



6 June 1944: D-Day in Ventnor

On the 6 June 1944, 75 years ago this week, Rene Howe was teaching at the Hermitage near Whitwell. She recollected the whole area around being covered with a heavy mist that morning, with planes were droning overhead, and the occasional burst of gunfire. During the day, someone from a nearby farm came to the school and said the rumour was that the Germans had landed on the Island. A somewhat anxious night passed which gave way to great joy the following morning, when the real news filtered through that in fact it was the Allies who had landed in Normandy, not the Germans who had come here.

The invasion fleet of about 5000 vessels of every type had assembled off the south of the Isle of Wight during the night of 5 June. This aerial photograph shows the ships mustering off the Island. In historian Peter Bray's words: *this was a huge armada, far outnumbering those of the Spanish and English fleets which had fought a battle nearby in 1588. Overhead there was almost continuous noise as waves of bombers, fighters, and troop-carriers made their way across the channel. On the sea below in the darkness the ships turned south heading for Northern France in a vast diamond formation.*



The radar stations in Ventnor and St Lawrence and the men and women operating them played a vital part. One of the operators at the St Lawrence radar station, Margaret Morrison, recalled that: *Although during the night before the first landings you could not properly see the huge armada passing Ventnor you had no doubt it was there. There were dark forms and the incessant throb of engines. And after D-Day our radar screens were covered with planes going out to support the push through Europe.*

Marigold Harding was a teenager living in St Lawrence, and her memory of D-Day is one of delight: *About 5 o'clock in the morning on 6 June 1944 we woke to a loud hum that got louder and louder until the whole air around us reverberated, and we were counting layer upon layer of planes as far as eye could see. Then someone said 'look out to sea' and we saw all these landing craft almost bow to stern. We - being my mother, brothers, Granny and the neighbours, all in our night attire - were laughing and dancing in the road!*

When the war was finally over, Ventnor's pier was repaired, the scaffolding fortifications removed from the beach and the town lit up at night again. Albert Taylor, who worked for the Ventnor Council, described how as part of the reconstruction of the town a small stone pedestal was built on the Eastern Cliffs. It was topped with a bronze directional plate to give visitors an idea as to where their home town might lie, but also to give the bearings of some of the Normandy battle areas: Cherbourg, Arromanches, Caen, Le Havre, and Dieppe. It was, he said: *in its way a memorial to the town's own ordeal, the base and column being constructed of stone salvaged from bomb damaged buildings demolished during the war.* It is still there today.



For readers interested in finding out more, we have three booklets by Peter Bray available in the Heritage Centre: *D-Day and Operation Overlord*, *Radar at Ventnor 1939-1945*, and *The Ventnor Area at War 1939-1945*.

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