

VE Day Journal by Irene Jaques, written after the event but in conjunction with her Diary page, aged 16 years.

VE Day – London – 8th May 1945

How often we have heard our parents, and grandparents talk of what happened in ‘the last war’, and ‘what a time we had when Armistice was signed’. Well it was our turn to be a little unruly, and to totally disregard all conception of time and sobriety.

The war against Germany, Italy, and later Japan, began in 1939 and ended in 1945. There is no need to say anything more about the war – no doubt by the time this journal is re-read it will be past history – but it is the first Armistice that I am concerned about. It is only the first Armistice because Japan had still to be overcome.

Many people consequently did not join in the revelry of the VE Days holiday, because their sons or husbands were still fighting but while the majority completely lost their sense of proportion, remained quietly at home and hung a flag or two out to show that they were in agreement with others’ happiness.

I live in the suburbs of London, and so it was the natural inclination to see what was going on up in the city. Consequently, a party of us – three boys and three girls – set off in high spirits on the tube train to Trafalgar Square. We couldn’t move when we reached the station for the crowds of would-be-merrymakers. I had not seen very much of London, and what I had seen was very drab and uninteresting – clothed in the garb of war – and so it was a sight to behold. Nelson, perched high among the birds of the air, usually so cold and reserved, covered in decorations and thousands of people squatting on his lion friends and upon the steps at the base of his pillar!

They sat on the lions’ heads, on their backs, on their claws and tails, and exploded fireworks before their noses! Poor creatures! If they had been alive to tell the story afterwards how full of righteous indignation they would have been!

We pushed our way through the Square and clinging tightly to each other’s coattails so as not to lose anyone in the crowd, we were swept under Admiralty Arch and down the Mall. By St James’ Park we rested awhile before going to Buckingham Palace to hear the King’s speech.

The crowds outside the gates and in the park, and upon Victoria’s Statue of Memorial were so dense that many fainted with the heat, and yet remained standing because there was no room to fall down!

A young soldier stood upon the Memorial steps and led the crowd who chanted periodically after the King had spoken over the radio, “We want the King – We want George!” Until His Majesty and his wife and daughters consented to show themselves upon the Palace Balcony. Then the cheers broke out, deafening to the ear, and the crowds surged nearer to the gates, and yelled “Where is he?” “I can’t see him!” “Lift me up someone!” Etc.

Free once more of the pressing, suffocating throngs of people, we sank down wearily on a patch of grass in the Park. Unfortunately, there were so many hundreds of folks with the same idea that there was little room left for us to sit, but we managed it!

Feeling a little better, we joined a stream of the followers of the Guards’ band that marched along Birdcage Walk to Westminster. Here again to obtain a minimum of security it was necessary to join arms in rows and so filling up the whole of the road, we marched along singing and waving streamers.

The whole city of London went mad! The everyday-sober stay-at-home was clinging to a lamppost, six foot above everyone else in Piccadilly Circus, and Rainbow Corner where the American Serviceman's Club has its quarters, was chock-a-block full of shouting crowds, objecting, (yet liking), the falling fireworks from the Americans. That was a trick that I thought uncalled for, in that it often slightly injured people who didn't notice the sizzling firework in time to push the crowd back from it.

If anyone attempted to drive a car, (and there were some idiotic enough to do that), it was covered with people, so that only a moving crowd was seen. Police leapt onto lorries and pushed people off as soon as they got on, and others climbed up behind in the meanwhile. I had never seen such lawlessness in all my life! And utterly unchecked! Crowds in Piccadilly waited with bated breath the fall of a man who walked undaunted across a ledge some thirty feet up, and roared their approval when he climbed into someone's window. Men on the roof of a large cinema poured buckets of water upon the crowds beneath, and the excited crowd leapt back, and those at the back of the throng were swept down the more sparsely populated side streets, as the fore ranks moved backwards. Couples danced on street air raid shelters and back in Trafalgar Square once more a sailor in his pants splashed about in a huge stone bowl.

By this time it had got dark and the lights had begun to show. I think it was the lights that thrilled us more than anything else. After six years of blackout it looked like fairyland, and we were too young before the war to know what the streets of London looked like lit up. They were changed from the drab streets, bomb scarred and dirty sidewalks that we knew to romantic wonderlands and London once more became a city of beauty.

Admiralty Arch was the prettiest sight that night in my opinion. It was floodlit and search lights played upon the surrounding buildings. Upon the top of the Arch men lit fireworks. Large, glowing Roman Candles and showers of bright stars and flowers shot upward from the Arch, whilst the crowds beneath, a little more subdued by the beauty of it all, gasped their admiration.

Back in the Square, the turmoil was rising. The sailor in the bowl, with the search light playing upon him, had his trousers stolen, whether for fun or in earnest we never knew, but the poor chap was beginning a wild war dance in the bowl, which was fast emptying its water upon the roaring crowds below.

A soldier stripped to the waist, his back plastered with lipstick, was leading the people in song. Riotous dancing proceeded around Nelson's Column, and little groups did the 'Hoki Koki' and 'Mother Brown'. Some were making bonfires of the rubbish and the older folks, beginning to feel the chill of the night air, sat around them gratefully.

It was getting very late, so we made our way once more towards the Palace. The King and Queen came out for the third or fourth time that evening, at midnight, and wished the people goodnight. It was a lovely sight. The Palace had never seemed an attractive building to me, but floodlit, it resembled a white card against a velvet background. A speck of colour in the white was all we could see of Royalty, but immediately they had left the Balcony, the lights on the Palace went out.

The crowds blinked their surprise and began to move away. Having already rested once more in St James' Park, we thought it about time to start for home. We realised with horror that we had missed the last tube and with groans and moanings we joined the hundreds of others who had to hike home.

At 1 o'clock in the morning, footsore already, we reached a water fountain just past the Marble Arch, and lined up for a drink! The boys wanted to sleep out on a park seat like the many others we

saw, and wait for the first train in the morning, but we girls had our reputations at stake, and vowed to walk our feet off rather than miss a night in bed!

So we walked! How sore our feet were. The mile or two we did walk seemed so very far, because we had started out so tired, with all the street walking we had done. Taxies were full, and every available car was packed. In vain for us to even think of hitchhiking.

At Queens Road we thought we would sit on the Underground Station steps until morning. We simply could not go any further. Then we saw an army lorry unloading its cargo of tired human bodies and in one last run of desperation we caught it before it moved on, and were fortunate enough to jump in.

So we rode home after all. Like cattle in a truck, and were deposited very near our homes. I crawled into bed at 3 o'clock in the morning and was never so pleased to sleep.