The world pitched into battle 21 summers after Britain had won the war to end all wars. But this time there were no foolhardy officers kicking footballs on the battlefields and no romantics believing that it was a glorious game. The spectre of Adolph Hitler and his Third Reich made sure of that. In a conflict that touched everyone, an estimated 55 million people lost their lives. British sport was one of the first casualties, dealt a knockout blow within days of war being declared on September 3rd 1939.

Two days before war was declared, Hedley Verity had taken seven wickets for nine runs in six overs for Yorkshire but the war brought an immediate blanket ban on sport. The mood was sombre and many people wondered if they would ever play again. Sadly Hedley Verity didn’t as he was killed in action in Italy in July 1943 aged 38. However, when people began watching and playing sport again the anti-sport lobby launched their usual vociferous attack. Sport was accused of wasting petrol, money and manpower but fortunately it held little water as what the critics ignored was that an afternoon at the cinema or a day in the country used up as much money, petrol and manpower as sport. They also neglected to mention that sport provided relaxation for tired war workers and entertainment for soldiers on leave. It took people’s minds off the horrors and provided a glimpse of normality.

Above all, it lifted morale and an example of this was the Easter Monday William Smith Festival on the Giant Axe Field, Lancaster.

It was estimated that a crowd of 15,000 attended the Giant Axe on Easter Monday 1940 for the first William Smith Festival held during World War II. Although not done on as large a scale as was the case prior to the war the traditional custom of egg-rolling was still a feature of the day. All over the field children could be seen having their “egg tournaments”. As had always been the custom brothers and sisters enjoyed themselves skipping, playing football or netball and competing in the races.
A photograph of excellent quality showing the youngsters of Scotforth School who played in the junior football final on the Easter Field in 1940. Robert Jones was the brother of Gerry Jones who became a first class referee on the Football League after serving his apprenticeship in the lower leagues including the North Lancs League.

Scotforth defeated Christ Church 1-0 in the second round after receiving a bye in the first round. The semi-final against St Luke’s was a tense affair but Scotforth eventually prevailed by 3 goals, 1 corner to St Luke’s 1 goal, 1 corner. The final of the competition proved to be a real ding-dong battle between Scotforth and St Peter’s. They were both evenly matched with sound defences. As there was no decision at the end of 16 minutes play extra time had to be played and finally St Peter’s emerged victorious by 1 goal, 2 corners to Scotforth’s 1 goal.

1939-40 Scotforth School

Back Row (L-R): Malcolm Campbell, Clive Middleton, Geoffrey Townson, Neil Stackhouse, Frank Parkinson, Derek Kneal, Ron Howson, Maurice Leytham

Front Row (L-R): Geoffrey Parker, George Whittle, Kenneth King, Robert Jones, Robert Corless
St Peter’s School winners of the junior football competition in 1940

Mr Smith of Broughton, son of the founder of the William Smith Festival, is seen presenting the shield to the captain of Skerton Central School Girls, the winners of the netball competition on the Giant Axe on Easter Monday 1940
The Senior Shield in the 1940 football competition was won by the Boys’ National School who defeated Greaves 1-0 in the final.

In 1941 the William Smith Festival Committee had been unable to secure the customary supply of toys but the children would not be disappointed as instead of the usual distribution at the respective elementary schools in the City at 10 am on Easter Monday, the Committee will distribute 2,300 sixpences to those children who had been issued with the necessary tickets.

This was not the only change in connection with the Festival as Mr F. H. Smith, the energetic secretary, told the Guardian. The venue would be the Barton Road Playing Fields, Scotforth and the usual football and netball competitions as well as the races would be staged there. There would not be the customary centre ring entertainment but in place of the clowns and equilibrists of former years there would be displays by the Boy Scouts Association and the Lancaster Lads Club.
An original photograph of the Ryelands School team who won the William Smith Festival Junior Shield in 1941. They are also displaying the League Shield (table attached) and the Parkinson Cup. Although I can’t identify the players the report of their final game on May 2nd 1941 against St Luke’s where they needed a point to win the league and duly obliged with a 2-2 draw contained the following names: Crane, Herman, Whiteside, Coulton, Standing and Smith.

A few weeks earlier they had faced their strongest challengers, Skerton, and the team lined up as follows in a 4-1 victory:

Crane; Whiteside (1 pen), Marsden; Bland (1), Kendall, Pritchard; Shaw (1), Herman, Bennett (1), Humpage, Morley

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In the same edition of the Lancaster Guardian that reported on football and marriage, other images and reports reminded the reader that fellow citizens were fighting and dying in the war and Hitler's planes caused death and damage almost every night.

Every edition of the local paper carried photographs similar to this and the one below showing bomb damage although the newspaper never revealed where the men were serving or which town had been hit as that would have aided German intelligence.

Although this modern semi-detached house in a North West town was badly damaged in an enemy raid last Thursday night, the occupants, including five children with ages ranging from seven years to one year, were rescued unhurt. The occupants were: Mrs. Robert Halliwell and her three children; Mrs. Cyril Halliwell and her two children; Mr. J. Moore, and another man, who were boarders.
Researching the files of the Lancaster Guardian certainly brought home to me the hardships that our country went through at this time. The deaths of serving men were published every week and marriages always seemed to show a happy bride with a smiling bridegroom dressed in his military uniform.

Lancaster men who were posted in 1942 as “missing” in the Far East

(L-R): Private William Liver, Pinfold Lane; Private J Hodgson, 44 Aldren's Lane; Lance Corporal V. Kemp, 75 Dale Street and Gunner Bob Carney, Bath Street

Lance Corporal Kemp, aged 23, was missing in Malaya and was well known in Lancaster being an active member of the Red Rose Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society. Another missing in Malaya was Private J Hodgson of the Reconnaissance Corps. Private William Liver is one of four brothers serving with His Majesty's Forces, two abroad and two in England. He was employed at Lune Mills before the war. Mrs Newton of 23 Woodville Street, Lancaster had a double notification that both her husband, Lance Bombardier J Newton and her brother Driver Robert Mount were on the list of missing in Malaya. It was a tragic coincidence that both were in the Dunkirk evacuation. Before the war Mr Newton was employed at Fahy's Garage, Morecambe and Mr Mount worked at Williamson's Greenfield Mill.

The relatives of the following Carnforth men, serving in Malaya, had been officially informed that they were missing after the evacuation of Malaya; Private Harold Moorby of 15 Hunter Street; Private Joe Baines of 12 Hunter Street and Private P Parkinson of 93 North Road.
Prisoners of War in Germany

Also from 1942 was this image of a group of prisoners of War in Stalag VIII-B in Germany. Bombardier Peter Rack of Newlands Avenue, Lancaster can be seen standing in the centre. Others in the picture are probably Lancastrians as well.

This sort of reading must have been horrendous for friends and family of the men and even if a loved one wasn't on a list of dead, missing or imprisoned his family would possibly worry even more. The bravery of men and women serving in these times never ceases to amaze me and people left at home got on with their lives with a smile and an attitude that said “we will never be defeated”

A feature of the Lancaster Guardian at this time was the weekly photograph that showed local men serving somewhere with His Majesty’s Forces. No information other than their home address was printed about the men as it could have helped the Germans to pinpoint regiments on the map of Europe.
Though there was no distribution of toys in 1943 the William Smith Festival, although on a modified scale, still proved extremely popular. Instead of assembling at their respective schools to receive the customary gifts dispensed in previous years the youngsters accepted the Committee's invitation to a cinema show at the Odeon Theatre on Easter Monday morning. 1,600 children attended and they thoroughly enjoyed the special fare provided for their entertainment. So far as the older boys and girls were concerned the highlight of their day were the football and netball competitions on the Giant Axe Field. Here there were not the large crowds that made the Festival such a spectacular affair in pre-war days but the quality of the games left nothing to be desired and they were admirably handled by the Sports Committee.
Newton School won the Junior Shield after a stern struggle which necessitated extra time being played before they could score the decisive goal that gave them the verdict over St Luke’s in the final by 1-0.

In the Senior Shield competition Boys’ National were worthy winners by a margin of two clear goals over Skerton Central Council School.

Only four schools contested the netball competition after Dallas Road scratched, Skerton, St Thomas’, Greaves and Cathedral with Skerton lifting the trophy by beating Greaves 10-5.

The 1944 Festival was again curtailed but no less enjoyable as it took place once more on Barton Road Playing Field due to the Giant Axe not being available. There was an early start at Barton Road where the football and netball competitions were staged. The junior tourney got under way at 9.30 am and before long a large crowd had assembled round the ropes. In the afternoon this crowd was considerably augmented until at the peak hour it was estimated that the “gate” totalled about 3,000. In spite of wartime restrictions there were a few egg-rolling parties with real dyed-in-shell eggs. There were also the traditional skipping parties in which uniformed members of the services of both sexes figured with lively abandon.

No festival would have been complete without the presence of Mr Tom Cornthwaite and on Monday he was again to the fore looking much better and justifiably proud of the fact that this was the 52nd occasion on which he has figured in an official capacity. Mr F. H. Smith was celebrating his 21st year as secretary and the anniversary was most appropriately marked for him at any rate by the fact that his school, St Luke’s Junior, for the first time won the junior shield. Other stalwarts who assisted in the running of the tourney and had one of the busiest days for years in this respect were Mr Sam Price, who doubled his secretarial duties with those of refereeing many of the games and Mr R Keefe and Mr F Jubb.

The netball competition was again organised by Mr Tyson with Miss O Richardson as referee. Greaves Central School won the netball shield by defeating Skerton Central 14-7.

St Luke’s, easily the smallest side to take the field, showed clever combination throughout their games in the preliminary stages, which were all won by a comfortable margin but they found Skerton a tough lot in the final, which was only decided in the last period of extra time, when St Luke’s won by the only goal, and gained the junior shield for the first time in the history of the school.

The senior football final was a ding-dong affair which ended in a goal-less draw. The first period of extra time yielded no score but in the second the strain which they had previously undergone proved too much for Dallas Road who fell away and the lively “Nashy” banged in three goals without reply to annex the coveted shield.
St Luke’s School, winners of the Junior Football Shield in 1944, photographed with Festival officials on Easter Monday. The Mayor of Lancaster, Councillor W. T. Grosse, is standing 3rd from the right on the back row and on the extreme right is Mr Tom Cornthwaite who had officiated at the Festival for 52 years.
Greaves School, on the right, winners of the netball shield in 1945 after beating Dallas Road School, on the left.

Boys National School, winners of the Senior Football Shield in 1945 are pictured with the Mayor and other officials.
Skerton School beat St Luke’s 2-0 to win the Junior Football Shield in 1945 with John Shuttleworth, captain of the team in the quartered shirt, holding the shield in the middle of both teams.

The Skerton School team photographed in 1945 with John Shuttleworth in a distinctive quartered shirt that was reserved for the team captain and Ivan Armistead kneeling in front row donning his goalkeeper’s jersey.
The successful Skerton School team of 1945 posing this time on Acrelands to celebrate winning the Junior Shield at the William Smith Festival with Ivan Armistead as goalkeeper and John Shuttleworth in the captain’s quartered jersey.

A cold wind on Easter Monday 1946 failed to chill the enthusiasm of the school children taking part in the William Smith Festival on the Giant Axe Field. This Victory festival was a happy one and a crowd of real peacetime proportions, about 10,000, watched the various events.

At five o’clock, the Mayor of Lancaster, Councillor G. H. Blatchford, J. P. presented the shields to the victorious football and netball teams.

It had been the Mayor who opened the festival in the morning by welcoming 2,000 young children to a special film show at the Odeon Cinema which is pictured.

The senior football competition was won by Skerton School who defeated Cathedral School 2-0 and the netball competition was won by Greaves School who defeated Skerton 12-7.
Bowerham School who won the 1946 Junior Shield by beating Skerton 1-0

Prizes bought in 1939 and stored in the Town Hall for this Victory festival were distributed to the successful runners in the races which were divided into six groups.

During the afternoon the Lancaster Lads Club presented a gymnastic display and the Band of the King’s Own Ryal Regiment, under Bandmaster L. Morley, played selections.

On Easter Monday 1947 the Giant Axe Field, normally the centre of much contention from crowds of fickle football supporters, echoed the laughter and the joy of school children when the traditional William Smith Festival captured the interest of Lancaster's young citizens.

Parents were there too joining in the festivities with all the fervour of the children. The Festival this year, as had been the case during the war, was run on austerity lines. Scholars from the junior schools encouraged their football teams with all the interest and enthusiasm of more experienced and knowledgeable soccer fans. Skerton School won the junior competition after hectic semi-final and final matches in both of which extra time had to be played.

The shield was not available for presentation but the Mayor, Alderman J. L. Dirkin, presented a new ball to the captains of the two finalists, Skerton and Bowerham. He also presented savings stamps to the players and kicked off in the final game.

Cathedral Primary School and Ryelands School, the losing semi-finalists were to receive a football for their team's efforts. Skerton beat Bowerham by three corners to nil after extra time.

The shortage of chocolate Easter eggs did not prevent the children from participating in the custom of egg-rolling. The familiar dyed eggs were still there although not to the extent of former years. Members of the Red Rose Boys' Club entertained the crowds with a boxing exhibition and the Lancaster Lads Club gave a PT display. The traditional practice of presenting the younger children with toys was substituted by a picture show at the Odeon.
Theatre. In the morning about 1,500 youngsters between five and eight years of age attended the show and were welcomed by the Mayor. The senior football and netball competitions were not held this year due to the austerity of the time and general cutbacks.

Skerton School winning the junior shield in 1947 being congratulated on their victory by the Mayor of Lancaster after he had presented the captain, Richard Ramsden, with a new football. Standing behind is Mr F. H. Smith, secretary of the Festival

Easter 1948 saw 2,000 children attend the Odeon Theatre on Easter Monday morning where they were welcomed by the Mayor of Lancaster, Councillor H. Butler, who also thanked the management of the Theatre for having arranged a suitable show for children. After the news reel the youngsters saw a nature film, a one-reel cartoon and a full-length coloured film, "Hopperty Goes to Town".
It’s fascinating to research the archives of the Lancaster Guardian and even more interesting to discover an error in the reporting or more likely in transcribing the reporter’s words. As can be seen the young boys of Bowerham School proudly display their achievements in season 1947-48 with the William Smith Festival Junior Shield along with other trophies. The account in the Lancaster Guardian on April 2nd 1948 was as follows:

“Big crowds gathered early at the Giant Axe with the prospect of a good day of sunshine and fun. Unfortunately the heavy rain soon after lunch necessitated the cancellation of the netball competitions until a later date and made the ground heavy and difficult for the final football events. Winners of the junior shield were Skerton Secondary Modern School who beat Bowerham in the final by 1-0; whilst after two periods of extra time the Cathedral Secondary Modern School carried away the senior shield by one goal, three corners, to the Boys National School’s one goal, one corner. The Mayor, Councillor H Butler, presented the shield and prizes”.

I’m sure the young boys looked forward to reading of their exploits in the Guardian and would have been somewhat disappointed for not receiving credit for their victory but they had a photograph to prove it and the whole of Lancaster would also have known.
St Peter’s Cathedral School in 1948 were winners of the Senior Football Shield

St Peter’s Cathedral School 1948

Back Row (L-R): Peter Maguire, Joe Stephenson, Bob Jackson, Terry Jackson, Tom Callan, Colin Atkinson, John Smith, Colin Westworth

Front Row (L-R): Tom Stephenson, Denis Brown (brother of Brenda Simpson), Ivan Anthony

Also in the picture are the Mayor (Councillor H. Butler), headmaster Mr Canneaux, Councillor Tom Holt and Harold Jones (behind Terry Jackson)
The William Smith Festival in 1949 saw the restoration of the centre ring stage events and another feature, egg rolling, was given a fillip by the fact that eggs were more plentiful as could be seen by the youngsters making their way to the Giant Axe proudly displaying their baskets of gaily coloured eggs.

The organisation of the Festival on lines approximating to the procedure in earlier days had been made possible by the action of the Corporation in deciding to augment the funds at the disposal of the Committee. Justification for this step was evidenced by the attendance and the interest evinced in every item on the agenda. From early morning until late afternoon the field was the scene of great activity particularly in the afternoon when several thousand people of all ages were present. The rain of the early morning occasioned some misgivings but fortunately it gave way to brighter conditions.

Greatest interest was, as usual taken in the football competitions, which commenced in the morning with the juniors followed in the afternoon by the senior games. There was also a good following for the girls' netball. The races had their supporters whilst in the centre ring acts highly amused the crowd, Punch & Judy being as ever a source of great enjoyment. The programme of instrumental music provided by the Lansil Works Band contributed its quota to the success of the day. One feature which could not be re-introduced on this occasion was the toy distribution for the “tiny tots”. Instead they were invited to attend a special performance in the Odeon Cinema. Fifteen hundred youngsters lustily cheered the Mayor, Councillor H. Butler, when he appeared on the stage and was introduced by Mr Smith, the secretary. Then they enjoyed a special film programme in technicolour which comprised two attractive cartoons, “The Butcher of Seville” and “Merbabies” as well as the full length feature film “Gulliver’s Travels”.

The responsibility for co-ordinating the desires of the Committee fell upon Mr A. J. Smith of Borwick Drive who had taken over the secretarial duties in succession to his father Mr F. H. Smith, who had retired after fulfilling duties for a quarter of a century.

The final of the football competition aroused great excitement, extra time being necessary in each case. Bowerham qualified for the final of the junior section beating Newton by three corners to two whilst Ryelands got the better of St Luke’s by 1 goal to 2 corners. Bowerham finally lifted the shield after extra time winning by 1 goal, 1 corner, to Ryelands School’s 1 corner.
In the senior section, Boys’ National went out in the semi-final to Dallas Road who won by 1 goal, 1 corner to nil whilst Skerton knocked out Greaves by 2 goals to 2 corners. The final was hard fought, the sides being level at the close of normal time. During the extra period Skerton secured the vital goal, winning by 2 goals to one.
The captain of Skerton Senior Football team being presented with the Shield in 1949 by the Mayor, Councillor H. Butler

The netball final resulted in a victory for the Girls Grammar School over Greaves Secondary Modern in 1949