

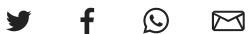
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What VE Day looked like around the UK

From crowds in Trafalgar Square and Belfast, to street parties in Essex and a knees-up on Manchester cobbled streets - how the day unfolded

By Mick Brown

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The biggest party that Britain has ever seen came later than expected.

For days, Germany's imminent collapse had been reported in broadcasts and newspapers, and at 2.41am on Monday 7 May, General Alfred Jodl, representing the German High Command, signed the instrument of unconditional surrender at General Eisenhower's HQ at Rheims.

Fighting had stopped. The war was over. But in Britain, in the absence of an official announcement, for the moment it was business as usual – or almost as usual.

It was not until 7.40pm that evening that a radio broadcast by the Ministry of Information announced in Pooterish tones that ‘in accordance with arrangements between the three great powers’ (Britain, America and Russia) a formal announcement of victory would be made by the Prime Minister Winston Churchill the following day. ‘In view of this fact, tomorrow, Tuesday, will be treated as Victory in Europe Day and will be regarded as a holiday.’

By then, the people of Britain had already taken matters into their own hands. Pubs throughout the country were full to bursting and crowds were assembling in city centres to celebrate. As VE Day dawned, that morning’s Daily Telegraph – with its headline ‘Germany Capitulates!’ – was reporting that a procession ‘more than a mile long’ made up of ‘a cosmopolitan crowd’ had marched through central London, and assembled outside Buckingham Palace shouting, ‘We want the King’, while flags ‘as if by magic’ were appearing all over London, and the light from hundreds of bonfires threw ‘a lurid glow over the metropolis’.



LONDON | CREDIT: Alamy

A heavy thunderstorm had passed over London in the early hours of VE Day morning, leaving a blue sky washed clean of clouds. For the first time in almost six years, newspapers were allowed to carry weather forecasts – hitherto prohibited on the grounds such information could be useful to the enemy. The Daily Mirror wrote: ‘Wind refreshing; warm and sunny at first but rain can be expected later.’

And so the day unfolded. Throughout the morning, crowds had begun to gather outside Buckingham Palace and in Trafalgar Square, where hastily erected boards around the base of Nelson's Column proclaimed 'Victory Over Germany 1945'. Traffic had ground to a halt as the streets became impromptu playgrounds and dance floors.

In Piccadilly Circus, soldiers competed to climb to the top of the pyramid of hoardings erected to protect the copper pedestal on which the statue of Eros had stood (it had been moved to Egham earlier in the war to protect it from German bombing), and cheers rang out as a lorry loaded with crates of beer edged slowly through the crowd, carrying an additional cargo of dozens of swaying and singing passengers.



WALES: A VE Day party in Pontarddulais, Glamorgan | CREDIT: Mary Evans Picture Library

The novelist Mollie Panter-Downes would write of the city resembling 'a vast, happy village fete', as the desire to join in with London's celebration 'combusted spontaneously in the bosom of every member of every family, from the smallest babies, with their hair done up in red, white and blue ribbons to beaming elderly couples who, utterly without self-consciousness, strolled up and down the streets arm in arm in red, white and blue paper hats'. (Much the same headwear no doubt spotted by Harold Nicolson, the diplomat and diarist, who would describe Trafalgar Square as 'a seething mass of people with figures draped over the lions,' with 'people wearing all manner of foolish paper caps and cheering slightly'.)

All across Britain, in cobbled backstreets, on suburban drives and avenues, on village greens, playing fields and factory grounds, trestle tables were being set up, bunting hung, flags flown; drums, bugles and accordions were being retrieved from cupboards and attics; cakes were being baked and children's fancy

dress hastily stitched together from whatever scraps of material were to hand in preparation for the festivities.



GLASGOW: Wrens and sailors celebrate in Gordon Street | CREDIT: Mirrorpix

In Medway Street, in the area of east Belfast that had been hit hardest by German bombers during the Belfast Blitz of 15 April 1941, a street party was under way. At a table draped with a Union flag and groaning with cakes and bottles of pop, a young resident, who had parted his hair and applied a toothbrush moustache, jokingly made a 'Heil Hitler' salute to a photographer.

Similar scenes were being enacted on the cobbled cul-de-sac of Rosamund Place in the Manchester district of Chorlton-on-Medlock, where under the gaze of a picture of Churchill, mothers danced a knees-up to the accompaniment of an accordion.



BELFAST: A children's party in the city – with a Hitler impersonator | CREDIT: Belfast Telegraph

As these pictures show, few men of conscription age were there to join the celebrations. Etched on the faces of the women, beneath the exhilaration of the moment, can be seen the strains of six long years of war, of shortages and air raids, of 'careless talk costs lives', of bad news from the front, and of telegrams with the words, 'deeply regret to inform you...'

While Churchill had gained assurances from the Ministry of Food that there were enough beer supplies in the capital to slake revellers' thirst, in Newcastle, as in other cities, so great had been the demand the previous evening that many pubs were shut. However, the Newcastle Chronicle reported that street vendors were doing a roaring trade in the sale of bunting, ribbons and flags of all nations, and in the sale of a little blue document, 'The last will and testament of Adolf Hitler... public enemy number one.' While along Scotswood Road, the city's main thoroughfare, several effigies of Hitler could be seen dangling from buildings, in a sacrificial purging of anger and revenge, and bonfires that had been lit the previous evening and burnt down to embers, were being replenished with more wood for the coming evening's festivities.



ESSEX: Children at this street party set to feast on food that had been in very short supply during the war | CREDIT: Mary Evans Picture Library

In Belfast, tens of thousands of people gathered in front of the city hall. 'Belfast is letting itself go, that's plain fact,' Harry McMullan reported for the BBC. 'Below me, the population of this city, laughing, cheering and dancing is surging past in great waves of colour and sound in brilliant sunshine.'



LONDON: British women dancing the jitterbug with American GIs | CREDIT: Getty Images

Among the crowd was a young girl named Susan Neilly. ‘Suddenly a boy hugged and kissed me,’ she would remember 70 years later, talking to a Belfast newspaper. ‘I’d met my future husband.’ His name was Herbert, known to everyone as ‘Wee Bertie’, and they would remain married for 63 years, until his death in 2013.

In London, young women working for the US government’s Office of War Information spilled on to the street and danced a furious jitterbug with American GIs, amid a confetti of paper cast out of the office windows.



LIVERPOOL: Nurses take to the streets to celebrate | CREDIT: Mirrorpix/Getty Images

Along Piccadilly, strangers linked arms like old friends and marched along the streets, singing and shouting, all inhibition forgotten. Soldiers hoisted young women on their shoulders. Joyce Digney and her best friend Cynthia Lowe, both Land Army girls, had caught the train from their homes in Epsom to Waterloo, and made their way to St Paul's Cathedral to pray for the brothers they had both lost during the war. (Ten consecutive services of thanksgiving were held at the cathedral throughout the day, each one attended by thousands of people.)

'We paid our respects and then we said, "Right, that's done now, let's go and have fun,"' Joyce would tell the Daily Telegraph 70 years later.



LONDON: Winston Churchill joins the King, Queen and Princesses to wave to the crowds outside Buckingham Palace | CREDIT: CAMERA PRESS / ILN.

In Trafalgar Square, a US Army Signal Corps photographer, identified only as TG Masecar, would capture the girls frolicking in a fountain with two British sailors in what would become an iconic image of the celebrations.



LONDON: Joyce Digney and Cynthia Lowe party with two sailors in the Trafalgar Square fountain | CREDIT: Imperial War Museum

‘It was the euphoria – everyone was smiling and hugging and kissing and laughing,’ Joyce recalled, ‘We just kept thinking, “It’s over, it’s over. They won’t bomb us anymore, they won’t kill any more of our young men.” And of course now it was all over, I thought maybe I’d get more clothing coupons, too!’



LONDON: Celebrations in Trafalgar Square, 8th May 1945 | CREDIT: Alamy

By lunchtime in the West End, every restaurant was filled to capacity. One of the diners at the Savoy, enjoying its special VE Day menu, was Noël Coward, who had been staying in the hotel since being bombed out of his home in 1941. Later that evening, after joining the crowds celebrating outside Buckingham Palace, Coward walked back to the Savoy with his friend, the composer Ivor Novello. In his suite, looking down on to the lights reflected in the Thames, Coward wrote in his diary, 'I suppose this is the greatest day in our history.'



BRISTOL: A giant street party in the city | CREDIT: MIRRORPIX

At 3pm, Churchill broadcast to the nation from Downing Street, formally announcing the signing of the surrender, concluding his address: 'Advance Britannia! Long live the cause of freedom. God save the King!'



NEWCASTLE: Residents of Tamworth Road, Newcastle, celebrate with a Hokey Cokey | CREDIT: North News and Pictures

‘God bless him! Came the echo from the great throng,’ the Telegraph reported the next morning. ‘And their pent-up feelings broke loose. They paraded in rejoicing, vociferous columns along the roads and in the parks; they waved their flags, blew whistles, pelted one another with confetti, and they persistently roared their desire to see the King.’

At 4pm their wishes were granted as the King appeared on the balcony of Buckingham Palace with Churchill at his side, joined by the Queen, Princess Elizabeth, dressed in the khaki uniform of the women’s Auxiliary Territorial Service, and Princess Margaret. The Telegraph would note that altogether over the course of the day the Royal family would appear on the balcony eight times in 10 hours, responding to crowds consumed by ‘a great outburst of relief and national thanksgiving’.

As darkness fell, after years of enforced blackout, public buildings and landmarks including Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament and Piccadilly Circus, were illuminated by floodlights, to more cheers from the massed crowds. Along Whitehall, people stood shoulder to shoulder as Churchill appeared on the balcony at the Ministry of Health to acknowledge the crowds once more. A Guards band struck up For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow, followed by Land of Hope and Glory. As the crowd burst into song, Churchill joined in, too. As Churchill was speaking, at Buckingham Palace the two young Princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret, were allowed to slip out, accompanied by Guards officers, and mingle with the crowds outside.



LONDON: All licensing laws in the capital were revoked for the evening and the celebrations went on well into the small hours, leaving many to sleep it off on the streets | CREDIT: MIRRORPIX

At the end of their adventure the Princesses returned to the Palace. ‘We stood outside and shouted, “We want the King;” Princess Elizabeth recalled. ‘I think it was one of the most memorable nights of my life.’

‘Poor darlings,’ the King wrote later in his diary, ‘they have never had any fun yet.’ Seventy-five years later, Elizabeth, by then Queen, would call upon the attributes of ‘self-discipline, of quiet good-humoured resolve and of fellow-feeling’ that had steered Britain through the Second World War, and which ‘still characterise this country’, in addressing a new crisis – and invoke a song that had been sung throughout Britain on that day of rejoicing and celebration, ‘We will meet again.’

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