

The War Comes to Roman Gate

Extracts from *Slinfold The Home Front in World War 2*

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Dina Chatwin, the lead author, was past-President of Rudgwick Preservation Society, and the author of the definitive book on Rudgwick's timber-framed houses. The author's had the distinct advantage that many Slinfold residents in 2008 had lived through the war, sadly no longer the case here in Rudgwick in 2025.

Roman Gate was once a double tollgate on the junction of the A29 and A281, both turnpikes in the 19th century. The cottage referred to in the text succeeded an older gatekeeper's cottage. Strictly speaking the junction is in Slinfold, though Roman Woods to the north are in Rudgwick, and the parish boundary follows in part the River Arun. Dedisham manor house which is close by in Slinfold once held sway over most of the farms in Rowhook, Rudgwick, as far as the county boundary. The origin of the 'Roman' connection is that Stane Street (A29) once continued north from the junction to London. None of which is relevant to planes in dog fights overhead.

The article opens with three pages taken from the book, and a useful parish map likewise (for which we have no equivalent for Rudgwick). The photographs and the text on charcoal burning refer to a location within Rudgwick's Roman Woods.

It is appropriate to see the dog fight between Karl Born and Josef František as a tragic but ferocious dual in the air. The article end with an appreciation of the winner of this dual, sadly himself killed very soon afterwards.

See Rudgwick's Roll of Honour 1939-1945 on this website page for further information.

AN EVENTFUL VISIT TO ROMAN WOODS

This account was written in January 2002 by Luke Toft, who now lives in Wales. He was visiting his uncle, Leonard Laker, who lived at Woodside, Clemsfold, and ran the wood yard there.

It was the hot summer of 1940 when I went to stay for a few days at Clemsfold near Horsham in Sussex where my uncle had a timber merchant's business. The 'phoney' war had ended with the withdrawal of our soldiers from Dunkirk and an invasion of these islands was feared. Since Dunkirk, the working hours had increased and the working week was now seven days with the eighth day off, even for a sixteen-year old like me. Living and working on the southern side of London, there was no alternative but to continue life as normal, despite the aerial combat taking place overhead as, more or less every day, the fighting continued the whole day.

Uncle had a contract to supply charcoal for gas masks, so we were told, and he had obtained the services of a charcoal burning family to make the charcoal for him in Roman Woods. The woods stood beside the line of Stane Street, the Roman road linking Chichester with London. Even in the apparently tranquil countryside there was an element of danger around us, as one of my Uncle's haulage contractor friends had been shot up by the enemy while driving his lorry along a road.

While I was staying at Clemsfold, Uncle's lorry was calling at Roman Woods, so I went along with my baby Brownie camera to see the charcoal burners at work. The charcoal burning site was in a clearing and all the operations took place there, so I photographed them all, except the crude wigwam-like shelter in which the 'family' lived while the burning was in progress. I remember being told that it was not unusual for children to be born in such shelters, presumably in earlier times, as there were no women present during my visit. When it was time to leave, we looked up and saw a man on a parachute coming down out of the sky near to us so we set off to be present as he landed.

On arrival we found that the parachutist was a German airman riddled with bullet wounds and protruding from his clothing were lumps of bloody jelly. To my astonishment he did not have a flying suit on, only his uniform. We had to leave after this and on the way home we noticed a building beside the Slinfold Road which was on fire with a crashed aircraft on it. The aircraft on the burning building was probably the one the German airman had flown during combat. Excitedly I photographed the burning house only to have my camera seized. Eventually my photographs were returned, minus those of the burning house.

This was just one of the many unforgettable memories generated during the ten months or so bombardment of London during 1940/41, the 'Blitz'.

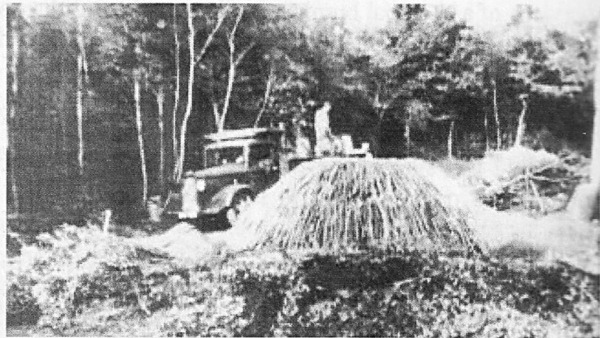
When interviewed in 1987, Douglas Jeal recalled that charcoal burning had started up again at the beginning of the war, after a gap of some years. The charcoal burner in Roman Woods was called Walter and the Jeals used to have him over for dinner from time to time. He was apparently a great character.

The plane which came down was a Messerschmitt 109 which crashed at Roman Gate Cottage (see p.65). The Police Occurrence Books for Horsham Division record that a man was reported for photographing the wreckage of an enemy aircraft, contrary to the Control of Photography Order (No. 1), 1939, at Roman Gate at 6.30 pm on Monday, 9th September 1940, and a caution was issued.

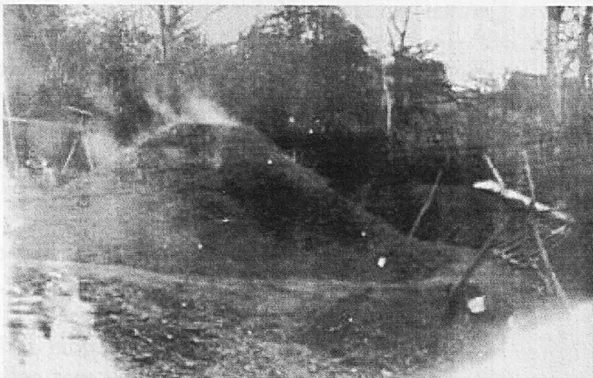
See overleaf for Luke Toft's pictures of charcoal burning.



Pl. 33: Building the stack



Pl. 34: Lorry belonging to Leonard Laker



Pl. 35: Burning stack covered with earth



Pl. 36: Charcoal being bagged

Plane crashes elicited considerable interest and numbers of people came to see what had happened. On 9th September 1940 a Messerschmitt 109 crashed at Roman Gate and the West Sussex County Times reported this as follows:

A Messerschmitt 109 was shot down in the late afternoon and fell in two pieces just in front of a roadside garden. The occupants of the house leant out of a window and saw it burst into flames in mid-air. The Spitfire which shot it down also crashed. The British pilot is safe. People crowded round the wreckage of the Messerschmitt, and a soldier walked off with half the propeller.

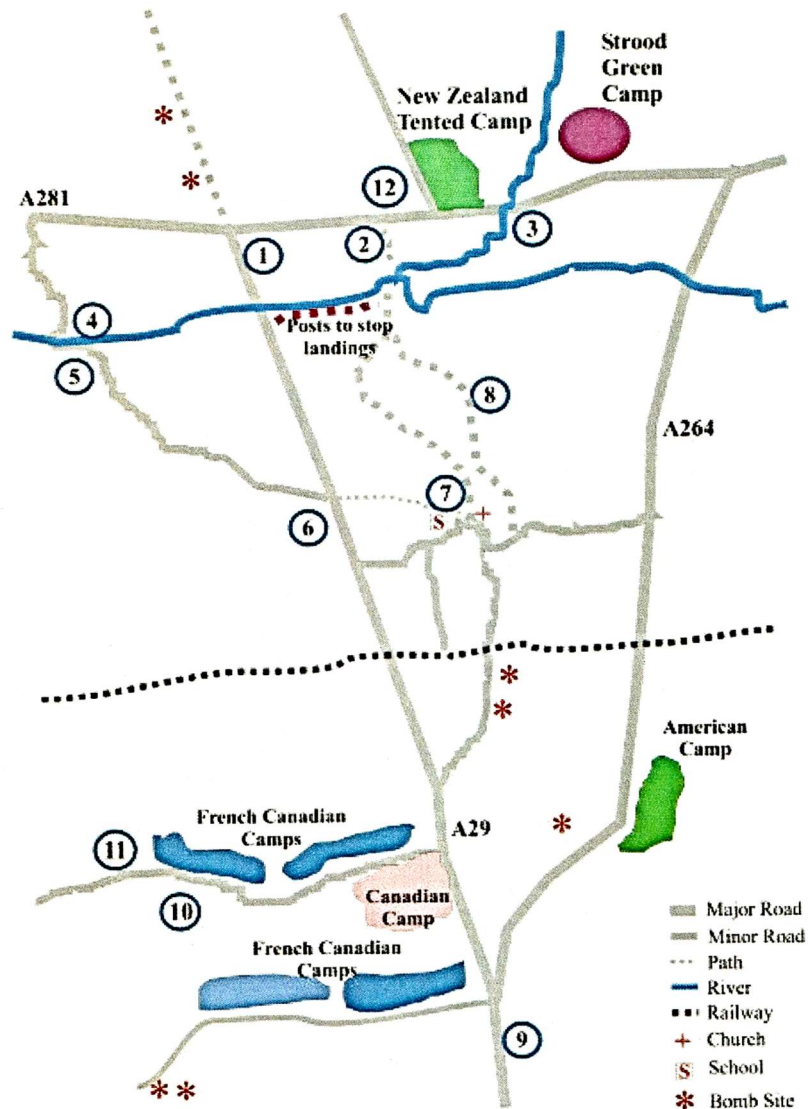
Laura Hopes was in the Station House with her sister when they heard the plane coming down: *So we got out our bicycles to go and see, and I put Tony, my son, on the back, he was about 15 months at the time.* Lois White remembers seeing fighting overhead and when she and her sister, Cathy, cycled home that evening, they saw the wreckage of the Messerschmitt, which had demolished the outside privy in the garden of Roman Gate Cottage as it came down. Johnny Johnson went to the scene of the crash in his capacity as a member of the Home Guard. The plane had landed in front of the bungalow, parallel with the road, having hit the telegraph wires on the way down. He thought the plane did not look badly damaged. Johnny said the pilot must have been a very small man as the pedals had three-inch wooden blocks on them. One of the crowd of spectators tried to run off with the joystick. Johnny told him that was not allowed and ended up bringing it home with him, where it remained for many years. Years later Roy Dumbrill came across the pilot's name, Karl Born, in a book. (For further information, see p.89.)



Pl. 23: Small piece of wreckage from the Junkers 88

MAP OF SLINFOLD

Based on a sketch by the late Roy Dumbrill
showing location of troop camps and significant events in World War 2



Key to Numbers on map

1. Fighter planes crashed.
2. Balloon came over as I walked to school.
3. Bomber crash.
4. Doodlebug crash.
5. One night Lancaster bombers flew over, something fell and exploded.
6. Barrage balloon shot down by Spitfire.
7. Plane flew over school. We were told to get under tables.
8. Area full of soldiers on day before D Day; they vanished overnight.
9. German fighter stuffed full of bullets.
10. The French Canadians went on a deep raid; only half came back.
11. The French Canadians gave us school parties.
12. Tank in pond.

No 1 on the map describes the location of the Born crash.

kills					
Date	Time	Used Hurricane	Place	Enemy shot down	Remarks
02.09.1940	17:50	P3975 / RF-U	5km East from Dover	1 Bf 109E	
03.09.1940	15:40	P3975 / RF-U	Over Channel near Dover	1 Bf 109E	mistakenly reported as He 113
05.09.1940	15:05	R4175 / RF-R		1 Ju 88	
05.09.1940	15:10	R4175 / RF-R		1 Bf 109E	
06.09.1940	09:00	R4175 / RF-R	Sevenoaks	1 Bf 109E	Wnr 1138 of 3./JG52, piloted Oblt Waller fell POW, Frantisek's Hurricane was heavily damaged (see photo above!)
09.09.1940	18:00	P3975 / RF-U	Horsham	1 Bf 109E-4	Wnr 1617 of 7./JG27, pilot Uffz Karl Born was KIA
09.09.1940	18:05	P3975 / RF-U	Beachy Head	1 He 111H-2	Wnr 5548 A1+DS of III/KG53, crashed on French coast
11.09.1940	16:00	V7289 / RF-S	Horsham	2 Bf 109E	
11.09.1940	16:00	V7289 / RF-S	Horsham	1 He 111	
15.09.1940	12:00	P3089 / RF-P	Hastings	1 Bf 110	
18.09.1940	13:15	V7465 / RF-V	West Mailing	1 Bf 109	
26.09.1940	16:30	R4175 / RF-R	Portsmouth	1 He 111	
26.09.1940	16:35	R4175 / RF-R	S/E of Portsmouth	1 He 111	
27.09.1940	09:20	R4175 / RF-R	Horsham	1 He 111	
27.09.1940	09:25	R4175 / RF-R	Gatwick	1 Bf 110D-0	Wnr 3147 L1+BL of 15./LG1, piloted by Oblt Ulrich Freiherr

This table is part of the record of Czech pilot Josef František, one of the top 'aces' in the RAF during the Battle of Britain. He was, as the table makes clear, the pilot who downed Born's plane at Roman Gate. It is remarkable how many of his 17 victims, unknown to those on the ground, were over the Horsham district. He himself was shot down and killed on 8 October 1940.


FRANTISEK Josef

He enlisted in the Czech Air Force in October 1930, joining Air Regiment 2 on completion of pilot training. By 1935 he was a Corporal in Air Regiment 1, returning to Air Regt 2 as a Sgt in 1937. He did not, as previously stated, serve in the Polish Air Force in 1938-9. He joined a Czech platoon formed in Poland following the German invasion, this unit serving mainly in the east against the invading Soviets; subsequently all Czechs who served in this unit, and who escaped from Poland to the UK, remained with the Poles, since the Czech authorities in exile maintained friendly relations with Stalin. In France Frantisek was posted as a fitter at a Polish air base at Clermont-Ferrand, where he became notorious for being absent without leave, flying all the types of French aircraft he could lay his hands on!



Josef František, pilot of the Hurricane which shot down Karl Born.

Below, Karl Born’s life story, such as is known.

Pilot	Rank	Born	Place	Score	Units	Aircraft	Awards	Notes
Born, Karl	Uffz	9/23/1918	Benndorf	5	7/JG-27 (7/40 Channel)	Bf 109E-4 Werk # 1617 (lost 9/9/40)	 EK 1 & 2 Fighter Operational Clasp	KIA 9 September, 1940 during aerial combat, crashing at Romans Gate Cottage, Rudgwick, Sussex. Buried Cannock Chase, Block 1, Gr 26 (M.Croft). His first victory, a Blenheim S of Portland on 25 July, 1940. His 2nd and 3rd, both Hurricanes S of the Isle of Wight on 8 August, 1940. His 4th, a Hurricane S of Portland on 11 August, 1940. His 5th, a Spitfire at Ford on 18 August, 1940. Magnus.

Born was initially buried in Hills Farm Road Cemetery in Horsham, but was later reinterred in the German cemetery in Cannock Chase.



German cemetery in Cannock