thankfulness at the end of the war in Europe, feelings that were tempered by the losses sustained by families and by the

thoughts of those still engaged in war in the Far East. But after five years of hardship, the time was right to celebrate.

### VE Day

Weather reports had been banned during the war but restrictions had been lifted by VE Day. Threatening to derail the celebrations, the day in Stoke Gabriel had started with a steady downpour of rain, but by mid-morning the wet weather had given way to warm sunshine. Meanwhile, the preparations were being made for tea and refreshments in the afternoon and bonfires in the evening. At 3.00 pm, the entire country fell silent as the nation listened to Winston Churchill's radio broadcast that the war in Europe had ended. Most parishioners had radios but many still gathered together to hear the news in a spirit of fellowship and unity. The church bells were rung immediately after the announcement and throughout the evening along with the bells from the parish churches up and down the river.

Following Winston Churchill's broadcast, the celebrations began. Stoke Gabriel village had two victory tea parties - one at the bottom of the village in Church Walk and the other at the top in Flood Street opposite the Baptist Chapel. The Church Walk tea party was organised by Charlie Churchward's wife, Winifred Churchward, and her companion, Lavinia Gladys Buchan. Using the Old School Room, local residents prepared buns and sandwiches of egg and spam, jelly, and drinks of lemonade and tea, and then served them up on the tables that ran the length of Church Walk.



Church Walk Victory Tea Party

Meanwhile, the local residents at the top end of the village had borrowed trestle tables and chairs from the Baptist Chapel and set them up in Flood Street at the junction with Paignton Road (formerly known as Lane End Corner). Lilian Knapman of nearby Maddicks Court<sup>1</sup> had kindly offered the use of her house for the preparatory work. Local ladies made sandwiches and cakes in the house and passed them through the sash windows to the patiently waiting crowd. There were about 50 adults and children at both parties, a large turnout given that many of the men had not yet returned home.

Following the Flood Street tea party, Cecil (known as Nobby) Hannaford-Hill, who was an accordionist, picked up his instrument and started to play. The children gathered round and, following his lead, danced and sang a number of contemporary songs all the way down Paignton Road to the War Memorial, then around Hillfield and Long Rydon, and back to Flood Street. The children then went into the Baptist Chapel Hall and played games for the rest of the afternoon.

A thanksgiving service was held in the early evening at Stoke Gabriel church and was “so crowded that extra chairs had to be brought in to seat the people.” The service was conducted by Vicar Henry Foxton Beaumont, a military veteran of the Great War, with the Baptist Minister, Rev’d Jackson, preaching “an inspiring sermon” and Mr W Weekes reading the lesson. At night several bonfires were lit in the village.



Winston Churchill addressing the crowds on VE Day

At Paignton, essential businesses opened for a few hours in the morning. After Winston Churchill’s broadcast to the nation, the Council Chairman delivered a proclamation, which was relayed to the Public Hall, and then he repeated the proclamation at Tweenaway Cross. Many women wore national emblems, mostly red, white and blue rosettes. At Dartington Hall, the Music Group, with string and wind accompaniment, sang from the Tower with the flags of the Allies waving gently in the breeze. Across the river, Cornworthy held a victory party to the Stop Gaps dance band. Other nearby towns and villages also held victory tea parties. In Paignton, gifts of flags, books, oranges and a sixpence were provided to the children and in the evening “al fresco dancing on Paignton Green was an outlet for

the people’s high spirits”.

In the towns and villages around Stoke Gabriel, numerous bonfires were lit, many of which were surmounted by effigies of Hitler and Mussolini. In Totnes the main bonfire was at the bottom end of the town, access to which was down a poorly lit path. Many failed to see the nearby leat including the town mayor who slipped into it to the great amusement of bystanders!

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<sup>1</sup> Maddicks Court is now the semi-detached cottages of Oaken and Summer Stitches.

The parishes fell quiet again at 9.00 pm as King George VI delivered a speech on radio that resonated with many of his subjects. For the first time since the black-out restrictions were imposed, the lights went on again and hurricane lamps and car headlights were deployed in the busy street areas. The Church House Inn in Stoke Gabriel, which had had electric lighting installed in 1941, was at last able to reap the benefit. Across the region, there was spontaneous community singing and dancing in the streets.



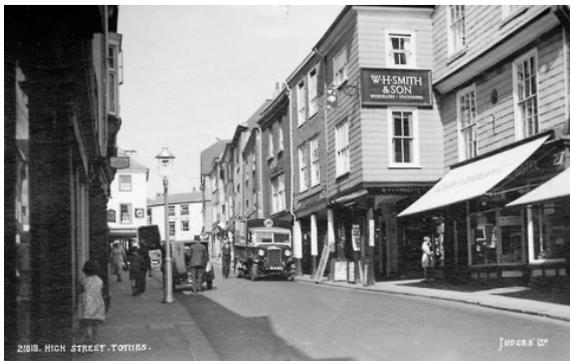
King George VI speaking to the nation

In contrast to many towns and villages in South Devon, Dartmouth had no organised festivities for VE day, deciding to postpone its rejoicings until victory had been secured in Japan. Nonetheless, flags and bunting were erected and many people congregated in the streets and at the evening services of thanksgiving in the local churches.

### Plus-1 (and more) Day(s)

While some spent the Plus-1 day quietly, many continued to celebrate. Bridgetown held a street party and fete at two hours' notice. Bus services to Torquay and Paignton were full, with the local bowling greens and tennis courts in great demand.

In Totnes three boys fell into the same leat as the Mayor on the previous day. They took off their clothes and hung them on bushes to dry. Later in the day, two of the boys returned



The Temperance Hotel is the building to the right immediately before W H Smith & Son

home and were duly chastised. One was afraid to go home, but his mother eventually went in search and found him, brought him home, put his feet in mustard and water, and sent him to bed. In the Temperance Hotel<sup>2</sup>, there was dancing every evening through to Saturday, continuing until well after 1.00 am. The crowds were so large that many were dancing outside in the street with music being relayed on loudspeakers positioned outside the hotel. Just before midnight on Saturday, the proprietor called for two minutes silence in memory of the

fallen, which was completely and respectfully observed by all. The behaviour and conduct of the revellers were the subject of very favourable comment in the letter's section of the Totnes Times.

<sup>2</sup> The Temperance Hotel was at 27, High St. By 1948 the hotel had become the Central Hotel and the hall at the rear had been converted into a small cinema. The Central Hotel was sold in 1959 and became the Continental Hotel in 1963. The hotel was closed in 1964 and the premises sold to F W Woolworth & Co. In 1973 it became Harberton Arts and it is now a hairdresser - Amanda Marsden. The cinema has recently re-opened as the Totnes Cinema (<https://totnescinema.co.uk/web/index.html>).

Back in Stoke Gabriel, the church bells were rung again on Friday 11<sup>th</sup> May to welcome home the first of the returning troops. They were two prisoners of war, namely Lieut D T Bibby of Wood's House, who had been captured at Dieppe in August 1942, and Lieut J Knight of Elmwood, who had been captured in July 1944. In the afternoon, the children had tea at the Dart Café to celebrate the victory.



Dart Café (now Emma's Restaurant)

Overshadowing the celebratory events of VE Day in Stoke Gabriel was a great sadness and shock at the death of the vicar's wife, Mrs Eileen Baldwin Beaumont<sup>3</sup>. She had passed away four days before VE Day, aged 54, but her funeral and thanksgiving service did not take place until the 12<sup>th</sup> May after the VE Day celebrations had concluded. In spite of his personal grief, Vicar Beaumont still led the parish in its thanksgiving for peace.

The ensuing days saw a gradual return to normality. The children went back to school, the men slowly returned home and then to work. Repairs were undertaken to buildings that had sustained war damage, from which Stoke Gabriel did not escape<sup>4</sup>. Plans were now being made for VJ Day and the welcome home for the troops and another opportunity for Stoke Gabriel to party!

Mike Stott, April 2020

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<sup>3</sup> Such was the popularity and respect for the vicar's wife that Eileen Clements (nee Hodge) was Christened with the same name.

<sup>4</sup> The blast from the bombs that had been dropped along the Dart estuary and particularly at Mill Point caused damage to a number of parish buildings including the Church House Inn, for which repairs to the windows, having been temporarily boarded up, were undertaken in June 1945.

## Selected Quotes from VE Day Speeches and Sermons

*“Let us remember those who will not come back: their constancy and courage in battle, their sacrifice and endurance in the face of a merciless enemy; let us remember the men in all the services, and the women in all the services, who have laid down their lives. We have come to the end of our tribulation and they are not with us at the moment of our rejoicing.*

*“Then let us salute in proud gratitude the great host of the living who have brought us to victory. I cannot praise them to the measure of each one's service, for in a total war, the efforts of all rise to the same noble height, and all are devoted to the common purpose...*

*“...We kept faith with ourselves and with one another, we kept faith and unity with our great allies. That faith, that unity have carried us to victory through dangers which at times seemed overwhelming...*

*“...There is great comfort in the thought that the years of darkness and danger in which the children of our country have grown up are over and, please God, forever. We shall have failed and the blood of our dearest will have flowed in vain if the victory which they died to win does not lead to a lasting peace, founded on justice and good will.”*

**King George VI's speech broadcast at 9.00 pm**

*“God bless you all. This is your victory! It is the victory of the cause of freedom in every land. In all our long history we have never seen a greater day than this. Everyone, man or woman, has done their best. Everyone has tried. Neither the long years, nor the dangers, nor the fierce attacks of the enemy, have in any way weakened the independent resolve of the British nation. God bless you all.*

*“My dear friends, this is your hour. This is not victory of a party or of any class. It's a victory of the great British nation as a whole. We were the first, in this ancient island, to draw the sword against tyranny. After a while we were left all alone against the most tremendous military power that has been seen. We were all alone for a whole year.*

*“There we stood, alone. Did anyone want to give in? [NO!] Were we down-hearted? [NO!] The lights went out and the bombs came down. But every man, woman and child in the country had no thought of quitting the struggle.*

**Winston Churchill's impromptu speeches to the Whitehall crowds**

*“Great and small, rich and poor, had stood as one man to face the common peril. God's highest gift to His people is unity in seeking righteousness and we stood confident and resolute, unconquerable, and we sought the aid of our God to bless our cause. We have not failed our cause and our God has not failed us. This is God's day and we thank God for all his gifts, for our unity, and for the outstanding devotion of the King and Queen.”*

**Rev'd Preb J Heywood-Waddington, St Mary's Church, Totnes**

*“Never had a nation stood so near to defeat and yet still believed in victory. Robbed of weapons so that we had little more than broken bottles and bare fists with which to fight, yet still unyielding. This Britain of ours stood, and still stood, thank God.....Only a nation imbued with amazing spiritual strength, wonderful courage and incredible power could have stood as we stood. We not only survived, we recovered, and we fought and we sacrificed and now at long last had triumphed.”*

**Rev’d N F Gibson, Totnes United Free Church**

*“We know that if mankind cannot destroy war, war will destroy mankind. Our eyes have been opened to the close and intimate relations that exist between the races who go to make up mankind, relations which we ignore at our peril. We talk freely about a new world - a new heaven and a new earth - with no more barriers between the races that make up the family of God.....The cynic, bitten with the memory of many failures of the past, may sneer at the vision.....But to believe that it must always be so is to lose faith in the future. And where there is no vision the people perish.”*

**Mr C H Phelps, Totnes Congregational Church**

*“Were we just fighting for the right to live, or was there some deeper purpose, some nobler aim that inspired us when we answered the challenge?.....We stood for more than life; we prayed for more than to escape destruction. We stood and we fought for a particular kind of life, for liberty of thought and speech, for man’s right to worship God unmolested, for the honour of a man’s word when he gave it, for freedom from the hands that ruthlessly exercised power. Without these things we were sure that life would be another name for death.*

*“We stood against a nation which, having discarded its faith, chose the way of power and terror.....But it is not enough to have defended that high cause in arms. It still needs to be lived. We still need to show by the way in which we frame the peace and fashion the new world that we are indeed sure that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men.*

*“It is not only war that demands disciplined and dedicated lives. Indeed it is easier to secure such discipline and dedication in time of war than peace for the dreadful urgency of the moment makes the need for those virtues very plain. But the law of love needs its devoted servants, and without them, however Germany may be treated, the peace will be lost and all will be to do again.”*

**Rev’d R A Edwards, St Mary’s Church, Dartington**

[Unfortunately, the “inspiring sermon” delivered by the Baptist Minister, Rev’d Jackson, in Stoke Gabriel parish church on VE Day was not reported. At times of national importance, the Anglican and Baptist churches in Stoke Gabriel often came together].

### Acknowledgements

With grateful thanks to the parishioners who shared their recollections of VE Day in Stoke Gabriel and especially the following who met with me one very pleasant afternoon at the River Shack just before the Coronavirus lockdown, their ages and place of residence being at the time of VE Day:

1. Ena Baker (nee Rogers), age 15, of The White House
2. Kathleen (Keeno) Squire (nee Baker), age 11, of Coombe Shute
3. Elaine Ross (nee Hannaford-Hill), age 10, of Sundial Cottage

and to George Collings, who joined us at the River Shack, for permission to use the photograph of the Church Walk victory tea party. He was aged 2 years and resided in The Barnhay.

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