

I remember it as a bright and sunny afternoon. I had just come out of Sunday School and Auntie Blanch, mother's friend from schooldays, who now worked for the Miss Briggs at Combe House on Ladder Hill, was waiting for me outside the in the High Street, opposite the Chapel. She usually had every alternate Sunday afternoon free and would come and have tea with us all at Milne Cottage in London Road. We were all very fond of her and she was 'closer' to my sisters and I than some of our blood relatives. We loved her dearly.

"I thought you might like a walk, Christine", she said as I approached her. "It's such a lovely afternoon."

We set off up the High Street and had just reached the Manse, just past The Merry Bells, when a man on a bicycle came tearing along the street, waving his arms at us.

"Go back, he shouted, "You must go back. It's too dangerous to come any further, just go home and stay home. The Canadians (*at the Shot over camp*) have gone mad! The idiots are racing around the place with their tanks!"

I must have been about seven years old at the time. It was obvious that something was wrong and, in the absence of any other information, Auntie Blanche and I turned back and made for home. Others had obviously done the same and Wheatley High Street was now clear of any walkers or cyclists. What was going on? I am uncertain of the exact date - but think it must have been in 1943/4. Once indoors, of course, we stayed there.

The next day all was revealed. Many trees - and lots of hedges - had been uprooted in the Forest Hill and Wheatley area. Walls had been smashed down and farm outhouses had been extensively damaged. It was complete chaos. Paths, concrete pavements and roads in the area had been smashed and many bore the ridged marks of tank treads, as some soldiers at the Canadian camp had taken tanks from the site and had gone berserk - using these vehicles as 'weapons' against the local population. Several of the locals were terrorised by these tank drivers who raced through the local area near the camp and confronted the locals who had been in the locality. One woman who was out with her baby in a pram was confronted by a madman with a tank who was threatening to crush all and everything that strayed into his path. The chaos and destruction went on all afternoon and must have cost the community thousands of pounds in repair bills.

In the end the locals were sworn to secrecy and "to forget that it had ever happened". The eventual bill was paid by the Canadian Government.

When speaking to a local historian many years later, he informed me that although he could find no mention of this particular event in local records, the Canadians had wreaked havoc on another community previously when discipline had broken down. He thought that this had taken place in Devon, prior to D-Day when feelings were running high and nerves were being stretched to breaking point.

So much for Allied "help". The locals did not see it in that light!

Christine Jackson (nee Tombs)