

EXMOUTH AT WAR

Arthur Cook

In the great scheme of things people often forget that many of Devon's towns and villages, far from being sleepy wartime backwaters, played a vital role in the fight against the Nazis. Indeed it has been said that Devon was among the most military active of any county during the Second World War.

In this book the author looks at his home town of Exmouth during the war years, drawing on years of collecting information and images, and interviewing many people who lived through the period and whose eye-witness accounts are included here.

Exmouth's strategic importance at the mouth of the River Exe made it a target for a number of raids including a devastating attack from the air in February 1943 in which 26 people were killed and many wounded, with great destruction of property. This and many other aspects of wartime life in the town are covered, including: The Home Guard; Children in Wartime; The Exmouth Civil Defence; The Role of Women in War; and the American Presence.

With over 300 photographs, this important book will fascinate anyone who has a connection to Exmouth past or present, and all those interested in the history of the war on the Home Front.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

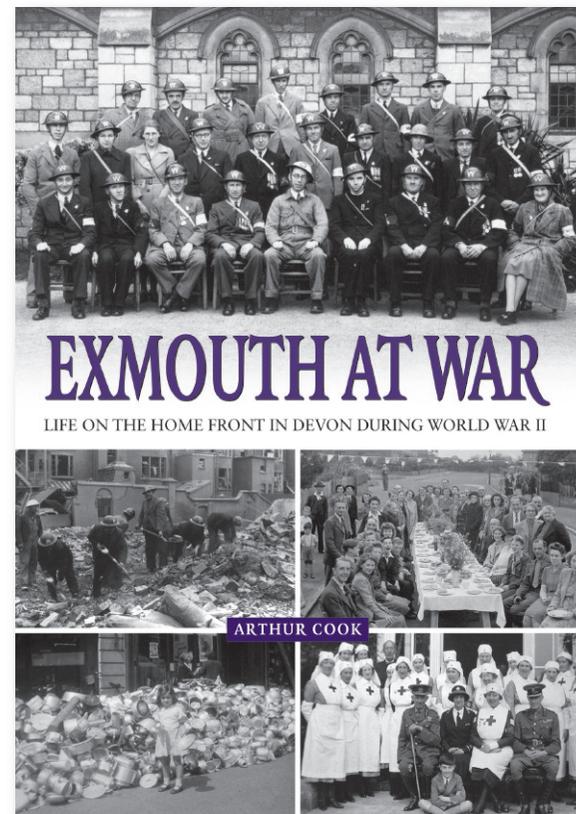
Arthur Cook lives in Exmouth and has spent much of his recent life recording and collecting memories of wartime from local people. His interest in this period of history started when he was a small boy when most of the toys he played with, including comics that he read and the films that he watched, were about the war. His interest in music also centred on the 1930s and 40s, and when he met his wife in 2004 they decided to combine their interests and formed 'Blitz and Peaces', a live World War Two music show with which they now tour Britain, performing at living history events, museums, schools and preserved steam railways. *Exmouth at War* is Arthur's first book soon to be followed by a book on the Home Guard, also to be published by Halsgrove.

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Above: Joy Penwarden shows the pans to the camera collected for Lord Beaverbrook's appeal

Left: L.D.V. and Home Guard Equipment

Sector 15 Air Raid Wardens at All Saints Church 1942.

Below: Example of a double-page spread.

EXMOUTH AT WAR

Family photograph amongst the beach defences

There was a ban on photographing beach defences and military establishments during the war; the penalties were extremely severe and the accused could be charged with spying or treason both capital offences, for which the maximum penalty was hanging. Because of this there are very few photographs available of the beach during WWII.

Machine gun emplacements (pill boxes) were positioned at vulnerable points along the seawfront and 4.7" ex naval guns positioned at foxholes on the landward side of the Queens Drive.

An Allen-Williams steel turret, now displayed on the seawfront, which housed a Lewis gun was placed on the mouth of the docks, which gave a good field of fire over the estuary and some protection against aerial attack.

Exmouth Warren
Exmouth Warren opposite the pier had around 30 small holiday homes and a tea room on it before the war.

The Allen-Williams Turret

EXMOUTH'S DEFENCES

war. People would stay on the Warren during the summer months and relax, sunbathe and fish for mackerel in small boats. On August 11th 1939 a 75" shark weighing 102lb was caught with a rod and line, which was a highly unusual occurrence.

No one was allowed to take photographs on any accessible part of the beach. After sunset, especially on the Warren, the situation was even more perilous. The fear of being wrongly identified as invaders and causing an unnecessary alert, may have resulted in being shot as enemy agents by the Home Guard. On July 5th 1940 just after the evacuation of Dunkirk, it was decided that the Army should also take over what was left of Exmouth Warren.

Due to gale-force winds, high tides and rough seas, a large section of Exmouth Warren was washed away on February 16th 1941. Some of the bungalows had collapsed into the sea destroying people's homes and possessions. Further storms on the 3rd March finally sealed its fate. Finally the remains of the small dwellings were demolished by the military to make way for barbed wire and anti-aircraft guns as the threat of invasion grew.

There was a scaffolding beam from the bottom of the Belsher slipway across to the Warren. It could be opened and closed by a chain and steel hawser with floats attached to it. This could be raised and lowered by the men of the Royal Naval Patrol Service, during the day it was left in fixed in place during the night with the Home Guard keeping watch over it. It was supposed to prevent ships and landing craft being able to enter the river estuary in the event of an invasion. How successful it would have been is debatable.

The swing-bridge at the docks was also immobilised every night and concrete tank blocks moved in front of the approaches to it. Once again the Home Guard patrolled it nightly, also staffing the pillar mounts for Lewis guns, which were placed by the swing-bridge. Exmouth gradually became a fortress and the population went about their everyday business, trying their best to put on a brave face and put the war out of their minds.

Tank Blocks and Defensive Lines

Joe Radgick
"Mamhead slipway had tank traps placed on it, it was laughable really 2'6" high concrete pyramid traps with a piece of railway track inserted into the top, to stop panzers, one is still there down by Shelley Beach, in the sand."

In June 1940 tank blocks appeared on the dock slipways, at major road junctions and on the approach roads to the town, as were the approaches to the railway bridge over Exeter Road and the railway line.

Roy Penberthy
"There were two gun emplacements out to sea, inside concrete casemates, one near the lifeboat station and the other at Foxholes car park. There were searchlights up on the cliff face you could get to them by climbing up the cliff walk."

John Pascoe-Watson
"There was a rectangular pill box next to the Belsher slipway, right at the end of the ground on the right hand side. It was for housing Lewis guns and was staffed by the Home Guard."

Joe Radgick
"At the top of the stairs for the ferry to Starcross, is a rectangular concrete gun emplacement with rectangular firing slots. This was camouflaged to look like a workman's hut; it was covered in wooden slats."

Exmouth Warren

The damage caused to the lower Parade shops March 1st 1941.



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