

Their Finest Hour and the u3a

Words: Alun Edwards and members of u3as from Banbury, Bognor Regis, Bury, Easter Ross and Sutherland, Evesham, Isle of Sheppey, Liverpool and Merseyside and the Wirral, Llandrindod, Oundle, Sheffield, and more.

Summary: u3a members around the country have been contributing to “Their Finest Hour”, an online digital archive (funded by the HLF, based at the University of Oxford) of the everyday stories and objects of the Second World War. On 6 June 2024, the free online archive was launched at <http://theirfinesthour.org/> as part of the commemorations for the 80th anniversary of D-Day. u3a members have kept alive important memories of the Second World War by volunteering for digital collection days. Significantly u3a members saved the final University of Oxford day in Liverpool when the venue had to be changed at the last minute, “By ensuring the success of the event u3a members underscored their commitment to preserving and sharing the stories of the Second World War for future generations.” (Dr Matthew Kidd, University of Oxford). Members have uploaded their stories online and organised digital collections in their u3as to help their colleagues use the Internet. “Their Finest Hour exemplifies purposeful, meaningful research and participation by u3a members”, (Maggy Simms, The Research and Shared Learning Projects Coordinator for the u3a).

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u3a involvement in Their Finest Hour

“As a child whose parents were the 'wartime generation' I know that their experience influenced my upbringing. My dad and mum only met because he was evacuated from London, so I often think that my existence is only because of the War. Keeping all those memories is of great importance to me and one of the reasons I volunteered to help ensure that others can keep those memories going” (Trevor Pitt).

u3a members around the country have been contributing to “Their Finest Hour”, an online digital archive of the everyday stories and objects of the Second World War. On 6 June 2024, the free online archive was launched at <http://theirfinesthour.org/> as part of the commemorations for the 80th anniversary of D-Day.



1 Extract, homemade card sent by Marjorie Wilband to her husband Cyril 1943 (University of Oxford/Jacqui Lindsay 2024 CC BY 4.0)



2 Bognor Regis u3a members collect Second World War memories from their community 11 November 2023 (Image: Betty Allsworth)

Since the u3a featured this Heritage Lottery Funded project based at the University of Oxford in *Third Age Matters*, Summer 2023, not only have our members submitted their own stories online, but they have run collection days for Their Finest Hour e.g. in Bognor Regis u3a and the Isle of Sheppey u3a. By doing this more tech-savvy members helped their colleagues who might not be used to uploading images and stories on the Internet. Of the 74 digital collection days, Dr Matthew Kidd from the University of Oxford enthused that “Bognor Regis was the most well-attended event for the project with more than 80 stories recorded”. Valerie Owens, Bognor Regis u3a says that “I hoped to help as a volunteer at an event near me. Unfortunately there were no local events being organised at the time. I felt passionately that these stories and objects should be recorded for posterity, so the obvious solution was to organise our own event!”

Most significantly, Matthew continues “The Liverpool digital collection day in March 2024 was a huge success thanks to the dedication and initiative shown by local u3a members. Responding to a call for volunteers just days before the event, u3a members worked tirelessly for several hours, welcoming visitors and interviewing those who came along to share stories and artefacts relating to their family's wartime experiences.”

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3 In the atrium of the Liverpool Central Library u3as members (seated) from Liverpool and Huyton, Merseyside, meet a new contributor during the Liverpool digital collection day, while other contributors are interviewed 2 March 2024 (Image: Ally Edwards)

“By ensuring the success of the event, u3a members in Liverpool and the surrounding areas underscored their commitment to preserving and sharing the stories of the Second World War for future generations” (Dr Matthew Kidd, University of Oxford).

Ian Parnell, a u3a volunteer at the Liverpool day expresses what many of us were thinking: “I found the day quite moving and the people were amazing”, and another volunteer remembers:

“One story that stood out was that at the insistence of the contributor’s sister the family went to the street’s public Air Raid Shelter, rather than the Anderson Shelter in their garden in Bootle - the one that they had always used. This saved their lives as the house and the Anderson Shelter were destroyed by a parachute mine. It’s as important to hear about the people left behind, as the people who went away to fight.” (Helen McEvoy)

u3a members did not only volunteer to support the University of Oxford. They felt it is vital that we preserve these stories, particularly social histories and objects before they are lost forever, for example:

“By recording the personal and everyday aspects and individual experiences of life in wartime communities, it broadens the historical coverage of the period and shows the true consequences of war from a very close and intimate perspective. It counterbalances the more usual national consequences of war described in most history books and national records” (David Goodin).

By participating our members benefited in many ways.

“I enjoyed the day and some of the stories were amazing. These were the first times some people had spoken the stories out loud, and they became quite emotional telling them”. (Ian Parnell)

“Recalling the story of the evacuee who stayed with my parents for the website prompted my son to research more. By looking through family diaries the lad I knew only as ‘Johnny from Bootle’ now has a full name and an address - maybe I can get in touch with him one day.” (Liz Edwards)

“My local library used my material for a display alongside a ‘yarn bombing’ project that is making a D-Day equivalent of the Bayeux tapestry. The library manager told me that local schoolchildren were fascinated by how young the men and women were.” (Caroline Yeo)

“These objects and photographs all mean so much to the owners. One day these will end up in the refuse and the story, the names on the photographs etc. will be lost forever without this record” (Iain Palot).

Stories from the Second World War

Ally Edwards has helped to catalogue the thousands of uploaded photographs via the Their Finest Hour website. Ally highlights these contributions from the many u3a members:

Christmas 1943

Marjorie Wilband sent this wonderful handmade Christmas card to her husband Cyril serving in the Middle East, December 1943. These were submitted by Jacqui Lindsay among other artefacts relating to her parents, Marjorie and Cyril.



4 Homemade card sent by Marjorie Wilband to her husband Cyril 1943 (University of Oxford/Jacqui Lindsay 2024 CC BY 4.0)

Hitchhiking across Britain with a doll's house

“Dad got home to Banbury a few times from Dover Castle. I know he hitchhiked and got home whenever he could. He built me a doll's house which I still have, made from bits of wood he found in Dover and he brought it home on his back.” (Rosemary Farrell)



5 A framed photo of Rosemary sat on her Dad's lap (Charles), her baby brother Anthony is in their Mum's arms, October 1942 (University of Oxford/Rosemary Farrell 2024 CC BY 4.0)

Shocking blast in an air raid shelter

Linda McLean contacted Their Finest Hour to record the detailed and well-researched story of her beloved father, Major Hugh Robertson, from Nigg in Scotland, who had fought with gallantry across Northern Africa and Europe of the 5th Battalion of the 51st Highland Division, and who cared passionately about his men.

What is interesting in this work, Ally recommends, is when you ask a contributor to think about the experiences of other family members. When prompted Linda told these stories about hers:

“My Dad (Hugh) married my Mum in 1951, 11 years her senior. My Mum was just in her teens during the war. I remember asking her what she did for VE day, and her eyes lit up! ‘Oh, we were allowed to go to the chip van! It was great!’ Most of her memories were of carrying a gas mask to school.



6 Major Hugh Robertson putting the shot during games held in Germany after VE Day (University of Oxford/Linda McLean 2024 CC BY 4.0)

“My father-in-law was a fireman. He was very highly thought of from what I understand, and was on duty the night of the Clydebank Blitz, March 1941. He was asked to go down into an Anderson Shelter and tell the folk that there was nothing left of their homes. He was heartsore at the devastation, and telling these people that they had no homes to return to was miserable.

He descended... and was completely awestruck. He said it was like Pompeii. Everyone in the shelter was dead... but they had been killed by the blast. They were as they had been... So, there were women sitting knitting, as they had been in life: kids drawing on paper on the floor, frozen in death. Nobody had any sign of injury. It

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It certainly shook him. My mother-in-law said she had never seen him return from duty looking as if he had seen a ghost. You may not know about the Clydebank Blitz, certainly, most Scots are unaware.” (Linda McLean)

Ally: “What if I hadn't asked Linda about her family! Does anyone else know these stories?”

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Christening Gifts

Liz Edwards uploaded several photos relating to her parents, Walter and Gwynedd Powell, both office clerks in Llandrindod Wells, Radnorshire, Mid-Wales, and volunteers in the Auxiliary Fire Service. Liz's elderly grandmother Lucy Gwen Peirson Jones farmed in the hills above Hay-on-Wye with some of Gwynedd's brothers. Gwynedd's other brothers served in the RAF, the RCAF, and the Australian Army. Liz's Aunty Mary was a nurse in England.

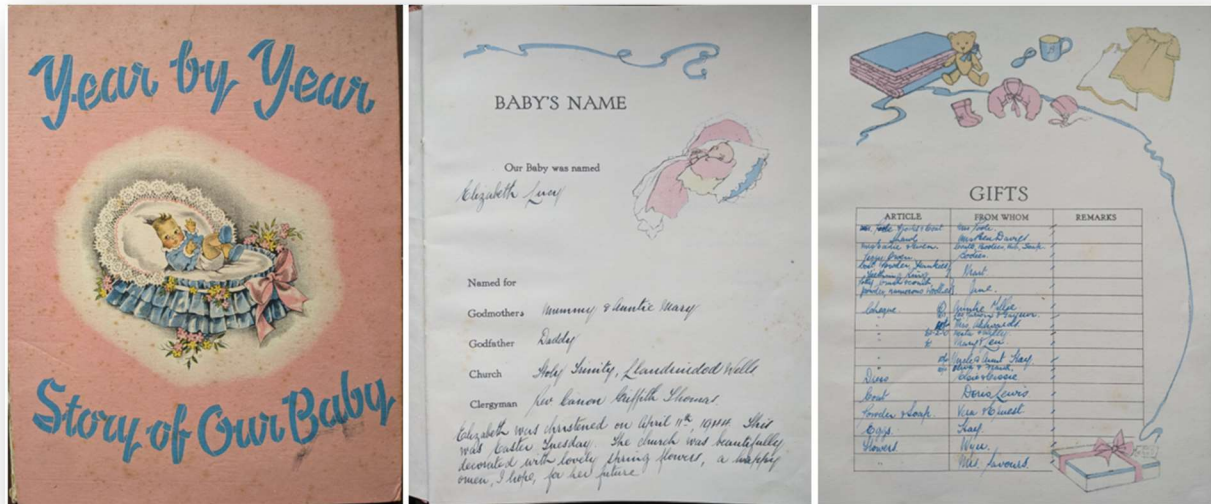


7 Liz's parents, Walter and Gwynedd Powell on their wedding day, Llandrindod Wells 1940 (University of Oxford/Liz Edwards 2024 CC BY 4.0)

Their Finest Hour prompted Liz to look for familiar family photos. That search led to boxes of letters and books like:

“My Mum kept a book called the ‘Story of Our Baby’. I was born early in 1944, so as well as details like my birth weight, eye colour, and who sent cards and congratulations to my Mum and Dad, there are interesting reflections on the War in Mid-Wales. For example, the list of gifts for my Christening shows ‘EGGS’, ‘SUGAR’ and ‘HAM’. Why? And then you think

- it's for making a cake and for the tea! In the book My Mum wrote 'Elizabeth was christened on April 11th 1944. This was Easter Tuesday. The Church was beautifully decorated with lovely spring flowers, a happy omen, I hope, for her future', all this in her beautiful handwriting". (Liz Edwards)



8 Gwynedd Powell's book of our baby (University of Oxford/Liz Edwards 2024 CC BY 4.0)

Hitchhiking across Britain with a doll's house

"Dad got home to Banbury a few times from Dover Castle. I know he hitchhiked and got home whenever he could. He built me a doll's house which I still have, made from bits of wood he found in Dover and he brought it home on his back." (Rosemary Farrell)



9 A framed photo of Rosemary sat on her Dad's lap (Charles), her baby brother Anthony is in their Mum's arms, October 1942 (University of Oxford/Rosemary Farrell 2024 CC BY 4.0)

On the Japanese front line from Mandalay to Rangoon, Burma 1945

Evesham member Peter Aggett submitted a story about his uncle who served in Burma (modern-day Myanmar). In two letters written to his parents in May and June 1945 Lt. Frank Aggett Royal Engineers, summarised victory over the Japanese in sanitised tones. Some of the fiercest fighting of the whole War in the harshest terrain is dismissed in these detailed if bright and breezy missives as “the normal ‘jitter’ party”. Later Frank describes his job now the Japanese have retreated:

“My main job just now is running my own private railway line - I’ve got a ten-mile branch line of which I’m sole lord and overseer - the locomotive power is a jeep fitted with railway wheels which pulls along a couple of ordinary railway wagons - and very successfully too - the only trouble being that if you want to stop suddenly - well you just can’t! So far we’ve had one fatal accident when we hit the proverbial cow on the line - that not only put paid to the cow but derailed a wagon and rather bent up the front of the jeep but fortunately no one was hurt. I personally left the jeep in rather a hurry!” (Frank Aggett)



6 Jeeps adapted for running on railway tracks head southwards from Mandalay, 1945 © IWM (SE 3615) permitted use under the IWM Non Commercial Licence

Stories that stand out for David Goodin and Betty Allsworth, the organisers for the Isle of Sheppey u3a collection, include:

A War Wound

Marilyn Orpin’s mother was wounded in Sheerness, Kent, whilst her father served in the RAF throughout the War, landed in Normandy on D-Day driving a tanker of aviation fuel, and in multiple campaigns across Europe - without a scratch. Betty thinks this “illustrates the complexity, maybe the absurdity, of war.” Marilyn’s story

“When my mother and father (Iris and Norman Shaw) were courting, they were saying good night in Iris’s doorway in Invicta Road one evening. Shrapnel from a dogfight up above

entered and exited her upper arm, leaving large wounds. She was taken to hospital by ambulance and remained there for a week as the wound became septic. The scars are still to be seen. My father died in 2004, just after my parents celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary, and my mother reached her 100th birthday in February 2024.”
(Marilyn Orpin)



7 Iris Shaw who was wounded by shrapnel from a dog fight in the skies above Sheerness, "To Norman With Lorry Loads of Love Iris" (University of Oxford/ Marilyn Orpin 2024 CC BY 4.0)

Not all stories are accompanied by photographs or artefacts to be digitised.

Being Bombed Out of the East End

Christine Woodard recalled her grandfather sending the family to safety to escape the worst of the Blitz bombing. He stayed behind with their dog, her grandfather worked in a factory.

“My Nan and Granddad lived in the East End of London together with their children, Bill, Fred, Jim and Sylvia (my Mum). My Nan took the three youngest children with her, during the worst of the bombing, to stay with her sister and family in Normandy near Guildford, Surrey. It was quite a surprise and shock, therefore, when, one day, they spotted my Granddad walking down the hill towards their house. He was wearing his pyjamas and slippers, and over this his black coat and bowler hat. He was pushing his bicycle, and,

attached to the bicycle by a lead, was the family dog. My grandparents' house had been bombed, and he had nothing left, apart from the few things that he had with him. He'd been in the air raid shelter in the garden, but the dog had been in the house and had survived by hiding under the bed." (Christine Woodard)

David: "How on Earth would I, and most people nowadays, cope with such circumstances? It was an ongoing tragedy in which the innocent victims had no voice."

u3a and an academic project

Their Finest Hour, it should be remembered, is an academic project. Indeed, supporters include the acclaimed historians like author and broadcaster James Holland, who is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a Research Fellow at Swansea University. James says of Their Finest Hour: "This is a brilliant project and one that will create a very important and lasting archive for the nation. Our heritage from the Second World War is extremely precious and those behind Their Finest Hour are performing vital and a significant service for us all."

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As well as recording memories the University of Oxford wanted to quiz the contributors about modern perceptions of the conflict. And u3a volunteers asked these 5 additional questions of the contributors. Questions like 'What three words come to mind when you think about the wartime generation?'

"That is the most difficult question. For me: ABSENT FATHER. Fatherless is incorrect. And for my Mum - HOPEFUL, she kept all Dad's letters, or was she APPREHENSIVE?" (Betty Allsworth).

What would you say? It will be interesting to read the future research arising from the many hundreds of answers to these questions.

The Research and Shared Learning Projects Coordinator for the u3a, Maggy Simms, has praised Their Finest Hour. "With the oversight of Ally - our members' interests have been preserved and the project has ensured they benefit rather than their enthusiasm just being employed." Maggy continues "Their Finest Hour exemplifies purposeful, meaningful research and participation by u3a members."

What three words come to mind when you think about the wartime generation?

From 6 June 2024 you can see all the stories on Their Finest Hour <http://theirfinesthour.org/>

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