



Keynsham Celebrates 80th Anniversary of VE Day

Saturday 10th May, 2025

Below are the memoirs that
Cllr Biddleston shared with the community during
the performance by the Thornbury Swing Band.

This year marks 80 years since the end of the most devastating war in history, both in lives lost and in the destruction it caused...

The end of the war was a moment the world had long hoped for, and when it finally came, the sense of relief and celebration was felt far and wide. Millions of people rejoiced with the news that Germany had surrendered. In Towns and Cities across the world, much like in Keynsham, people marked the victory with street parties and celebrations.

Today, we invite you to step back in time as we enjoy the music of the Thornbury Swing Band who will be performing songs from the 1940s. Alongside the music we will share personal memories from Keynsham residents who lived through the historic announcement of VE Day.

Our sincere thanks go to local historians Brian Vowles and Michael Fitter who have written several books on local history. Their dedicated work has helped to preserve this important moment in time. The memories you'll hear today are drawn from their collected writings, which remain available online for anyone wishing to explore more about how VE Day was experienced here in Keynsham.

And so! It is time to revisit the era through the music of the Thornbury Swing Band. Please help me welcome the band to Keynsham Memorial Park!

As the spring of 1945 unfolded, the war in Europe was clearly drawing to a close. Families had grown used to gathering around the radio each evening, tuning in to the 9 o'clock news, listening for updates from the front. Newspapers hinted at Germany's weakening grip, and conversations in shops, schools, and streets turned increasingly to one question: "When will it end?"

Still, the country waited—ready to celebrate but holding its breath in anticipation.

In Keynsham, in preparation of the end of the war, flags and bunting were dug out from attics and cupboards ready to decorate the houses and shops in red, white and blue. Plans for street parties in various parts of the town were organised. Scarce rations were set aside for the celebrations and youngsters were out busy collecting old furniture and scrap timber that could be used for bonfires...

On May 8th 1945 the news finally came. The Western Daily Press announced: "PEACE! IN WEST GUNS ARE SILENT. TODAY'S THE DAY...THE WAR IS OVER! Unconditional surrender has been received from Germany... Today is VE-Day, and at three p.m. Mr Churchill will broadcast the news that the war in Europe is officially at an end."

Local resident, Lily Harrison shared this memory "My brother Frank, a very well known and popular person, decided on his own type of 'Town Crier' announcement. Accompanied by my sisters, Evelyn and Clara, he set off touring the streets, ringing a large handbell, and calling out that the war was over. This created much fun and soon many other people joined with them."

After nearly six long years of conflict, loss, and rationing, the idea of peace probably felt quite unbelievable to the residents of Keynsham... with the news of the end of the war the streets of Keynsham filled with laughter and cheers... and I expect relief in what I can imagine had been a very long time...

Let's take ourselves back there now with more music from the Thornbury Swing Band...

Celebrations across Keynsham quickly came together. "There were wonderful parties going on all over Keynsham," recalled Roger Bees.

With John Baker adding: I remember the party celebrating the end of the war, held in Albert Road, below the school-end and just past the turning to the hospital. There were long trestle tables down the middle of the road, about four in number. They had white tablecloths on them with sandwiches, cakes and jelly (but no ice cream as you could not get it) all supplied by mothers.

Miss Gwendolene Bennett was also at the Albert Street party. "There were a number of children present, but I don't know where they all came from...we all sat down for tea at a long table. I can't remember what we ate – the food was probably sparse, as it was in those days, compared with today. But I know that my mother provided a chocolate cake."

According to other attendees of the Albert Road party, a fancy dress parade was held for the children, and later at night a huge bonfire was lit in the middle of the road that scorched the surface and later had to be replaced.

Another celebration was held in Temple Street. This children's party was organised by Mrs Hilda Green and like Albert Road, trestle tables were set up down the centre of the road with jelly and blancmange served to the children. After the treats the tables were cleared away and races and games were held.

Roger Bees was seven years old at the time and attended the Temple Street party. "I can remember the jelly and the blancmange at the street party. There were lots of games going on such as 'Pass the parcel'. There were also running races, sack races, and three-legged races with prizes. Generally, it was like a mad house with everybody going crazy."

Due to years of austerity, film for cameras was difficult to come by and therefore very few photos were taken on VE Day; however, I can just imagine the celebrations now...

I believe it's now time to get back to the music.....

Ladies and gentlemen, as we enjoy the music of the 1940s this afternoon it is also important to recognise the sacrifice that everyone had made during this time. The celebrations held in Keynsham on VE Day weren't just about the victory and end of the war; they were about community, resilience, acknowledging all that had been lost... but ultimately looking ahead to a better future...

As Lily Harrison recalls, "There was a sense of jubilation everywhere throughout the day."

Roger Bees adds: There was a lot of ale drunk that night I can tell you. There were four pubs in Temple Street alone. I kept going from one area of Keynsham to another. There was a lot of bunting about. The doors of a lot of the houses were open, though in any case we never locked them in those days. It was a freer time altogether...

Brian Knowles wrote: After the children were reluctantly packed off to bed the evening continued with wild enthusiasm and normally respectable townsfolk lost their inhibitions. Accordion players struck up outside The Ship and in the three other pubs in Temple Street a lot of ale was drunk. People were singing and dancing in the road, arm in arm doing the 'Hokey Cokey', the 'Palais Glide', the 'Lambeth Walk' and 'Knees up Mother Brown'. Wartime songs were sung and locally billeted service personnel joined in the revelry throwing their caps in the air. Another bonfire was lit and fireworks set off (although these were in fact tubular smoke canisters as no others were to be had). There were to be many sore heads and red faces the next day!

Lilly Harrison added: In the evening, crowds gathered in Temple Street, being the central point of Keynsham for singing and dancing which was mostly for the adult population. Service personnel in uniform all joined together in hilarious fun. Quite a few service people had billeted with civilian families so there was quite a family atmosphere.

Let's remember that spirit this afternoon —as we continue to honour that remarkable generation through the music they loved.