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Preparations for war; a postscript to Harold Gough’s reminiscences of Rothamsted

The spring 2009 Newsletter of the AAB (Issue 70) contained an article by Dr Harold Gough describing his memories of Rothamsted in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Reminiscences of Rothamsted 1938 – 1941). For me, a retired member of the Rothamsted staff with a continuing interest in Rothamsted’s history, the whole of the article was fascinating but it was the reference to the Munich crisis, and Rothamsted’s response to it, that particularly caught my eye.

At the time of the Munich crisis (1938), the head of the Insecticides and Fungicides Department was Dr Frederick Tattersfield. By coincidence I had, a short while before reading Dr Gough’s article, visited Tattersfield’s son to seek his help in identifying people in photographs taken during his father’s time at Rothamsted. During my visit he showed me a family album, and allowed me to copy a number of photographs from it including the two reproduced here.

Both photographs show Rothamsted staff digging trenches, exactly as described by Dr Gough. Dr Tattersfield is the person wielding the pick (very energetically!!) in the first photograph, and he also appears in the second photograph (left foreground). With one exception, none of the other people have been identified.

The two photographs give a very good impression of the scale of the activities but I can’t help wondering what they hoped to achieve. Digging an air raid shelter would seem, to me at least, to have made very good sense. In contrast, I can see little point in digging trenches, which are usually for defensive purposes, unless the apiary buildings in the background were in fact a cover for something far more clandestine!

John Jenkyn, December 2009