

## 4 Delays, diversions and hold-ups 1939-1945



1939 - the start of the Second World War. TV watchers will, no doubt, be familiar with the Home Guard, the blackout, Air Raid Wardens, and the lighter side of rationing and the 'blackmarket' from such programmes as *Dad's Army*. Those of the older generation will have no difficulty in recalling the real thing. At Crowland the Home Guard used a field on The Common for a practice site, using mortar shells kept from the 1914-18 war! (And as recently as August 1993 one was dug up and had to be attended to by an Army bomb disposal unit. It was the fifth such shell to have been discovered on the site, but so far none have been found to be live.)

Above, Spalding, Crowland and District Home Guard Officers photographed at Ayscoughfee Gardens, Spalding. Crowland men are *back row*: Bert Slater (extreme left); Fred Beeken (2nd from right); *front row*: Dr Drake (2nd from right).

Transport was of course vital, but like everything else was operating under severe difficulties. During the war, haulage was restricted to a 25-mile radius of Crowland and work was mainly transporting agricultural produce from local farms to railway stations at Eye, Postland, Thorney and Littleworth. Seed potatoes from Scotland were collected from

the stations and taken to farms, also granite for the 'reaches' or untarmacked farm roads. All had to be unloaded by hand when delivered to their destination, and the granite was both loaded and unloaded by shovelling. Bricks were also carted for building the 'pillboxes' which would have been used in defence. 'Pillboxes' were small brick-built or concrete shelters intended for a gun emplacement. Many were built all over the country at strategic points in the fields, and a few may still be seen here and there in the Fens. At Crowland, the construction job fell to Robert Strickland, the local builder, and some 'survivors' may be spotted at Mason's Bridge, Baxter's Bridge, and Bukehorn Road (in the trees near Powder Blue Farm and again near Rose Farm). Others were scattered amongst trees in the area, the flat Fenland countryside being considered particularly vulnerable to airborne invasion.

In spite of the war, it wasn't always all work and no play.



Here is John with elder brother Bert and sister Nellie Jane on Cowbit Wash during the 1940 Lincolnshire Skating Association Challenge Cup event. An indication of the large number of spectators attracted to these events, even in wartime, may be seen in the



background. John's skates came from Switzerland and were brought back for him by Mr Sam Kingston after a visit there.



Still at Cowbit during the same winter, Bert Slater, who was one of the great names in Fen skating, is presented with the Mile Challenge Cup by F. Holdich-Smith, President of the Lincolnshire Skating Association. There were sixteen entrants in the race and Bert's winning time for the continental type course was 3 mins. 16.4 secs. Despite the war, racing continued to take place whenever possible and on this occasion some 5,000 spectators turned out to watch some exciting racing. Bert was the 1933, 1935, 1947 and 1954 Lincolnshire Amateur Skating Champion.

There were other good skating winters in

1942 and 1944, but no official championships were recorded.

At Slater's, 1939 had seen Nellie Jane married to her policeman fiancé, but 1940 was a sad year. Charles Slater, John's father and founder of the transport firm, died on 2 April at the early age of 50. John's mother and his elder brother Bert carried on, trying to keep up 'business as usual' in spite of all the problems.

In 1943 and 1944, permits were issued by the Ministry of Transport for lorries to travel to London and Birmingham markets with produce. Journeys were made after tea and on Saturdays and Sundays to be back for local day work. Drivers were given a key to the market stands and had to load and unload their own lorries. The lorry headlights were masked for the blackout; there were no heaters in the cabs and no salt or grit on the roads. All signposts had been removed early in the war. Petrol was of course strictly rationed; commercial petrol was dyed red and any private motorist caught with red petrol in his tank could be summoned.

The V.1 and V.2 rockets, known as 'doodlebugs' because of the droning sound they made, began to fall in 1944. John, Bert and other drivers had several encounters with them when unloading at Brentford and Covent Garden Markets. On one such journey to deliver a load of potatoes, John decided to call on his Aunt Nell, who lived not far away. He discovered the street had been destroyed by a V2 and Aunt Nell was homeless. Needless to say she returned with him to Crowland. Worse was to follow; in January 1945 Betty's Aunt and Uncle, John and Eva Sargent, who also lived in London, were both killed when their house suffered a direct hit. Uncle John was brought back to Crowland to be buried in the Abbey Church-

yard with his first wife Eliza Ann. Add to all this the usual weather hazards and it is easy to see that lorry driving in wartime was no picnic.

Back home in Crowland things were happening too. On 20 November 1940 at 3am, a landmine was dropped in Barbers Drove, making a crater 80 feet deep and 40 feet wide. Sid Whiting, who lived nearby, tells how he awoke to find himself looking up at the stars from his bed, the tiles having been ripped off his house roof by the blast. Raymond Roberts, an evacuee who had been staying there since war was declared, must have wondered why he had bothered to leave home on discovering "a lump of clay as big as a bucket" on his pillow! Clay was thrown as far as Abbey Walk.

Out in the fields, parties of German and Italian prisoners-of-war were joining the girls of the Women's Land Army at work on the farms. Slater's lorries were engaged to transport them from Conington Camp to their various destinations.



*A party of land-girls and Italian prisoners-of-war on Crowland Common in 1942.*

Up in the village, Mr James Bailey, the blacksmith (of whom we have already heard) had received his order from the government for 2,000 pairs of mule shoes for Indian pack mules taking part in the 1940's Burma Campaign.



However, folk still found time to have some fun in a good cause.

Horse shows and gymkhanas were often held in the Snowden Field during the 1940's. Bert Slater organised these events and is seen here with lady supporters of the Red Cross. Musical entertainment was provided by a barrel organ borrowed by Bert from an old Italian gentleman who lived near the St Mary's Church in Boongate, Peterborough. It was eventually bought from him in exchange for a bottle of wine! Pictured top right are:

*Back row, left to right:* Marion White, Bertha Slater (John's mother), Elsie Sutton, Annie Wheatley, Ena Raynor, Harry Blanchard, Lilian King, Joan Smith, Violet Patman, Peggy Strickland, Daphne Strickland, Natalie Turner, Beatrice Bailey.

*Front row, left to right:* Violet Rawding, Caroline Dunmore, Alice Forth, Lilian Cawthorn, Bert Slater, Joyce Lown, Gladys Lindsey (John's cousin), Lilian Scotney, Lilian Holland.

The war ended at last. Sadly, 18 Crowland men did not return. But, as always, life went on and slowly began to get back to something like normal. Slater's were busy:

Driver George ("Stodger") Smith recently returned from war service with the RAF is seen here (bottom, right) passing Trinity Bridge in 1945 in a new Commer articulated lorry powered by a Perkins P6 engine. New lorries were hard to come by after the war and this one had to be obtained through agents in Spalding and Lincoln. Stodger would have loaded the 18 stone (2¼ cwt or approximately 114 kilos) sacks of corn himself, using a sack winder or hicking barrow to get the sacks on to his back and then climbing by ladder to position the sacks on the trailer.







1945 or 1946, at the side of the A47, by Odam's Mill, Eye. Rumour has it that, during the war, William Joyce ("Lord Haw-Haw") was heard in one of his famous - or infamous - broadcasts from Germany, to say "Are you all right, Mr Odam? Please don't pull your mill down, it is our landmark." This was probably the truth, for the mill, built about 1820, was a tower mill some 80 feet high and was certainly a landmark in the flat Fens. It originally carried eight sails, but these were gradually removed as they fell into disrepair. The four seen in the picture continued in use until 1947 when they were gradually dismantled. Since then, a good deal more of the tower has been demolished and only the bottom storeys now (1993) remain.

The lorry in the picture was a 1945 Dodge 6-tonner with a Perkins P6 engine. It was bought from Parkers of St. Ives, Cambridgeshire, and the driver was Horace ("Squib") Copland. "Squib" worked for Slaters for 34 years from May 1940 until he was forced to retire through injury. Born in March 1913, he seems to have been quite a character and was popularly supposed to always have a double-barrel 2-bore shotgun under the lorry seat. Consequently, he was never short of a good dinner of pheasant, partridge, hare or rabbit. Also, if he was free on a Sunday, he would often take his ferrets and spade rabbiting. A typical day's work at Slater's would have seen "Squib" loading and unloading three or four

loads of wheat in 18-stone sacks, barley in 16 stone sacks, oats in 12-stone sacks or beans in 22 stone sacks, all loaded by means of sack-winder and ladder. If the load included potatoes, these sacks would have been loaded with a hicking-stick. Loads were taken from local farms to railway stations at Eye, Thorney, Postland and Littleworth. Some of the railway trucks had no open doors and had to be loaded through a trapdoor called a "bob-hole". This involved pushing the sacks through one at a time, the loader crawling through after them, then standing up to lift and stack the sack. These were usually sacks of potatoes as corn went in box wagons not the "bob-hole" type. Loading from farms sometimes meant the farm labourers carrying bags across deep drains, using a springboard plank. The winter of 1947 saw 15 feet of snow on some drains so obviously this was a very dangerous process.





1946 was also a year of some family interest to the Slaters. John's cousin Fred (Uncle Desborough's son) formed the Crowland Athletic Club, which eventually turned out to be the forerunner of the Peterborough Athletic Club. Fred was already a skater. In 1929, at the age of 18, he came 3rd at Cowbit with a time of 4 mins. 5.4 secs. over the mile. He appears in the photograph on page 15 of 12 skating members of the family sitting in a boat by the side of Crowland Lake, taken in that very year.

Here he is again (above), 17 years later, with a group of cross-country runners from his newly formed Athletic Club, all obviously braving the cold for the sake of the photograph. Fred is standing at the extreme left and Bert Slater is 4th from the right. The *White Hart* public house and Harker & Graves Stationers in North Street form the background.

Another picture (right) of the Crowland Athletic Club, taken at their first sports meeting in Stimson's Field (now Stricklands Drive) with Broadway houses in the background. Fred Slater is standing 3rd from the

left. Other members of the family include Bill (standing, extreme left), Rodney (Fred's son - seated, extreme left) and Bert (seated, extreme right) with the children - Lorna (Bill's daughter) and his own son Michael. Rodney is a pop musician. He was with the 1960s Bonzo Dog Doo-dah Band, now (1990s) recently re-formed and broadcasting again.

Fred Slater moved to Peterborough a few years later, to work at Perkins. Unfortu-

nately, the Crowland Athletic Club faded out after he left. However, he went on to found the Peterborough Athletic Club and became so well known in the town that, after his death on 13 November 1975, a memorial service was held at Peterborough Cathedral. The annual "Round the City" road race is also named after him - the "Fred Slater 10km Road Race". It takes place every Easter Monday and includes four laps of the city centre, starting and finishing in Cathedral Square.

