

## Holt History Vol.2



The tail fin of a German fire bomb. A sealed white phosphorus stick was attached to the tail fin. When it hit the ground it split open and spontaneously burst into flames, setting light to whatever it landed on. This one was salvaged from a burnt-out church in Portsmouth in 1941.

Perhaps the nearest brush with wartime tragedy that Holt had was in the last few months of the war when an American bomber crashed on the edges of Holt. The crew of a crippled four-engine U.S.A.A.F. B24 Liberator bomber had bailed out over the sea on their return to their base in East Anglia but the bomber headed, unpowered, towards the town. I came across an account by Ian Massingham who witnessed the crash. He had joined the R.A.E and while on deferred service awaiting call-up had got a temporary job with the Ministry of Supply at Swan Lodge, Cley. One of the jobs of this unit was to sell off-cuts to locals for firewood. On the afternoon of Thursday August 24th 1944, he and a mate were delivering a load of wood to a house behind Pereers Farm on the Cley Road just outside Holt. There was a lot of air activity at that time as the allied invasion of France was in full swing. He described the day as sultry and on the ground it was quiet as Thursday was half-day closing for the shops in Holt. It was around mid-afternoon when he heard an aircraft engine droning closer and then spotted a bomber very low heading towards the town with only one of its four engines working. As it passed over, it suddenly curved back towards Holt and was so near the ground that it was certain to crash. It shaved the top of the hedge that bordered the town cemetery, 'scattering foliage in all directions and then it was sliding along on its fuselage through the field in which we were working, before smashing into Pereers Farm, demolishing the farmhouse.



Pereers Farm on Cley Road after the Liberator bomber crashed into it.



Mary Jones (née Empson) standing on the site of the pigsty at Pereers Farm where, but for her father's timely arrival, she would have been playing when the bomber destroyed the building.

ran and his make waited for a few minutes in case the wreckage burst into flames. Then they walked over to the damaged aeroplane to see if there were any survivors. There was just a strange silence surrounding the empty aircraft and 'a thin spiral of steam rising from inside the debris'. Amongst the wreckage they found a flying helmet and a pilot's notepad. Ian leafed through the notes and realised it had been returning from a bombing raid over Germany and had encountered heavy flak (anti-aircraft fire). The official American records of this episode show that the Liberator had been on a mission to Kiel and had been badly damaged by the flak. But in addition, it was running out of fuel and so the crew had bailed out over the sea. The pilot kept the aircraft steady and then bailed out himself over land. He was the only survivor. In about twenty minutes the Holt Fire Brigade arrived along with local policeman, Tom Payne. A horrifying sight met their eyes. It was as if a bomb had hit the farm buildings. Amazingly, the Edwards family in Pereers Farm were away in Norwich visiting relations, They were not the only ones to have had a lucky escape. Four-year-old Mary Empson (now Jones) had gone down to the farm with her cousin Betty to feed the pullets that were being reared in the pig sty. Her father, Ben Empson, had been out on a taxi run with his Rolls Royce and had come back to Holt along the Cley Road. As he passed Pereers Farm he had stopped and called over to the two girls offering

them a lift back home. They ran down the track and clambered in. Just as they pulled up outside their house in New Street there was a terrific bang that reverberated round the town. It was the aircraft smashing into Pereers Farm. The pig sty was in the plane's path and was flattened. 'If my Dad hadn't come by at that moment...' Mary did not need to finish the sentence. The wreckage of the aeroplane was there for some time and much visited by the local souvenir-hunting lads. Billy Dunham and George Rudd biked over to the site on several occasions. They salvaged bits of Perspex from the cockpit windows that they made into rings.