

# SHERWOOD'S 'BLACK GOLD'

With oil supply a critical factor for wartime Britain it was imperative that all measures were taken to find and secure every available source. Surprisingly, reserves were found and exploited in Nottinghamshire's Sherwood Forest as **Joshua Levine** explains.

**T**HE IMPORTANCE of oil to Great Britain during the Second World War can hardly be overstated. It sustained the civilian population and enabled the military effort. On the Home Front, it provided heat, light, food, clean water, working hospitals and a basic level of comfort. For the military, it was the source of toluene for explosives, synthetic rubber for tyres, wax for packaging, and of petrol, that magical mainstay of modern warfare.

In May 1940, the magic was enhanced by the arrival in Britain of an improved form of fuel. Known as '100 octane', it was the result of a process known as catalytic cracking and gave an instant boost to the power rating of Fighter Command's Spitfires and Hurricanes. British pilots were surprised by increased speeds, enhanced rates of climb and of acceleration. The sudden improvement in performance contributed significantly to their successes during the Battle of Britain.

But all of this depended on oil being available in huge quantities - and

the supply could not be taken for granted. It arrived by tanker, but German U-Boats, hunting in packs, threatened to stem the supply. Between September 1939 and February 1941, seventy-nine British or British-controlled tankers were sunk with the loss of over 630,000 tons of oil. Not only were the U-Boats picking off tankers, but the Luftwaffe was destroying hundreds of thousands of barrels in dock areas. In April 1941, for example, stocks were affected during attacks on Avonmouth, Purfleet, Plymouth, Thamesfleet, Thameshaven, Jarrow and Belfast.

**MAIN IMAGE:**  
A Spitfire is refuelled in 1940 with what was nationally crucial fuel; 100 Octane petrol.



## SHERWOOD'S 'BLACK GOLD' Britain's Texan Roughnecks: 1943



### ROBIN HOOD'S BACKYARD

In the summer of 1942, the Secretary for Petroleum, Geoffrey Lloyd, called an emergency meeting of the Oil Control Board. Discussion focused on an impending crisis – until Philip Southwell, a senior Anglo-Iranian Oil engineer, stood up to speak. His words caused a sensation. The most pressing matter regarding Britain's oil requirements, he said, was the development of Britain's own oilfields. His listeners were amazed. What

oilfields? The board members were entirely unaware of an astonishing undertaking in Sherwood Forest. Almost three decades before the discovery of oil in the North Sea, an effort was underway to pump oil from the ground in Robin Hood's backyard. At no other period would such an ambitious venture have been attempted – but these were radical times.

The impetus for Britain's inshore oil industry had come from Lord Cadman, the government's petroleum advisor. As far back as 1908, while overseeing

drilling tuition at Birmingham University, Cadman had been convinced that oil would come to dominate world politics. In the build-up to the Second World War, he led a nationwide search for deposits – and when significant oil reserves were discovered near Eakring in Sherwood Forest in June 1939, Cadman pressed home the need to start drilling immediately. D'Arcy Exploration, a subsidiary of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, quickly set to work – and a cadre of specialist drillers was called in. >>

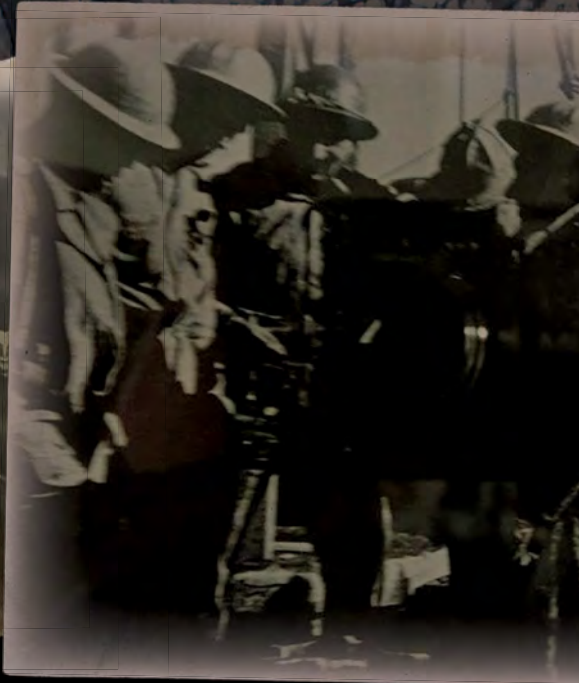
**ABOVE LEFT:**  
The Texan 'Roughnecks' on one of Sherwood's oil wells.

**ABOVE RIGHT:**  
This leafy lane belies the fact that this was once the centre of an important oilfield.



## SHERWOOD'S 'BLACK GOLD'

Britain's Texan Roughnecks: 1943



**ABOVE LEFT:** The group of Texans who arrived in wartime Britain to drill for oil.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** The American 'Roughnecks' at work.

**BELOW:** An oil tanker set alight by a U-Boat in the Atlantic illustrates the perilous state of fuel supply to Britain during the Second World War.

One of these men was Sandy Ross, an Anglo-Iranian driller, who was at home on leave from Iran when his telephone rang. Told by an inscrutable voice to report to Newark railway station, he would be working at Eakring for the next five years. Men were needed in large numbers, and many of the first recruits were Nottinghamshire coal-miners deemed unfit for work underground. The Labour Exchange was called upon to provide others, so that unskilled workers found themselves training to become everything from labourers to well pullers to members of the drilling crew. Jack Clarke had been a miner at Ollerton Colliery, before starting work at Eakring. He remembers the small country roads clogged with double decker buses ferrying newly-created oil workers to and from the

wells. 'The lanes were so busy,' he says, 'that local people used to avoid travelling along them.'

### A HUNDRED NEW WELLS

At first, wells up to 2500 feet were drilled, which were soon producing an average of 700 barrels of oil per day. A national oil industry was built from scratch, an extraordinary undertaking at a time when the country was unsure of its own survival. The oilfield, with its derricks and pumps, seemed unlikely to be targeted by enemy aircraft, hidden away in the heart of England among the oak, birch and hawthorn trees. But any residual risk paled alongside the fact that Eakring crude was of an astonishingly high quality, purer than anything being produced in Europe or the Middle East. This made it ideal for the high octane fuel

required by Spitfires and Hurricanes.

By 1942, the nation's oil supplies had begun to run short. Stocks stood at two million barrels below normal safety reserves just as military requirements were increasing. It was clear that 'indigenous' production would have to increase and the Petroleum Department urged a fourfold increase. This was why, in August, Philip Southwell went before an emergency meeting of the Oil Control Board to confess the truth about Britain's secret industry.

The specific problems laid out by Southwell were the lack of skilled labour and difficulties in obtaining materials and equipment. The rigs in use had been designed for deep-drilling operations in Iran, and were not appropriate for the shallower Nottinghamshire reserves. They were also large and complicated to



erect and move, resulting in wasted time and effort. Denis Sheffield, working at Eakring in 1941, recalls the struggle: 'This heavy equipment would be pulled by hand and jacked by a gang onto a lorry,' he says, 'and they would literally manhandle it up at the next site.' Smaller and more mobile American rigs were badly needed. Given the equipment, and the men to operate it, it was hoped that a hundred new wells could become operational within a year.

the United Kingdom. Noble, founder of the Noble Drilling Corporation, also agreed to recruit drillers and forego any profit from the operation.

The result was that forty-two experienced oil workers, mostly from Oklahoma and Texas, were engaged to come to Britain on year-long contracts. They would be billeted together in an Anglican monastery in the Nottinghamshire village of Kelham. But how would the placid monks react to the arrival of drillers plucked from another world? Eugene Rosser, the Noble Drilling Corporation representative who would be looking after the men in England, was keen to reassure the

**RIGHT:**  
The impractical Middle Eastern-style rig unsuited to Nottinghamshire.

**CENTRE:**  
An artist's impression of the wartime oilfields at Eakring.

**BELOW:**  
The American oil workers meet the monks of Kirkham Hall where they were billeted.



## WOULD-BE HELL RAISERS

With this goal in mind, Philip Southwell flew to Washington DC to set out Britain's material requirements. He wanted to buy the latest rotary drilling rigs, drill pipe, and rotary rock bits – but United States law presented a problem. Drilling equipment could not legally be sold to a foreigner – so a loophole was exploited. The equipment was sold to Lloyd Noble, an American appointed to carry out operations in

anxious novices. 'I'm figuring,' he said, 'that not many of them is going to feel like a lot of hell-raising and whoring around in their spare time.'

One of the would-be hell-raisers was Lewis Dugger from Louisiana. Interviewed many years later, Dugger was honest about his motivation for accepting the position: at \$29 a day, he stood to receive almost twenty times the pay of an army private. 'I said yes straightaway,' he says. >>



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**ABOVE AND BELOW:** Wartime 'Nodding Donkeys' can still be found in situ at the oilfield location.

**CENTRE:** The plaque displayed at the Duke's Wood site.

## CULTURE SHOCKS

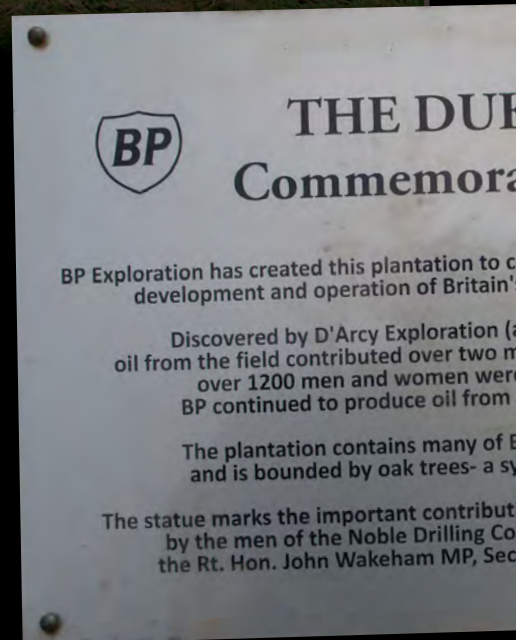
The 'roughnecks' met up in New York before sailing for Britain. One man was fired – for getting drunk and running wild – before even crossing the Atlantic. And when the group finally disembarked, they spent the day drinking before being taken to a hotel. It didn't bode well for the monks of Kelham Hall, who were surely in for a surprise.

The roughnecks arrived at the monastery on 18 March 1943, carrying banjos as well as bags. The next day, they were taken to Newark where they innocently mistook the ruins of Newark Castle for war damage. In the town, they spoke cheerfully to impressionable locals, bought bicycles, and stood out in the crowd. Their Stetson hats, colourful shirts, and cowboy boots presented an unreal sight against a

monochrome English backdrop.

Small culture shocks were soon felt. One of the oil workers tried to place a telephone call to his family in the small town of Stroud, Oklahoma. After a confused discussion, the operator tried to place the call through to Stroud, Gloucestershire. The roughneck had never heard of that Stroud, the operator had never heard of the other, and a sad little argument ensued. Meanwhile, in The Fox pub, the men, accustomed to Budweiser and Schlitz, were unimpressed by local beer. Once they had drunk the pub's whisky, they took to adding salt to pints of bitter and mild in a desperate attempt to improve the taste.

The roughnecks' accommodation was in one wing of the monastery, two men to a room. Each roommate worked a different shifts, twelve hours on, twelve hours off, so they barely saw each other. Lewis Dugger's room was spacious and warmed by a fireplace, and nearby was a recreation room with a snooker table. There were also good washing facilities – unusual for the time but important for men who spent their days in filthy conditions. There were six cooks and stewards (all soldiers recently released from hospital) who prepared and served some very unpopular meals. 'It was either Brussel sprouts, or mutton, or potatoes fried in mutton grease,' remembers Dugger.



Once the men were settled, Eugene Rosser set a target: 'Guys, we want to get after it! We want to drill a hundred wells in a year!' And the roughnecks were soon showing their worth. After the first twelve hour shift on an existing Anglo-Iranian rig, they reported 1,010 feet. The works manager refused to believe that this was possible. But there was no mistake; the American drillers worked much quicker than their British counterparts. And when the new American rigs began to arrive, their speed increased further. By the beginning of June 1943, they had completed 42 wells, at an average of



one a week; the British crews had been taking up to eight weeks to complete a single well.

Astounded by this pace, the Anglo-Iranian Company asked Eugene Rosser how it was done. In front of Sir William Fraser, Anglo-Iranian's chairman, Rosser explained what the English drillers were doing wrong. They were wasting time changing rock bits when the existing bit was still doing a good job. They were waiting too long for cement to set on their wells. And they were drilling with chemically-prepared mud when they could be drilling with water. Above all, though, they were too rigid in their application of the rules and failed to react to circumstances as they arose.

**LACK OF FOOD**

Though he is critical of much of the Eakring set-up (which, it should be remembered, was entirely new and operating under wartime

up the yard, but he was soon assigned to a drilling crew. The British, according to Mitchell, learned from the Americans, and began to improve. 'We went the same way eventually,' he says. In Ivan's case, it included dressing like them, in their cast-off clothes.

Despite their initial rate of progress, and the impression made on the locals, the Americans began to experience problems. Mistakes crept in, levels of drinking increased, and the mood turned darker. The problem, it became clear, was lack of food. The roughnecks were used to a robust diet of red meat, fresh fruit and vegetables. They were not prepared for an English diet, and certainly not a wartime one where many foods were rationed and others unavailable. Working twelve hour days, seven days a week, the men lost weight alarmingly. 'It was food for an office worker,' says Dugger.

The black market, though, was one way of boosting rations. Talking to

a farmer, Dugger agreed to trade five gallons of petrol for a dozen eggs. At 2016 prices, it works out at £2 per egg. As Dugger pointed out: 'Money don't mean nothing when you can't get stuff.'

**INCREASED RATIONS**

Food matters finally came to a head when a steward announced that breakfast would consist of warmed up Brussel sprouts from the previous night's dinner. Fed up and hungry, the roughnecks announced they would work one more full month but if the food had not improved by then, they would return home.

Deeply concerned, and aware of the army's abundant food supply, Eugene Rosser travelled to London to speak to the Petroleum Attaché at the United States Embassy. He was sent first to see Major General John C H Lee, Chief of Supply of Services, who, in turn, wrote to his Chief Quartermaster, Brigadier General Robert Littlejohn, ordering him to >>>

**BELOW:**  
At the oilfield site this statue of an oil worker surmounts a base above a plaque bearing all the names of the Americans involved.

**DUKES WOOD**  
Native Plantation

Commemorate all who were involved in the discovery, the first commercial on-shore oilfield at Eakring.

forerunner of British Petroleum) in 1939, 100 million barrels to Britain's war effort and at peak, 1 million barrels involved in the oilfield's development. Dukes Wood until field depletion in 1965.

Britain's native species of trees and shrubs and a symbol of Nottinghamshire and its people.

contribution to the development of the field during the war by the Corporation of Oklahoma and was unveiled by the Secretary of State for Energy, on May 18th 1991.

conditions) Lewis Dugger was clearly enthusiastic about the job, saying: 'I felt I had an obligation, and I wanted to do it to the best of my ability' adding: 'The English roughnecks weren't skilled when they started' he says 'but we taught them what to do and they're quick learners.'

One of those British oil workers who learned quickly was Ivan Mitchell, a local boy recruited through the labour exchange. Attracted by the money - '£3 more than I was getting' - he cycled through the forest to attend an interview at the oilfield. His first job, at the age of seventeen, was tidying



- AMERICANS WORKING IN COOPERATION WITH BRITISH DRILLING EFFORT - 1943**
- |                         |                    |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| PHILLIP E. ALBRITTON    | DEWEY AYCOCK       |
| JOE S. BARKER           | WILLIAM M. BURNETT |
| ROBERT M. CHRISTIE      | ELRAY R. DAVIS     |
| GEORGE C. DARRMAN       | HERMAN DOUTHETT    |
| LEWIS V. DUGGER         | E. G. GATES        |
| GERRY E. GRUFFIN        | JAMES E. HARDING   |
| DE TADT HAVELLEY        | E. H. HEMPHILL     |
| RAY A. HILEMAN          | EDGAR HOLT         |
| WM. C. FRANCIS JOHNSTON | VIRGIL L. LATHAM   |
| A. L. LONG              | L. B. MCGILL       |
| JOHN H. McLENNAN, JR.   | A. J. MAY          |
| RAY E. MILLER           | ALBERT A. MORTON   |
| J.W. NICKLE             | LLOYD NOBLE        |
| CARL NORBERG            | L. M. "PETE" OAKS  |
| C.E. OLVEY              | FRANK PORTER       |
| L. B. ROBINSON          | CLAYTON REIDINGER  |
| ALLEN RUTHERFORD        | E. F. ROSSIER      |
| CLARENCE SIKES          | GORDON O. SAMS     |
| WOODY WAYNE WALDEN      | J. L. WAITS        |
| G. CHRISTIE WATSON      | DONALD E. WALKER   |
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## OUTLAWS AND ROUGHNECKS TOGETHER

By the end of the Americans' year in Sherwood Forest they had drilled 106 wells, pumping nearly a million barrels of fine crude oil. In the days that followed, the roughnecks were offered the chance to carry on working at Eakring (albeit at a lower wage) but they all chose to return to America. In fact, four men had already gone back: one had been injured, another was homesick, and two had been fired – the first for drunken fighting and the second for helping a local farmer when he was supposed to be sick in bed. When the time came for the rest to leave they went quietly. 'We disappeared without any fanfare,' says Dugger.

They sailed home on *Mauretania*, having reached Southwell's goal of 100 wells, helped ease the national petroleum shortage and passing on knowledge to local men. At its peak, the oilfield employed 1,200 people, and by the end of the war stretched across nine miles of countryside, producing over 300,000 tons of high grade oil, equivalent to two and a quarter million barrels from 170 nodding donkeys. It had become a genuine commercial proposition and a life that extended into the 1960s.

A visit to the area reveals that the 'Roughnecks' have never quite gone away. Their names are still carved into old beech trees and their image is visible in a bronze statue in Duke's Wood nature reserve. And perhaps, one day, they will sit beside the Merry Men as figures of Sherwood Forest legend – outlaws and roughnecks together. On a national scale, however,

their achievement reflects the ambition of a country reinventing itself. Beliefs and assumptions were changing. Oil was no longer something that simply came from abroad. Just as the people of Britain were

making do and mending – so was the island itself. ☉



**TOP LEFT:** Kevin Topham of the Duke's Wood Oil Museum shows off graffiti carved into nearby trees by the American oil workers.

**ABOVE LEFT:** A reunion party of the American oil workers during the late 1970s.

**RIGHT:** The grave of Herman Douthit. He is the only American civilian buried in the American Military Cemetery at Madingley.

issue military rations to the oilfield workers. After a few days, however, nothing had happened so Rosser went to Littlejohn's headquarters where it became clear that the Brigadier General was not prepared to see him. Littlejohn, a plain-speaking man with a huge logistical task on his hands, had no interest in civilian oil workers.

Unwilling to return meekly to Kelham Hall, Rosser plucked up the courage to barge into Littlejohn's office. The astonished quartermaster began shouting – until a remarkably timely telephone call from Major General Lee silenced him. The chief of supply confirmed his order, leaving the seething Littlejohn with little choice but to comply.

The roughnecks were soon receiving increased rations – including an extra meal at midnight as the day and night shifts crossed over. 'We could eat great,' says Lewis, 'sugar, pork luncheon

meat, sliced pineapple, sliced peaches...' The mood improved immediately – as did the standard of work.

## FELL TO HIS DEATH

Even with extra rations, oil drilling was a dangerous business. One man's arm was broken by a spinning rope, another caught his hand in a motor clutch. And in November, Herman Douthit, a 29-year-old Texan, fell to his death from a platform 55 feet above ground. His

boots, it seems, were covered in clay and his gloves were wet. As he climbed down a ladder, he fell, suffering head injuries. An ambulance arrived quickly, but Douthit was pronounced dead on arrival at the American Military Hospital at Sutton-in-Ashfield. The funeral was held in the small church attached to

Kelham Hall. Douthit's coffin was draped in an American flag which was sent to his widow in Texas, along with the proceeds of a collection taken by locals. Today, Douthit is the only civilian buried in the United States Military Cemetery at Madingley, Cambridge.

