



Letter 3: This Country Is At War

Our third letter is written by Helen Pearson (the vicar's wife).

Helen's letter is dated 3rd September 1939, the day British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain broadcast to the nation with the news that Britain was once again at war.

Helen is writing to her cousin Patricia in Oxford.

She writes:

Dear Patricia,

I write this letter to you with a heaviness I hope neither I nor any of us never grow accustomed to. Today has been long and solemn, and although the sun has now set over our little village and we are once again sitting behind the blackout, there is a sense that the true darkness has only just begun. Still, writing this letter to you feels like the most natural thing in the world to do, as if noting the day's events down on paper might bring them into some sort of order.

You will have heard this morning's news yourself, of course. Though we all suspected Chamberlain's announcement that we were going to war with Germany, hearing the words spoken aloud... well, they struck like church bells in the stillness, clear, cold and impossible to ignore.

As I suspect happened in most places across the country, many people here in Alton Haypun did not want to be at home on their own when they heard the news, so they began gathering in friends' houses well before eleven. There is something about listening to the wireless in moments like that, isn't there? Suddenly, it feels as though the whole country becomes a single family gathered around one fireplace.

We were not alone for Mr Chamberlain's speech either. We had Mrs. Langley from up the lane, the Coppersmiths with their two boys, and elderly Mr. Pritchard, who said he did not want to be by himself "when history turned its page." I placed the chairs around the wireless set and tried to make the room as comfortable as possible

for everyone, though nobody truly sat comfortably in the knowledge of what we had all gathered to hear.

When Richard turned the wireless on, it crackled with that peculiar, distant hum, as if it was clearing its throat before speaking to us. The Prime Minister began to speak and we hung on his every word. His voice was steady but lined with a sadness that was impossible to miss. When he announced that the deadline had passed with no reply from Germany, and therefore "this country is at war," the room seemed to fold in on itself, Mrs. Langley pressed a handkerchief to her mouth, and the boys looked at their parents with wide eyes, looking for reassurance that everything was going to be alright. I was already holding Richard's hand in mine, braced for the news but I held it a little tighter when the words spilled out of the wireless. He tried to reassure me with a smile and a nod but despite his best efforts, I could tell he too was searching for his own reassurance that everything will be alright.

The room remained silent until Chamberlain had finished speaking, Richard turned off the wireless and, as you might expect, everyone looked to him for some sort of guidance. I knew in that moment that Richard's responsibilities as the vicar of Alton Haypun would take on greater significance. He looked at us all and said, "If ever there was a day for prayer, this is it." And so he announced he would hold a short service at the church at four o'clock.

Richard and I went to the church immediately. I helped with the preparations where I could, lighting a few extra candles and placing a vase of late-summer dahlias near the pulpit. I then left Richard there and went off to spread the word about the afternoon service.

After the Prime Minister's speech, it is hardly surprising people are looking at things differently. When I went to see Mrs Larkin at the General Store, I found her taking in the air at the front door, blinking at the sudden brightness of the day as though surprised that the world still looked the same. The village was somewhat quieter than usual.

Alton Haypun does not wear its emotions loudly. Instead, a quiet resolve seemed to settle in the village, the sort born of people who've weathered storms before and know how to steady themselves for the next.

When the villagers began to arrive at the church they did so with a quiet, deliberate humility. Families sat close together in the pews, closer, I think, than they ever have before. The hymns were sung softly but earnestly. "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" carried a weight today I had never felt in it before. Richard's voice did not waver as he read from the Psalms, though I could see the glister in his eyes. He spoke of courage and neighbourliness, of the strength that comes not from boldness but from kindness. He reminded everyone

that fear need not isolate us, that it should, instead, draw us closer.

People lingered afterwards, reluctant to return to their houses where the wireless waited to bring more news. It felt, for a moment, like the whole village had become one household.

When Richard returned from his duties at the church this evening, he said there was a notable difference in a few of the young men he had seen walking to the pub. One of them being young Joe Carter, the Blacksmith's son. Richard said how they seemed to now walk in a different way with instinctively straightened backs, as though the word "war" had tapped them on the shoulder like a drill sergeant. Joe's father is understandably fraught with worry and has already been to see Richard to seek advice and reassurance. Joe is now of conscription age and, like many other parents, Brian is frightened of losing his son to the war. One can only hope the conflict with Germany will be short and many young men will be spared the awful order to take up a rifle and go off to fight the enemy. That hope seems such a distant one today.

Everyone is wondering the same question but no one wants to say it: What happens now? There is a strange feeling to it all, almost as if we are living in a photograph that has not yet fully developed. The outlines are there, but the details are still smudged with uncertainty.

It is late evening now as I finish this letter and Alton Haypun is silent. The air feels heavy, yet somehow fragile, as if the night itself is listening.

None of us know what tomorrow will bring but I take comfort in something I witnessed today. When the world tilted, the residents here in Alton Haypun leaned into one another and in that, at least, there is hope.

I do hope, my dear sister, that you are in good spirit despite the news from the Prime Minister.

Write soon. I would value your words more than ever.

With love,

Helen

That was the letter from Helen Pearson, written on the day Britain entered the Second World War. Through her eyes, we see how one of the great turning points of history was felt not only in government chambers or military headquarters, but in the quiet corners of ordinary villages like Alton Haypun, around wireless sets, with friends and family close by, and in the pews of the local church.

Look out for your next letter as we continue exploring life on the British Home Front in the Second World War one voice and one letter at a time from Alton Haypun At War.