

SOUTHWARK AT WAR

A BOOK OF MEMORIES COMPILED AND EDITED BY RIB DAVIS AND PAM SCHWEITZER

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Local Studies Library

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Cover photograph: A Heinkel over the docks in 1940. Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

Rear cover: Gas mask drill outside the Red Cross premises, 160 Peckham Rye, c 1939.

Courtesy of Mr & Mrs Charlesworth.

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SOUTHWARK AT WAR

This publication forms part of a reminiscence project to record and celebrate the lives of people in Southwark during the war years. Co-ordinated by Pam Schweitzer and Rib Davis of Age Exchange Theatre Trust and Reminiscence Centre for Southwark Libraries and Education Service

The project has involved many tape-recorded individual interviews, group interviews and discussions and the collecting of photos. These materials have then contributed to an exhibition held at the Elephant and Castle, a specially commissioned play *When the Lights Come on Again* which has played to young and old across the Borough, an education pack for use in schools and colleges, a permanent set of resources of tapes, photos and transcripts and, of course, this book.

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INTRODUCTION

What is now the Borough of Southwark has altered almost out of recognition in the years of this century. The most profound changes took place as a result of the Second World War, transforming forever not only the landscape but also the ways of life of the people of the borough. If we are ever to come to terms with the present we must have some understanding of the past, so this book not only marks the 50th anniversary of the end of the war - recording and celebrating the experiences of those who lived here through those momentous years - but also puts into perspective the lives we lead now.

History is very often presented as a series of famous names and events, but in fact we all play our part in creating - and living through - history; this book tells the story of the war years in Southwark using the words of ordinary local people. It was these 'ordinary' people who endured the day-to-day experiences of being under attack, coping with shortages, being shunted around the country. It is their memories which are presented here, along with photographs which also portray the everyday life of the borough. Some of the tape-recorded interviews we held were of individuals, some of groups, in which the reminiscences of one would jog the memories - good and bad - of another. We hope their stories may also jog your memory a little.

Southwark at War records a huge range of experiences, from the ferocious bombing of the industrial and dockland areas of the north of the borough in the early years to the fierce rocket attacks on the south towards the end of the war. We learn of women holding the fort, taking on new responsibilities, looking after each other and finding new comradeship. We learn of the enormous amount of work conducted by Civil Defence organisations, of firewatching involving men and women who were also doing other work in the

day. There was some fun to be had here during the war but also a huge amount of work.

Many Southwark children were, of course, evacuated during the war, some to idyllic rural life, rather more perhaps to places where they felt out of place or plain unwelcome. While the 'phoney war' continued many returned to Southwark, only then to find themselves at the heart of the Blitz. Once more large numbers left, returning again to London during the relative calm of the middle period of the war, yet this time soon finding themselves under rocket attack. All the traumas - and, in a few cases, the delights - of youth in wartime are reflected in their reminiscences.

Maintaining some sort of family life in this bombarded part of London was a hard business during the war. Menfolk were often abroad, children and perhaps older people in other parts of the country, women out to work. In addition there was the rationing and shortages to cope with. Yet the end of the war, the joyful but often painful reuniting of families and communities, also brought its own enormous problems in terms of both personal relationships and physical circumstances. Many young parents who had hardly seen each other for years had had their beliefs and assumptions radically altered by their wartime experiences. Now, crammed with their children into their in-laws' back room in Bermondsey or Peckham, they did not have an easy time of it.

It has been a privilege for us to meet these people and talk about their wartime experiences. We have been saddened, entertained, amazed and moved. We have also learned a great deal. We hope you gain as much from reading this book.

Rib Davis and Pam Schweitzer



A view looking north towards Tower Bridge across the Gainsford Street area of Bermondsey.

EVACUATION

We all thought there was going to be a full-scale war, panic stations. We all got ready to go away. When they announced it - they were evacuating us to Rye - I was on Denmark Hill station and all of us was there crying our eyes out. We'd all had to pack our bags for twelve o'clock. We were waiting to get on a train. In came the train and before we got on we heard the siren go. They thought they were going to come over right away and start bombing, so they bundled us all in the train and we didn't have time to say goodbye or anything. We were all pushed into the train and off we went. We didn't know where we were going. All the signs were all wiped out. You didn't know where you were. You couldn't say because if you opened your mouth you didn't know who was listening.

Mrs Bennett

We were in this church, sitting down there and some official person would come round and say, "This lady's going to take you." It was like an auction sale to me. "This person will take a mother and one child. This person has enough room for a mother and three children." Or, "This person will take you if you could do her housework."

Mrs Bennett

I had started to teach when war broke out. On the 1st September, I was teaching on the Old Kent Road: we were evacuated. There was lots and lots of children went. They came to school with their rucksacks on and things. From Waterloo station we were taken on a train to Yeovil in Somerset. When we got down there the reception was quite good. We were taken to the factory. They were making 'survival cheese'. They had milk, biscuits,

ready for the children and everybody. Then we were taken to a big school to be sent out to different homes. That's where the arrangements in Yeovil went wrong. Some of our children were put in one of the worst streets in Yeovil that you can imagine, really poverty stricken. One of our staff was put in a house where the sheets were dirty on the bed. She said, "I can't stay there."

Elsie Blenkey

I was chosen and my brother was chosen at the same time, which left my sister. I said, "I'm not going to go until my sister's got somewhere to go." We were supposed to be kept together. But nobody wanted three children. Anyway, she was fortunate enough. She was selected by a lady, a spinster, her and her sister lived together. They came up about half an hour, three quarters of an hour after we had been selected, which made it a lot easier. At least I knew I could write back home and say, "We've all got a place to go." Got somewhere to write to - this is the thing. Because some of them were left. They weren't chosen for two, three, four days, some of them, and they had to sleep at school.

Bill Winter

The horrible thing about it was you were taken all away, all put in a school hall and they came round and picked you out. If you looked nice, you were picked out. But if you were some poor little soul with nothing you were left.

They was outcasts among the village people because they were Londoners.

Southwark pensioner



*Evacuees returning to the Oliver Goldsmith School dispersal point in Peckham Road in June 1945.
Evacuation ended on 7th September 1944.*

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There was quite a lull and I came home for a while. I was home for the January raid and that made me go away again. Then I went to a place where I had the most awful old lady that anybody could ever have. It was a great big house and she wouldn't have evacuees. It was compulsory, but that was against her grain. She didn't like me and she really made my life a misery. I wasn't allowed to wind the clock up. And you would have a flannel for this, and another flannel for that. And I never knew which was which, and she always used to stand there and watch me! And of course my children then were wearing 'siren' suits - all in one. She said it was disgusting for a little girl to have trousers on.

She wasn't very happy at all with us. Then my husband had leave, and she wouldn't let him stay with me. That was it. I went home to London.

Kathleen Ash

I think all of the children from Alexis Street School were evacuated to Worthing. We were put in the house of a retired civil servant, a Mr. Askey, whom we called Grandad - he was 68 - and his young looking 64 year-old wife who we said was much too young to be called Grandma, and anyway we had grandmas at home thank you. Anyway, we called her auntie. I remember trying to speak very poshly to Mr and Mrs Askey, trying to explain that Pat (my schoolfriend who was billeted with me) had no 'tail' in her pack, meaning that she had no towel. No one could understand a dicky-bird I was saying! They were absolutely wonderful to us.

'Grandad' was very traditionally English. We used to go into town with him every other Saturday to change our library books, get our hair cut for sixpence. We had the traditional fringes and short sides, children at that time. He took us

Christmas shopping. It was absolutely marvellous. He was very routine minded. I remember having syrup of figs every Friday night. In those days, hot water was quite difficult to achieve so it was only one bath a week but we had it regularly. Pat and I invented games like hide-and-seek on the landing upstairs which was a bit difficult for them really but we enjoyed it.

The people in Worthing were as kind as they could be. I had no feeling that we were outsiders in any way.

Doreen Woods

The whole school was totally disrupted by the fact that the London school was given the school buildings for the morning of one week and the afternoon of the next week and the Worthing children were shunted out into Parish Halls for the time they couldn't use the school. It was either the London school was in residence or the Worthing school was in residence.

Doreen Woods

The place I got in, she didn't really want us. I'm working like a skivvy in there - and yet they were getting paid for our keep. I was washing up, doing the dinner and everything. They were paid for our keep. There was two girls there and a father. Those girls weren't very nice to me because I was planted on them and they didn't seem to make me welcome. I said, 'I'm going home.' And I did.

Pensioner at the Yalding Centre

We used to go off into the fields. During the war, we used to get a fortnight off from school and we all had to go potato picking. We picked the potatoes and we got sixpence for that. I think it was for a week! It wasn't very much - it's quite hard work bending down picking up potatoes. Then we would

get a week off for haymaking because most of the men had gone off to the war so they relied on the older children. We did haymaking and quite a bit of farmwork.

I loved it. I still keep friends with people we stayed with and I still go back to see them and I phone them every three months or so. I still like the country. Although I've come back and always lived in London, I did like it. It was lovely just to be able to roam down country lanes.

Doris Stevenson

48 Brandon Street
Walworth SE17
21st October 1941

Dear Nell,

Just a few lines in answer to your more than welcome letter. I was ever so pleased to hear from you. I wrote to you but I suppose our letters crossed in the post. Well dear, everybody's alright up to the time of writing. Nell, don't worry over me and don't think of coming home. It's very bad here and when I say so you know it is the truth because I don't make much of it. It was supposed to be a very quiet night last night, Monday, but when I came home this morning from the tube, I'm sorry to tell you that 76 Larcom Street, Mrs Miller's house and Mrs Kitchen's in Brandon Street were right down. Mrs Smith and Hilda Baylis's house in Charleston Street had been hit. Rodney Place, Rodney Road, Bronte Place, St Peters Church Liverpool Street, the crypt shelters under the church they say was faulting and Queen Street School is down and several other best of everything. It will all come right soon. So cheerio dear, good luck and God bless you and Doreen.

With fondest love and best wishes from your loving Mum and Dad.

BLACKOUT



Sandbags outside Abbey Buildings, Bermondsey Street in September 1939.

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I made my own blackout. Got the big sheets and rolled them up and down. Made it like blinds. We were up at the top of the house, and we only used to have little candles, never had the lights on properly.

Mrs Quinlan

My sister and I were over the West End and when we were going along, the sirens went off. As we were running "Aah!" I bashed right into this shelter in the road. My legs! And my knee, the shins went right into them. You couldn't see, no. Nothing at all. I don't know how we got there.

Pensioner at the Yalding Centre

I can remember my sister-in-law and myself were walking along and we banged into a lamp-post. I thought it was just me that banged myself, but she was bleeding and I had a great big lump on my eyebrow. We both walked into the same post and didn't know!

Mary Clouter

It was like a thick black cardboard and we use to make frames and they used to fix them, very posh, you know. We used to get up in the morning and take them down and put them up again at night.

Queenie Turner

You'd get so bothered about it, you'd go round making sure there couldn't possibly be a chink of light, and you'd go outside and look right through, and yet the warden would say, "There's a chink of light there!" And I remember a squabble going on in two houses, where the man on the other side would just see this tiny chink - well it wasn't as big as a cigarette. I shouldn't think the Germans would ever see that! And he'd say, "Oh, you're going to end up in prison! I'm going to get the policeman!" Oh, the racket that went on, it was amazing, it really was... and you'd get so worried that you'd pin them with drawing pins that went all the way round the edge.

Grace Smith-Grogue

This area was devastated, no question about that, so when you started out, you didn't know how far you were going to get, because you didn't know what the problem was - if there was a hole in the road, or a burst gas main or water main, electricity up the wall, or whatever. So you couldn't gauge a journey - you couldn't say, "Well, it'll take me half an hour to get there", because you never knew, it could take you all day! But generally speaking, you could move around.

Lil Patrick

You'd just stick your tape diagonally across the windows. Anti-blast tape. Some of it was like a hessian tape. A lot of it was paper with very fine hessian lining. These were small Georgian windows so it was a bit expensive. The idea was that instead of the shards flying through, at least it would hold a lot of it in one piece, the broken panes. We had what they termed 'good quality blackout material,' which was something very much like leatherette. It was good quality stuff. We didn't need to change it once during the war. We had it on a roll. We used to roll it up manually. Then of a night time, pull it down and put drawing pins in the side to make sure that it was closed up. There wasn't supposed to be any light shining. Any little chinks of light and someone would go, "Put that light out!"

Bill Winter

I was coming home from work, and the blackout was on, and it was a dreadful fog, absolutely dreadful. And I got off the bus - now you could not see your own hand! And my torch gave out, and you could not see - it was just like a black curtain, and you felt your way. It was before the copings were taken away - because they took the railings for the war - so we had copings down where I lived. And if somebody had a torch, they would help you along. I'd say, "Where am I?" - because you wouldn't know whether you were

across the road, that way. Absolutely that sticks in my mind, more than anything else, that particular night. It was ghastly! My sister was terrified, because I lived upstairs in her place, and she was waiting for me to come home. And then when I got to the turning, somebody said, "I think this is your turning," and I walked along, feeling my way. I knocked at three wrong doors before I found my own!

Bermondsey pensioner

Everybody was so kind. If you came along the road and it was blackout and people were there, they'd walk along with you. You never had any fear like you would today if you did it, even when the fogs was on. They'd walk along and some of the men in those days would say, "All right girl. Come along," and they'd walk along with you and we'd all walk along with any man that came along the road.

Doris Platt

We had some nice moonlit nights, which wasn't to our benefit because over would come the planes. There wasn't a lot of traffic. Bike lights, everything had a shade over the top. My sister lived down in Louth Road and I used to run down there to her in the blackout. You got used to it.

Mrs Bennett

One day I came back from Yorkshire for a week or two weeks. I came in and I forgot you had to black out everywhere. I had curtains. I could have done it easy, but I didn't. The Warden came up banging at the door and coming in and telling us, "Your light's shining out. We'll all get bombed." Being up in Yorkshire and never having to do it, I'd forgotten all about it and I didn't do it. Of course after that for a week or fortnight they just came up and did it for me. They was too scared that I'd forget, 'cause it was very serious.

Ivy Richardson