# Violet Hewitt’s bravery averted disaster at Earsham munitions site after VE Day



While the recent VE Day celebrations primarily honoured the thousands of troops who fought valiantly in Europe against the Nazis, a significant yet lesser-known act of heroism from Norfolk deserves recognition. Violet M. Hewitt, a crossing keeper from the village of Earsham, played a pivotal role in averting a disaster that could have decimated her community in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

On 6 July 1945, as American army lorries transporting cluster bombs made their way through Earsham—home to an ammunition depot known as Station 545—a critical incident unfolded. Some wooden bomb cases slipped from the lorries and onto the railway track at Drake's Lane Crossing. When the driver of the following lorry braked sharply to avoid the fallen cases, more bombs cascaded onto the tracks, directly in the path of an oncoming train. In a moment that epitomised bravery, Mrs Hewitt disregarded the urgency from American servicemen urging her to flee and instead dashed down the track, brandishing a red flag to alert the engine driver. Miraculously, the train halted just 175 yards from the danger.

For her extraordinary courage, Violet Hewitt was awarded the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) Medal—becoming the first woman to receive this honour. Eight decades later, her bravery was remembered with the unveiling of two plaques during this year's VE Day anniversary celebrations in Earsham. The event featured a poignant exhibition attended by over 120 villagers, including schoolchildren and nursing home residents, offering a rich tapestry of local memories and wartime history.

Richard Randlesome, chair of Earsham Parish Council, and borough councillor Nicholas Meade undertook extensive research on both Mrs Hewitt’s legacy and the wider context of Earsham during World War II. "If it wasn't for Mrs Hewitt, the village wouldn't be here," Randlesome remarked, highlighting the fragility of life during the war. The exhibition included impressive displays alongside personal artifacts contributed by local families, providing firsthand accounts of the American presence in the village.

Earsham Hall served as a crucial Forward Ammunition Depot during the war, with munitions stored in the surrounding woods and fields, creating a significant logistical hub for the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF). Bombs transported from factories arrived via rail and were then relayed by convoy to nearby airfields, including those at Hardwick, Seething, and Flixton. Over three years, 625 trains, carrying approximately 21,038 wagons and 200,000 tons of supplies, traversed the line, underscoring the scale of wartime operations.

While much of the history surrounding Earsham is often overshadowed by prominent headlines, it is crucial to grasp the full narrative of wartime contributions, not just military but also civilian acts of courage. The area's logistical significance has implications that resonate today, as current infrastructure and communities still thrive in areas once shaped profoundly by the war.

The contributions of individuals like Violet M. Hewitt remind us that heroism in times of crisis often does not come with medals or accolades but rather through sheer resolve and selflessness. The unveiling of her memorial serves as a touching tribute to her legacy, ensuring that her name and story endure as part of Earsham's rich and complex history. The residents, who attended the exhibition, not only commemorated the past but also forged a stronger community bond, ensuring that generational stories remain alive.

**Reference Map**- Paragraph 1:
[[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25158011.story-earsham-hero-ww2-uncovered-memorial/?ref=rss)- Paragraph 2:
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[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAF_munitions_storage_during_World_War_II)- Paragraph 5: [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25158011.story-earsham-hero-ww2-uncovered-memorial/?ref=rss),
[[3]](https://www.bures.me.uk/FAD/trialpage.htm)- Paragraph 6: [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25158011.story-earsham-hero-ww2-uncovered-memorial/?ref=rss), [[5]](https://www.rafweb.org/Stations/Stations-E.htm),
[[6]](https://www.airfieldresearchgroup.org.uk/forum/airfield-discussion/17235-usaaf-forward-ammunition-depot-bures)- Paragraph 7: [[1]](https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25158011.story-earsham-hero-ww2-uncovered-memorial/?ref=rss), [[7]](https://www.scribd.com/document/22253159/Army-Ammo-and-Explosives-Storage-in-the-US-1775-1995)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/25158011.story-earsham-hero-ww2-uncovered-memorial/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.americanairmuseum.com/archive/place/earsham> - This page provides historical information about Earsham, a military site used during World War II. It details the role of Earsham Hall as the headquarters building and the camp's location within the grounds. The site was utilized for storing munitions, including poison gas bombs and chemical weapons, and featured concrete structures for protection. The page also mentions connections to individuals associated with the site, such as Chester Galaski, a member of the 1916th Ordnance Ammunition Company. The information is sourced from Barry Anderson's 'Army Air Forces Stations' and Roger Freeman's 'The Mighty Eighth War Manual'.
3. <https://www.bures.me.uk/FAD/trialpage.htm> - This article discusses the establishment of Forward Ammunition Depots (FADs) during World War II, focusing on the Bures site in Suffolk, England. It explains that the Bures FAD was the largest in East Anglia, servicing both the 8th and 9th Air Forces. The article also mentions other FADs in the region, including those at Earsham and Barnham. The Bures site was chosen for its remoteness, proximity to railway lines, and ease of security maintenance. The network of roads was constructed by a large number of black-American US Army servicemen under challenging conditions.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RAF_munitions_storage_during_World_War_II> - This Wikipedia article provides an overview of RAF munitions storage during World War II. It details the construction and operation of Air Ammunition Parks, which were designed to store large quantities of bombs and other munitions away from airfields to protect them from potential Luftwaffe attacks. The article lists several main Air Ammunition Parks, including those at Barnham, Brafferton, Earsham, Lords Bridge, Mawcarse, Norton Disney, Snodland, Southburn, and Staple Halt. It also mentions the expansion of these parks to accommodate the needs of the USAAF during the war.
5. <https://www.rafweb.org/Stations/Stations-E.htm> - This page from the 'Air of Authority - A History of RAF Organisation' provides detailed information about RAF stations starting with the letter 'E'. It includes data on RAF Earls Colne, RAF Earsham, and other stations. For RAF Earsham, the page notes that it was a sub-site of No 53 Maintenance Unit, RAF Pulham, and was reduced to inactive status on 30 April 1954. The page also provides information on the location, control, and operational history of these stations, including the units based there and their operational periods.
6. <https://www.airfieldresearchgroup.org.uk/forum/airfield-discussion/17235-usaaf-forward-ammunition-depot-bures> - This forum discussion focuses on the USAAF Forward Ammunition Depot at Bures in South Suffolk. The user shares extensive research on 'USAAF Station 526', the FAD at Bures, and mentions that there were two other FADs in East Anglia: Earsham and Barnham. The Bures site was noted as the largest, servicing both the 8th and 9th Air Forces. The discussion highlights the significance of these depots in supporting the operational needs of the USAAF during World War II.
7. <https://www.scribd.com/document/22253159/Army-Ammo-and-Explosives-Storage-in-the-US-1775-1995> - This document provides a comprehensive overview of Army ammunition and explosives storage in the United States from 1775 to 1995. It includes a list of military installations and ordnance depots, detailing their locations and functions. The document also discusses the historical development of ammunition storage facilities, their roles during various conflicts, and the evolution of safety and security measures over time. It serves as a valuable resource for understanding the logistics and infrastructure of military munitions storage in the U.S. military history.