



Letter 1: Blackout

Welcome to Alton Haypun At War where we follow the Second World War through the letters sent from and received in our quiet fictional English village.

Our first letter comes from Martha Smith, the Alton Haypun postmistress, who is accustomed to order, punctuality, and a tidy counter. Martha's letter is dated 2nd September 1939, a day after the official Blackout regulations came into force in Britain.

It was feared the country would become the target of aerial attacks by enemy aircraft and so it was decided to introduce measures to make it difficult for enemy bombers to navigate and find their targets. It was hoped the Blackout regulations would prevent mass destruction of British towns and cities and the high number of casualties that would result from aerial attacks. It was the responsibility of the Air Raid Precautions (A.R.P.) Wardens to help uphold the regulations and ensure everyone was abiding by them.

Martha writes from her home in the heart of Alton Haypun as the residents are still trying to get used to the new way of living under a veil of enforced darkness.

Her letter, addressed to her friend Irene in Wiltshire, captures the strange mix of nerves, practical headaches, and an odd feeling that has settled over Alton Haypun. From bungled window blackouts to the overzealous A.R.P. Warden and the surreal beauty of the village under moonlight, Martha's observations give a vivid snapshot of village life adjusting to wartime darkness, with a wry sense of humour and a keen eye for detail.

Martha writes,

My Dearest Irene,

It still seems strange to be writing by candlelight knowing that outside our little village sits in complete darkness. Mr Merrin does not know what to do with himself having suddenly found his evening role of lighting the lamps along the four lanes and The Square redundant, and who knows how long this new Blackout order will go on for? I wonder how you are coping with it so far?

What a day we had when it came into force yesterday! I suppose in the larger villages, towns and cities everything feels rather well prepared with official notices, speeches and sirens, but here in Alton Haypun things are a little less oiled. We had Mr Richardson, our Chief A.R.P. Warden, marching up and down the lanes and round The Square like a sergeant major in a pantomime. He had found an old tin dustbin lid and was trying to organise a "practice alarm." The only result was Mrs Griffiths dropping her washing in fright and chasing him down Mill Lane waving Mr Griffiths briefs at him as she went. Needless to say, she gave him a piece of her mind when the chase ended at The Square. Mr Richardson claimed that Alton Haypun needs to be prepared and she should be grateful he was taking it upon himself in his official role to make sure the local residents were ready. Mrs Griffiths suggested banging a dustbin lid and blowing hard on his whistle in close proximity to someone who was unaware of his presence was not the way to go about things and he should find a better way of communicating with people.

By half past four, every house in the village was busy, every window and doorway was being lined with blankets and whatever else was considered blackout material. You have never seen such goings-on. Mrs Taylor at the bakery got herself in such a flap, poor thing, that she fixed the blackout material on the outside of the windows with the windows shut. "Can't have a draught," she said, "I'm mixing dough." It took her an hour to realise she had sealed herself in like a parcel.

Do you remember those little leaflets we were all given back in July telling us what to do with our gas masks and how to prepare our homes for the Blackout? Everyone seemed to be double-checking them again today. I pulled mine out of the dresser drawer in the living room and read back over it just to be sure.

I was due to deliver the last tins of Blackout paint from the post office to the Carters' forge this afternoon, but halfway there I met Mr Richardson in full ARP uniform, waving a checklist like a weapon. He has taken to inspecting blackout material house by house, door by door. Heaven help anyone who shows a chink of light. He gives lectures long enough to melt the glue on your stamps. He has already organised a public meeting on Wednesday on how to uphold the Blackout and has a sheet of paper in the post office to be signed by all villagers who wish to attend. Needless to say, that sheet remains blank!

Poor Mrs Larkin got a full fifteen minutes talking to on the perils of "enemy aircraft sighting domestic light seepage," despite the fact her blackout precautions are excellent. I have seen them myself. When I asked her if she would be attending the public meeting, she said she would rather risk the Luftwaffe than another lecture from Mr Richardson!

Alton Haypun really does look like a different place in the darkness. It is all shadows and shapes. The moonlight is all we have now and without it, even the clock face on the church tower goes into hiding. My, how we take light for granted. We will all have to find new ways of getting around after dark now.

There are some positives to it though. My senses are so much more alert and I am noticing things that the light had darkened. That sounds like a very strange thing to say but it is so true! For instance, last night, I noticed how dark our lane was and the stillness of it. Every sound seems louder and you can hear everything, the owls hooting, the fox in the woods, even the church clock, which I barely noticed before, seemed to shout when it struck ten o'clock, and an occasional breeze whispered its way through the village.

I looked up to the Moon before turning to go back inside. The sky was clear, no clouds, and I stared up at the stars for a few moments. There were plenty to look at. It was as if Mrs Taylor had shaken off her apron towards the sky and the flour had dusted the heavens. Strange, isn't it? We cover the earth in darkness and suddenly the sky grows brighter.

Speaking of the darkness, I keep catching myself thinking of Stanley out on the farm so late these days. He is working hard and enjoying the responsibility, but every now and then the thought creeps in. Only a year from now he will turn eighteen. I try not to dwell on it, but I suppose you will understand why it has been sitting at the back of my mind.

As I was about to close the back door, Mr Griffiths walked by on his way home from walking his dog, puffing away on his pipe. I told him he was brave smoking at night with Mr Richardson around. "My dear," he said, "if enemy pilots can spot my pipe from up there, then good luck to them." I told him he would have us all fined if Mr Richardson copped him at it. A moment later, Mr Griffiths name was shouted out in the darkness from further up the lane. It was Mr Richardson! Mr Griffiths let out a chuckle and we bid goodnight to each other. I closed the back door quickly to avoid ending up as an attendee of the lecture that was about to begin in the lane

The funny thing is, beneath all the muddle and some complaining, there's an odd feeling in the air. It is such a strange feeling with the village stretched thin with nerves. We all keep saying "it will be over by Christmas," though I do not think anyone really believes it. Still, the talk of it helps.

I tried my gas mask on for the first time today and gave the vicar an awful fright. He only came in for some stamps and found me looking back at him like a startled beetle. He better watch out tomorrow, the schoolchildren are having their first gas-mask drill.

Anyway, I will finish my letter here. The candle looks tired and is becoming rather sleepy.

Give my love to George. I hope the Blackout is not putting too much strain on his deliveries.

Yours, in semi-darkness and good spirits,

Martha

Martha's letter shows that even in a small, quiet place like Alton Haypun, the routines of postmistresses, bakers, and farmers have been interrupted, and everyone—whether delivering letters, lighting lamps, or tending windows— felt the subtle, unsettling weight of war.

That was the first letter from Alton Haypun At War.

Our next letter comes from Margaret Hurst, a resident who has lived in the village all her life. Her once predictable days and carefully managed responsibilities are about to change, revealing how even the most ordinary lives were drawn into the extraordinary circumstances of the war.