



A Celebration of Peace: VE Day in West Lothian





Foreword

Much of the research for this booklet was undertaken early in 2020 as the country prepared to mark VE Day 75. The outbreak of Covid 19 and the lockdown of the country meant that many of the plans for VE Day celebrations had to be cancelled. The 80th anniversary of VE Day in 2025 offers the opportunity for the country to come together and mark the end of WW2 and to honour all those who bravely fought to secure the freedom of our nation.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the care home residents who participated in VE Day reminiscence sessions in 2020.

The End of Hostilities

The Germans surrendered to the Allies at 2.41am on 7th May 1945, bringing an end to six years of conflict. The 8th of May was declared as VE (Victory in Europe) Day and celebrations were held across the world, including here in West Lothian.



Generaloberst Alfred Jodi signs the official surrender at Rheims.

Planning for Victory

“We knew that the Allies were on top, we knew what was happening because of the recordings on the radio. We were looking forward because we knew that the Germans were on the run.”

Hugh, resident Woodlands Care Home

Germany's surrender had been expected for some time and Britain had begun putting plans in place for the celebration of victory.

On the 30th April, the Scottish Home Department issued a letter to local authorities on the celebration of the termination of hostilities in Europe. Councillors in West Lothian were informed that victory would be marked with a two-day holiday and that local authorities would have a responsibility for entertaining the public in their own localities. Council meetings were held in West Lothian to plan the format of celebrations.

Bathgate Burgh appointed a special committee to consider what local action would be taken on declaration of victory. At a meeting on 23rd of April it was agreed to plan for the simultaneous ringing of church bells for a quarter of an hour after news of the declaration. The committee also discussed the decoration of the town for the celebrations. The Merchants Association had informed them that Bathgate merchants were willing to display flags. However, the committee decided to make no specific recommendations on decorations due to: the number of local people who had suffered a bereavement during the war; those who still had relatives fighting in the Far East; those whose relatives were Prisoners of War and those who had family who were seriously injured and were still in hospital. Meanwhile at a meeting of the Burgh of Armadale, councillors agreed to “ask the public to decorate their houses and property as well as circumstances permit.”



In Linlithgow arrangements were planned by the Burgh's Entertainment Committee. The group advertised for a contractor to broadcast music at the Peel but after there was no response the Committee hastily had to make their own arrangements for broadcasting and floodlighting.

Celebrations begin Early

There was a sense of anticipation in the air in the days leading up to the announcement of victory. Philpstoun was decorated for VE Day in advance of the official declaration of peace. On the 5th of May, the Saturday preceding VE Day, James Noble of the Gordon Highlanders returned to the village. Noble had been taken prisoner at St Valery on 12th June 1940 and had been a prisoner of war in a number of camps in Germany since then. Less than a month previously, Noble's mother had received official intimation that her son had died on a German Death march.

The official announcement that war had ended was broadcast on the radio late on the 7th of May. Victory in Europe Day and the following day were declared as national holidays; both schools and workplaces were closed although locally some shops opened on the morning of VE Day to allow people to get provisions in. Many people started celebrating right away. In Winchburgh, people began to gather in the streets. Among their number were Norwegian

revellers from a nearby camp who cheerfully paraded up and down the main street, wearing red, blue and white rosettes. Children in Bridgend began building a huge bonfire on a bing next to the village. A bonfire was built and lit at Parkhead Crescent in West Calder. It burned through the night with flames still visible as West Lothian awoke to peace on the 8th May. Helen Paterson's brother was home in Blackridge on leave from the army when peace was declared. On the morning of VE Day he woke his fellow villagers by banging dustbin lids together and lighting the jets on the gas street lamps.



On VE Day, West Lothian woke up to newspaper headlines filled with declarations of peace.



School closures across West Lothian were documented in school log books including in this extract of the Stoneyburn Public School log book.

The Circ. From the Director of Education re. VE day states that the day on which the Prime Minister announces the cessation of hostilities will be regarded as the first day of two days holiday to be granted to mark the occasion. A special service was held in school this morning as a preliminary to the one due to take place on the morning of VE day.

Monday at 9pm. The B.B.C. announced that Germany had surrendered unconditionally that day, and stated that the next day Tuesday would be regarded as VE Day and a whole holiday would be observed by the nation on Tuesday 8th May and Wednesday 9th May. Further the Prime Minister would broadcast on Tuesday 8th May at 3pm and the King at 9pm.

8th- 9th May 1945

Accordingly, the school was closed on these dates.

William Paton was a miner in Stoneyburn. He recorded his memories of the declaration in his diary.

MAY 1945

Mon 7th:- This was a day of great expectations and waiting in Britain, as it had been announced over the Radio that Churchill would be speaking at any time to announce the end of the war with Germany, which had already been broadcast from Germany. It was later announced that he would not speak until tomorrow at 3.P.M. and that tomorrow would be regarded as the first V.E. (Victory in Europe) day. The rejoicing started after that, and some of the bonfires which had been built in readiness were lit and a dance was held in the welfare Hall. Most workers would be on holiday during the next two days.

*"I remember when it came on the radio. We went to work...I worked in the Bathgate Co-operative in the office but I think we were all sent home. We just went out and we had a jollyfication because everybody was out in the streets celebrating." **Mary, Linlithgow Care Home***

Decorating for Peace

By the morning of the 8th of May, buildings and streets across West Lothian were decorated. Although rationing was still in place, people were permitted to buy red, white and blue bunting without using their ration allocation.

Flags and streamers were on display in the main streets of Bathgate with many local residents also displaying flags on the exterior of their houses. In Linlithgow, the decorations on the High Street were impressive. There were a large number of Union Jacks on show,

others hung the Lion Rampant; the display also included some captured German flags. The Town House was decorated with flags, bunting and long colourful streamers.

There were also decorations in local villages. The West Lothian Courier reported that in Pumpherston, *“the villagers were busy with decorations and before midday the entire village was a mass of flags and streamers.”*

Some residents in Seafield put on a display of brightly coloured lights outside their houses.

Churchill Broadcasts to the Nation

At 3pm on VE day Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, announced the end of war in a national radio broadcast. In Linlithgow the Prime Minister's BBC broadcast was relayed to crowds gathered at the Cross through speakers installed by the Burgh Surveyor.



Image courtesy of Linlithgow Heritage Trust

“My dear friends, this is your hour. This is not victory of a party or of any class. It’s a victory of the great British nation as a whole... The lights went out and the bombs came down. But every man, woman and child in the country had no thought of quitting the struggle... I say that in the long years to come not only will the people of this island but of the world, wherever the bird of freedom chirps in human hearts, look back to what we’ve done and they will say “do not despair, do not yield to violence and tyranny, march straightforward and die if need be - unconquered.” **Winston Churchill**



Churchill addresses the people of Linlithgow just a month after VE Day.

In Broxburn a large crowd gathered at the Broxburn Regal to hear Churchill’s broadcast. Meanwhile in Bathgate, local people listened to Churchill’s speech from radio sets at Greig’s wireless shop and at Central Garage. After the broadcast, church bells and the whistles from

works and railway engines could be heard across the town. The West Lothian Courier reported, *“the crowd at George Place gave vent to their pent-up feelings by cheering and singing, and for some time the scene was one of enthusiastic but orderly jubilation.”*

Back in Linlithgow, the Union Jack was raised from the clock tower shortly after Churchill’s declaration by Mrs Ford, wife of Linlithgow’s Provost. Heads were bowed as the National Anthem played. The town bells then chimed, declaring the celebration of Victory in Europe.

IWM (H41829)

This image captures Churchill as he waves to crowds in London from the balcony of the Ministry of Health building.



William Paton recorded how he celebrated VE Day in his diary.

2nd 1st V.E. Day Holiday! - I heard Prime Minister Churchill speaking on the wireless at 3 P.M. when he gave his long awaited and eagerly expected statement about the surrender of Germany. He announced that the war with Germany was over and that Germany had given in to unconditional surrender. It was a day of great rejoicing in every town and village in Britain and many stirring scenes were witnessed. In Stoneylearn Bonfires were lit in every street at night and crowds gathered round them and sang into the wee sma' hours. and a victory dance was

may 1945
run in the welfare Hall. The village was gay with flags and so were some of the men when they came out of the 1st house of the pub as they started to parade up and down the streets and had a sing song at the Institute. I went down to Bathgate in the afternoon and went to the Rega pictures with Jean and Bell. The programme was interrupted at 9 P.M. so that the audience could hear the king speaking. After we came home from Bathgate Jean and I went to the victory dance in Welfare Hall after having heard the singing and rejoicing at two of the Bonfires.



The Government's decision to have a 3pm announcement caused some upset for VE Day plans in Winchburgh. The church ceremony had originally been scheduled for the morning but had to be moved to the evening. The locals had planned to have a youth parade prior to the service but news of the changed time didn't reach most of the intended participants. Only the Boy Scouts and the Cubs turned up for the march led by the Silver Band. To make matters worse the Boys Brigade and ex-members marched past in the other direction bound for a service at Woodend.

Street Celebrations



"In Bathgate, everyone went down the steelyard, it was packed. There was quite a lot of soldiers because the Poles were all stationed up at Whitburn...so there were a lot of Poles and Canadians and Americans and all the forces and we were all out dancing and having a good time" Resident, Linlithgow Care Home



Crowds line the streets during the VE day festivities in Bathgate.

Parades

On the afternoon of VE Day, around 600 Polish troops who had been stationed at Polkemmet Camp paraded through Whitburn. They were led by Whitburn Miners' Welfare Silver Band and marched to the Children's Recreation Ground where a Thanksgiving Service was delivered.

In Pumpherston, the local pipe band led a march to the works canteen where tea

and biscuits were served to all attendees by the women of the War Work Party. That evening in Broxburn, the Public Band and the R.C. Band led a parade though the main streets with a musical programme being played at the Public Hall. There were similar scenes in Bathgate that evening when the Public Band marched the streets playing "lively airs".



Joe Marshall leads the dairy horse during a VE Day parade in Bathgate.

Church Services

R. & F., Bathgate



Church Services were held across West Lothian both on the VE Day holidays and in the days that followed.

In Bathgate, the VE day procession ended at the High Church, where a Joint Thanksgiving Service was held. It was attended by members and officials of the Town Council and representatives of all the Protestant congregations in the town whilst a service was also held in St Mary's R.C. Church.

In Armadale, Thanksgiving services were held at both the West Church and the Armadale R.C. Church on the Wednesday. Special Thanksgiving Services were held

across the country on the Sunday after VE Day. The service at St Michael's in Linlithgow was attended by representatives of the Town Council, members of the Women's Detachment of the Red Cross and Girl Guides. Rev Rutherford warned the congregation, "*In the last resort peace and war sprang out of the souls of men and so long as pride and selfishness were there seeds of war had still fit ground in which to germinate.*"

Our VE Day



Images of partying around long tables feature heavily in media representations of VE Day. This particular image shows a street party in London. Celebrations took a different form here in West Lothian.

“All the children got free tea...it was a lovely day...There was flags out and we danced around and we danced the other way. It was fun... There were melodeons playing...at every special day, out came the accordions.”

Elizabeth, Resident, Woodlands Care Home

“Oh aye, there was a lot of celebration. I’m saying ‘celebrations’ – people were pleased and that. They had... you know, as I say, they had bonfires back and forward. But I don’t mind any street parties or anything like that. I mind they had a bonfire up at Burngrange and the man that was the piper went away to tune his pipes and never came back. They got him drunk down in the fields. He had a bottle of whisky with him.” *Peter Kane, West Calder*

“We all went out into the street and were cheering. The church bells were ringing. They opened the Miners’ Welfare and someone had an accordion. It wasn’t a street party. That was more of an English thing.” *Betty Smart*

“We didn’t get dressed up but we played games and there were accordions and we were dancing, it was very good...” *Client, Linlithgow Day Care*

VE Day Bonfires

Huge bonfires were erected in streets across West Lothian, providing a focus for local VE day celebrations. This was the first time local people had been able to light bonfires since the introduction of black-out restrictions in 1939. The black-out had made a significant contribution to low war-time morale and it was fitting that the light of the bonfires was such a pivotal part of victory celebrations.

Effigies of Hitler were a common feature of the local bonfires. In Armadale, a Hitler effigy was paraded through the town before being placed on top of the bonfire. Meanwhile in Stoneyburn there were cheers as Hitler effigies fell into the fire.



VE Day bonfire at Stoneyburn.

The bonfire at Wynford houses in Uphall was lit by Walter Whitelaw, a Prisoner of War who had just returned home. Similarly, at Pumpherston a bonfire was lit by Mrs Robert Molloy who had six sons who had served in the conflict, including one who had made the ultimate sacrifice.

In Linlithgow a bonfire was built at Cockleroi by the Scouts and other youth

organisations under the direction of Scoutmaster Robert Dickson. The bonfire was made from waste material and reached an impressive 20ft in height. It was lit at 10.30pm by Provost Ford and enjoyed by the crowd of around 500 people who gathered to see it. Unfortunately, the mist was so bad that the spectacle wasn't witnessed by the rest of the town.



At Uphall there was a real sense of ceremony at the bonfire in School Place as an effigy of Hitler was consumed by flames followed by hours of dancing in the school playground to the music of a piano accordion.

Celebrating on the Ration

“You cannot have five years of war and when it is over enter into immediate paradise” **Clement Atlee**

While the blackout was lifted, some war-time restrictions continued, impacting celebrations. There were no new party clothes and food rationing meant that very few cakes were consumed.

Woodlands Care Home resident, Elizabeth, worked as a house maid during the war. She remembers opening a tin of salmon to serve to the residents of the house on VE Day. Fellow resident Hugh reflected that his family were never well off so were not able to enjoy party food.



“We had a party because everyone was so pleased and of course everything was rationed but my aunt who stayed with us, she got out the girdle and did a big baking of potato scones because we had lots of potatoes and lots of flour...so we had a party and we all had potato scones because there was nothing else available of course... I remember It' so long ago but it's lovely to think back”

Resident, Linlithgow Care home

“Everything was rationed...you were very restricted, you didn't have a lot of sugar”

Resident, Linlithgow Care Home

Windsor Buffet was one of many establishments to open late on VE Day.



West Lothian residents were able to raise a glass victory. Beer was not rationed and on VE Day pubs were allowed to stay open until 10.30pm. On the morning of VE Day, Churchill even sought assurances that there would be enough beer from the Ministry of Food. In Harthill one pub even gave its customers free beer.

The King's Speech

Thousands of people gathered near Buckingham Palace for the VE day celebrations. During the course of the day the King and Queen made many appearances on the Palace balcony. In Linlithgow crowds gathered at the Cross where the words of the King were relayed by loudspeaker.

The King addressed the nation at 9pm on VE Day where he made reference to those who had lost their lives in the war:

"Let us remember those who will not come back...let us remember the men in all the services, and the women in all the services, who have laid down their lives. We have come to the end of our tribulation and they are not with us at the moment of our rejoicing."



The Royal Family pictured with Winston Churchill waving from the balcony of Buckingham Palace.



Earlier on VE Day, local soldier, Warrant Officer James Rough, RAF, son of Mrs and Mrs Rough of Balbardie Avenue attended Buckingham Palace where he was decorated with a Distinguished Flying Medal by His Majesty King George.

Fireworks and Dancing

Floodlighting was turned on at the Town House at 10pm in Linlithgow and an impressive firework display was let off from the balcony including rockets and Catherine wheels. Later, dancing was held at the Old Town Hall and around The Cross with music from gramophone records playing through loudspeakers. A victory dance was also held at Chalmers Hall with festivities continuing until 2am.

Partying lasted even in longer in the village of Seafield where residents danced to the music of W. Strain's band until 3am.

The editor of the Linlithgowshire Gazette reported that *"there was no 'Maffeking,' no drunken orgy or anything of that kind...The underlying feeling was one of thankfulness not jubilation."* Nonetheless, the newspaper also reported that several flags were stolen from outside local shops during the festivities.

Celebrating Outwith West Lothian

Although there were festivities across West Lothian, a number of local people travelled to Edinburgh to join the city's celebrations.

"...I was in the railways at the end of the war...we never got the day off. We still had to run the trains. There were celebrations oh aye in Edinburgh at the castle... there were fireworks at quite a number of the prominent buildings"

Hugh, Resident Woodlands Care Home

"...as soon as it was announced on the radio mother bundled my younger sister and myself into our clothes and off we went into Edinburgh to the French Institute which was full of delirious French people all hugging and kissing, drinking wine and making merry because at long last they could see their relatives again."

Jacqueline Rae

“I lived in Edinburgh...there were street parties, all the streets had their own party, big long tables in the middle of the street all filled with baking. There was a lot of rejoicing in Princess Street Gardens, they were all gathering. There were so many crowds you could hardly see where you were going.”

Resident, Linlithgow Care Home

“... we went down to London for that Victory Parade...You could hardly move – the amount of troops. They were from all over – America and Australia. We saw the King and Queen and the two Princesses. It was a very nice experience..”

John Dick, Addiewell

Celebrations Continue

West Lothian celebrations continued through to Wednesday, 9th May. In Bathgate a service of Thanksgiving was held at the High Church at 11am with music being provided by Bathgate Burgh Band. The service was originally planned to be held at Kirkton Public Park but poor weather necessitated a change in location.

The band then played a programme of music to a large crowd at George Place at 3pm for an hour. That evening there was dancing at various halls throughout the town. In Blackburn, 120 older people were entertained in Blackburn Welfare Hall by the village’s VE Day Committee. Meanwhile in Linlithgow, there was a dance in Town Hall with entertainment being provided by a band from Stoneyburn.

Children were led by Whitrigg Coillery Band on a parade through local streets before putting on a pageant in a local field to mark the victory of the Allies in Europe.



Among the pieces performed were “The Battle Song of the Republic”, the verses being sung by a child dressed as Britannia.

The end of the public holidays did not bring an end to the festivities and the communities of West Lothian held many more celebratory events in the weeks and months that followed.



Realities of War

As West Lothian prepared themselves for celebrations, the realities of war continued to have an impact at home. On the Friday before VE Day, Mr and Mrs F.C.T. Tudsbery had received official intimation that their only child, Robin, had been killed in action in North West Europe. The Cambridge graduate had been 26 at the time of his death. On the same day the news reached

Wilkieston of the death in Germany of Flight Sergeant Tom Wilson, the only child of Mr and Mrs George Wilson.

Just three days after VE Day, Mrs and Mrs John Neilson of Linlithgow Bridge received notice that their only son Sub. Liet. John Neilson (20) was missing and presumed killed in a flight over the sea near South Wales.

VE Day from Afar

Large numbers of local servicemen were still on active duty on the VE Day holidays. This included David Morrison who served in the Navy during WW2:

I was in Burma. I spent the final stage of the war in the Far East and I remember we received the news of the end of the war in Europe and spliced the Main Brace. 'Splice the Main Brace and Dress Ships' came the order. Splice the Main Brace meant giving the crew an extra tot of rum, and Dress Ships means putting up flags and what have you.

I remember it well and I can also remember being in the Far East when the war with Japan ended in August 1945.



Armadale born Tom Fleming recorded his experience of the arrival of peace in his war-time diaries. Just a few days previously he had been involved in the liberation of prisoners at Stalag XB.

Sunday 6th May

Ceasefire here – any minute now and the War in Europe will be at an end. Papers are full of the news. Preparations being made for the celebration of VE back home – how I wish I could be there now.

Monday 7th May 1945

News is through that the war ends officially tomorrow at midnight but ceasefire everywhere today.

Tuesday 8th May 1945

VE Day but we move to Colonel Lombard hospital and are working well after midnight. Hear Winston Churchill, and the King and Queen to celebrate at Piccadilly Circus. It hardly seems credible. I wonder how Olive will spend it!

Returning Soldiers

Many local people were able to welcome their loved ones home in the weeks and months after VE Day. The 14th West Lothian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery returned to West Lothian on the Friday after VE Day. The men had served in Egypt and Italy for almost five years. Large crowds assembled in the streets of Bathgate to welcome the returning men.

During their wait, they were entertained by loud speakers provided by Greig brothers.

Residents of Newton and Abercorn held a victory dance adjourning at midnight to meet the bus bringing local lads home, before re-joining the dance with their loved ones. All returning servicemen were issued with “demob” suits in preparation for return to civilian life.

1945 General Election

A general election was held just under three months after VE Day. Despite his popularity during the war, Winston Churchill was defeated. Labour secured a landslide victory and were elected to power under the leadership of Clement Attlee. The government focused its efforts on post-war reconstruction and social reform including social security, free health care and affordable housing.



In West Lothian, new council schemes provided new homes for returning servicemen. These drawings from July 1945 are for new housing at Glenmavis.

VJ Day

On 6 August 1945, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Three days later another was dropped on Nagasaki. 15 August was declared as Victory in Japan Day. The official Japanese surrender did not follow until 2nd September when Japan signed the official surrender document whilst aboard the US battleship, "Missouri."

West Lothian celebrated once more, although festivities were much more muted than the rejoicing of May 1945. With the war finally over, the road to recovery could begin.



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