



BG Research Online

Grigg, E. and Basquill, S. (2023) *Grandad's Army: The North Scarle Signal's Platoon notebook*. Lincolnshire Past and Present, 132. pp. 22-24. ISSN 09609555

This is an author accepted manuscript of an article published by The Society for Lincolnshire History & Archaeology in its final form on 1st June 2023 and made available under a [CC BY 4.0 Deed | Creative Commons licence](#).

This version may differ slightly from the final published version.

OBJECTS OF LIFE

WITH SARA BASQUILL
AND ERIK GRIGG

Grandad's Army: The North Scarle Platoon Signaller's Handbook

The reopening of the Museum of Lincolnshire Life, following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period of 2020, saw an increase in the number of public object donation offers. Perhaps people discovered they now had the time to get around to that de-clutter they had once promised themselves? One such offer was an intriguing Home Guard notebook, filled mostly with enigmatic groups of letters, training notes and random descriptions of world events. The donor knew little about what was contained in the notebook, but confirmed it belonged to his grandfather, John William

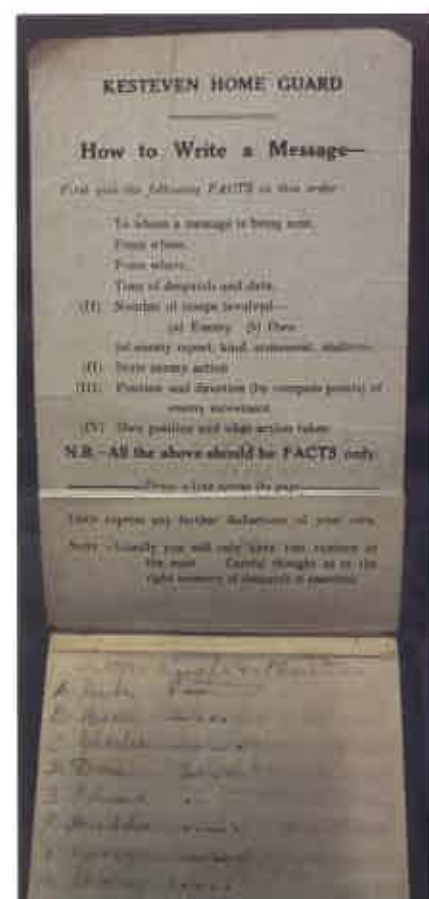


Pages from Drake's Home Guard notebook.

Drake, born at Brandy Wharf, Lincolnshire, in 1890. Having known Dr Erik Grigg for some years, and of his research into the history of the Home Guard, I invited him to the museum to examine the notebook. Home Guard archival material is surprisingly rare and excitingly Dr Grigg's visit resulted in some new historical discoveries.

The Home Guard was a part-time, unpaid military force set up during the Second World War to defend Britain against the threat of Nazi Germany and later made famous by the popular BBC sitcom *Dad's Army* (1968-77). Initially founded as the Local Defence Volunteers on 14 May 1940, they were given the catchier name of the Home Guard by Winston Churchill two months later. They did vital work and were eventually stood down in late 1944.

The notebook is 20 cm by 12 cm. Inside are blank pages that have been written on in pencil and on the inside front cover is a printed sheet headed 'Kesteven Home Guard', with instructions on how to write a message. The book is also stamped by the Kesteven Home Guard (the North Scarle Platoon were part of the 1st Battalion of the Kesteven Home Guard, which formed part of the North Kesteven Group). This is the only such book to survive in any of the archives (although only a tiny percentage of the records of their force survived) and tells us not only were the Home Guard getting bespoke stamps made to authenticate documents, but they were also printing up signals books like this.



The printed page of Drake's Home Guard notebook.

Home Guard Signals Units were first formed nationally in December 1941 and reorganised on a more professional basis in September 1942. Those selected for this work were trained up by regular troops from the Royal Corps of Signals (Mills and Carney 2008, pp. 107-8). Some of the surviving Home Guard uniforms in the We'll Meet Again museum, Freiston, feature the crossed blue and white flags of the Royal Corps of Signals and this was one of the few specialist badges that the Home Guard were allowed to wear (bomb disposal



John Drake in the uniform of the Royal Garrison Artillery, 1916. (Courtesy of Rupert Drake)

and dispatch riders were the other two main exceptions).

John Drake, along with the local baker Alf Wiseman, established the North Scarle Platoon. Drake had served with the Royal Garrison Artillery in the First World War in East Africa and after the war spent five years in the Territorial Army. His family had been farmers but seem to have fallen on hard times, having to sell their farm; in 1939 he is recorded as being a river drainage worker. Drake was around 50 years of age when he joined the Home Guard, which is slightly older than the average for Lincolnshire (which seems to have been around the age of 33). The donor also provided us with a copy of his certificate for completing a course in signalling whilst in East Africa in 1916; his expertise in this field was probably what prompted his unit to make him a Home Guard signaller, so presumably this was his notebook when he was retrained in the Home Guard.

The booklet contains lots of notes in pencil that a signaller would be expected to know. These include a list of the phonetic alphabet (not the version we use today, 'Freddie'

and 'King' have been replaced with 'Foxtrot' and 'Kilo' for example) and the Morse code alphabet. There are also instructions on using a Fullerphone (the standard Army issue field telephone used to transmit Morse Code) and the Number 38 portable wireless (the standard Army issue portable radio); while the local Home Guard did not have such equipment, if an invasion had occurred Drake may have been expected to use one. This was not unusual as regular troops trained their nearest Home Guard unit and Home Guard Signalmen or Dispatch Riders were expected to be as proficient as their full time equivalent.

Large sections of the booklet contain handwritten messages. Some of these are in Army codes using capital letters arranged in blocks of five, some in Morse, but most are written out in longhand. These messages seem to be test messages as they contain random descriptions of world events, long quotes from



A Lincolnshire Home Guard uniform displaying the blue and white crossed flags of a signaller. (From the We'll Meet Again museum. With thanks to Paul and Linda Britchford for permission).

news stories, reports of international events like fighting in Papua New Guinea, a piece on smoked salmon, an announcement about ration points being temporarily lowered, an egg production report and so forth. After cross referencing these seemingly random news events with newspapers of the time, it is obvious that they all date to 1942, which makes sense as that was the year the Home Guard signallers would have been trained en masse. The fact that Drake seems to be able to send and receive these messages using Morse Code and/or Army codes demonstrates how rigorous his training was.

If Drake was a signaller, he presumably was part of an organised structure of such soldiers within the Lincolnshire Home Guard from 1942 onwards. The signals section of the Lincolnshire Home Guard have left few surviving records so this book is an invaluable source of information about their training and skills.

There is a written record dated 1942 of a signals unit under a Sergeant George Harwood in the 12th Lindsey based in Saxilby (just six miles north of North Scarle) that had been issued with flags and a field telephone (HSDG 2005 p. 72). In the same publication is a photograph dated 1944 showing them proudly holding a shield they won at the Lincolnshire Intelligence and Signals competition, so presumably they were a county-wide network of units who kept their standards up through regular competitions. There are references in archival material relating to the 10th Lindsey Battalion to looking after the pigeons in the Alford loft that were used to send messages (51 MLL1/3/8). Pigeons also were recorded having been used 'to good effect' during exercises by the Burgh-le-Marsh platoon (also part of the 10th Lindsey), though officers were told not to use the birds to send frivolous messages as, and this is a genuine quotation from a Home Guard internal memo, 'even a pigeon has feelings' (51 MLL1/2/8). Drake's notebook has no references to flags or pigeons. According to the

donor, Drake was already proficient in the use of semaphore signalling following his training with the Royal Garrison Artillery during service in the First World War; he retained this knowledge into old age.

There is also evidence that the work of signals units in the Home Guard was not just a male preserve. There exists an interview in the BBC's 'WW2 People's War database' with Patricia Brown from Grantham who stated that the Home Guard signals unit in that town (which she was a member of) was predominately made up of women. The evidence of the photograph from Saxilby and the uniforms in the We'll Meet Again museum, however, suggests that while the intelligence units analysing the signals may have been staffed by women (who were issued with a Bakelite badge rather than a uniform), the actual Home Guard soldiers sending the signals were usually men, like John Drake. As well as phones and flags the Home Guard often used Boy Scouts, Army

Cadets or other boys aged 16 or 17 as runners to deliver messages by hand.

The notebook is currently awaiting accessioning. This involves assigning an object a unique museum number and an entry in the museum accession register – the formal, legal inventory of the museum's collection. Once accessioned, the notebook will be available for public viewing by appointment, as are most objects that are held by the museum but not on public display. It will also be available for relevant future displays. ①

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

51 MLL1/2/8 and 51 MLL1/1/2/8 are records of the 10th Lindsey held at Lincolnshire Archives

REFERENCES

Patricia Brown's account can be found here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/85/a5844585.shtml>

H.S.D.G. (2005) Step Back in Time, History of Saxilby & District Group
J. Mill & T. Carney (2008) The Insignia and Uniforms of the LDV and Home Guard

Sara Basquill is Collections Development Officer for Lincolnshire Heritage Services

Dr Erik Grigg is Lecturer in History at Bishop Grosseteste University (School of Humanities)

The Museum of Lincolnshire Life is housed in a former barracks built for the Royal North Lincoln Militia in 1857 on Burton Road in Lincoln. It holds nearly 250,000 objects including an authentic WW1 tank. There are also interactive galleries of the Royal Lincolnshire Regiment.

Admission to the museum is free, except for event days. Normal opening is Friday to Tuesday 10am–4pm – last entry 3.45pm.

The museum can be found online at lincolnshire.gov.uk and can also be followed on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.



Beryl George

We are deeply saddened by the sudden death of Beryl George who managed and edited the book reviews for LP&P over the past three years. She did an excellent job for us, finding Lincolnshire titles from a wide variety of sources and efficiently recruiting reviewers. She will be missed very much.

Beryl was a very active local historian whose recent books (pictured below) on the Cornhill and Sincil Street area of Lincoln, published by the Lincolnshire Co-op, are much admired. She made a strong contribution to the work of the Survey of Lincoln and regularly wrote articles for their publications.

