



# Bletchingley Conservation and Historical Society

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## Fuelling the War

In 1943 lots of workmen and engineers started to dig trenches over large tracks of Southern Britain including through Bletchingley. Back then, no-one asked questions as to why this was happening but no doubt there were plenty of ideas put forward by so called “local experts”. Since then, it has become clear that what they were up to was building one of the biggest technical feats of the war – a pipeline running from Walton-on-Thames through Bletchingley to Dungeness and under the sea to Boulogne. From Walton the pipeline connected to others spanning the UK. Tim Whittle who has written an in-depth book on the subject was our guide at the meeting of the Bletchingley Conservation and Historical Society.

Though the country had a number of “advantages” during the war (being an island and an incredible pool of people able to find solutions to problems to name just two) one thing it didn’t have was easy access to the fuel needed to drive the war effort on nearly all fronts. Tim Whittle put forward a number of ideas that made his audience think; he reminded the Society that there was hardly any oil to be found naturally anywhere in the British Empire and North Sea Oil wasn’t known about then. The country therefore had to find another solution for transporting imported fuel to where it was needed.

Tim gave a potted history of the types of fuel then available and the companies involved in their production: Standard Oil became ESSO; Royal Dutch – Shell and Burmah became BP. He also showed how giant tanks had been built around the country using steel and concrete and then half buried in earth mounds.

Preparing for War: by 1936 a decision had already been made to have Reserve Depots around the country and, two years later, a network of smaller distribution depots near to airfields. By May 1940 the Government had taken control of the railways and the Shell Mex headquarters had moved from Central London to a more secure location. The country was 800,000 tonnes of fuel below target. The RAF was in desperate need – they had little more than one days supply in reserve and don’t forget this was the time of the Battle of Britain. The country had to import fuel from America but the Atlantic Convoys were a dangerous proposition. Those that arrived safely discharged their fuel into tanks on the west coast of Britain – they couldn’t risk having tanks on the east coast, it being in range of German bombers. There were aerial attacks on petroleum installations including at Thames Haven and Coryton (in Essex). Some of the fuel tanks were built alongside giant water tanks to try and protect them. But the airfields were mainly in the South East....

Step up the pipeline engineers! By 1941 a one hundred mile pipeline had been built from Avon (near Bristol) to Walton-on-Thames (near Kingston) which became a major distribution depot. Fuel was then delivered onwards by road tanker to its final destination. Another (140 mile) line was built

between Merseyside and Avon and in 1942 another between Reading and Southampton. Even though there were huge scars on the landscape it was more difficult for the enemy to locate and destroy the actual pipelines (the diameter of the actual pipes was actually quite tiny). Patrols were also set up with ten mile sections coming under local “guards” (locally a Mrs Cripps) who made regular checks on their sections. There was still the problem of getting the fuel to Europe where it would be needed for the troops; in 1942 Lord Mountbatten asked whether it would be possible to build a pipeline under the sea. In comes PLUTO, the God of the Underworld.

Generally believed to stand for PipeLine Under The Ocean or more officially PipeLine Underwater Transportation of Oil, PLUTO became an integral part of the war effort in Europe. Likewise fellow film stars BAMBI (codename for the pipeline from the Isle of Wight to Cherbourg) and DUMBO (Dungeness to Boulogne) – the latter connecting to Walton on Thames, via Bletchingley. Its trajectory was from west to east located to the north of Bletchingley Village. Tim Whittle gave a comprehensive over-view of how the pipelines were built and how they functioned.

However the idea that the pipelines fuelled the D-Day invasion of Normandy has now been debunked. Not a single drop of the many tonnes of fuel needed was sent by pipeline – it was all by road and ship. BAMBI provided some of the fuel for the activities at Operation Market Garden in Belgium but it was closed soon afterwards. DUMBO was longer lived, even today cables and pipes are still being laid along the route – but now Mrs Cripps has been replaced by digital monitoring.

The fate of the pipelines and their infrastructure (including the truly massive “Conundrum” machines (used to lay the pipeline cables) has been mixed what with storms, recycling of valuable metallic materials, etc taking their toll. However the infrastructure of the actual pipelines remains as the largest remnant of the Second World War.

Tim Whittle’s book, “Fuelling the Wars – Pluto and the Secret Pipeline Network 1936 – 2015” is available from the author, on-line and all good bookshops. A recording of the talk to the Historic Society is available by contacting our website at [www.bletchingleyhistory.org.uk](http://www.bletchingleyhistory.org.uk).

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