

AIR RAIDS AND SHELTERS

We came back to London on the Saturday, the day after there was the worst raid on London. I thought the war was over, because the city was alight, the city was still alight from the night before. There was just burning buildings everywhere and it got worse and worse and then we crossed the river towards the Elephant and Castle - it was dreadful.

There were still fires going and there was masses of debris everywhere and it took you ages to walk through a street because you were going all over the bricks with your suitcases. When we got to my mother's house, the house had gone. It had been bombed with an oil bomb and there was just a shell as you walked in and the staircase standing, and nothing. I couldn't find my mother, but she'd been sent to a rest centre.

Doris Platt

We had a beautiful shop in Tower Bridge Road my grandfather built, it was called the Tower Bridge Palace. And in his cellar, which was a big cellar, he barricaded it all up, and made a great big door which we put up near the end and sand-bagged it. At night we all went down there. And lots of our neighbours went down there, and people who lived nearby, and relatives up the road. We had beds made out along the wall. And we lived down there, and in the morning we used to come out and have a look round, see what was missing. One day the house next door but one was gone, and we didn't hear it go in the night! I mean we heard these noises all night - crash, bang, wallop - but all you say is "that's near" or "that's far".

Joe Scala

It was just wide enough in our shelter for me to lay like widthways. But of course, anybody who came down... There was my sister, had a sailor man-friend and he was about 5'10", six foot. What happened to him: he had to lay one way and you had to put your legs over his legs. Most uncomfortable. You'd die for six o'clock to come, for the all-clear, for you to get out and either you fell into your bed for an hour or you had a bit of a wash down.

Grace Shelford

The Anderson shelter was all full of spiders and earwigs. We had a couple of bunks, you know, to sleep, but we hardly ever slept in there. It was horrible, believe me. There was four of us: Mum and Dad, my sister and myself. It was damp, you would get little creepy crawly spiders.

Pensioner at Kennington House

My Dad had the shelter all blocked out. He had all that oak panelling all the way round - he used to do carpentry as a hobby. We had beds down there, blankets, a little fire for cooking down there, an Aladdin paraffin stove. We had all different foods stored there, all tinned stuff so that if you had to stay down there for days and days you could. And you got a water butt down there. It was lovely.

May Roberts

Down the tube we used to enjoy ourselves, used to have a sing-song. Everybody was friendly and you used to make the best of it down there. All different turns, singing and that. They loved my little boy, specially when he was in his uniform. I don't know why we used to go to Piccadilly

Circus. I don't know if we tried to get in nearer or if that was perhaps the only one we could get. Course you got your own place and you kept your own things there.

Mrs Quinlan

Coming home from Peek Freans one day, walking along the road - I can still see it now, the Messerschmidts came right down, and all the children were coming out of school - it was in our dinner hour. As we came through that turning the children were coming out, we could hear these planes above us and they dive-bombed the railway bridge in Galleywall Road. We got all the children what we could and run them in the Victory Pub and put them under the table. But I could still see that pilot as he came right down,

right onto the railway grinning. There was a helmet but you could see the grin on his face, that's how low he came. There was all the bullet holes all along the bridge.

Emily Lane

At Crosse and Blackwell's in Crimscott Street where I worked, they used to make us go down the shelter. But we lost such a lot of time that afterwards, when the raids wasn't so bad we worked 'till it got near, then they put us down the shelters. They had spotters on the roof and when the air raids were announced they'd watch the planes. When they got too near, they'd sound the alarm and we all went down to the shelters till the all-clear went. If it was dinner -time we'd run home.

Doris Stevenson



The devastation of Barrow, Hepburn and Gales leather manufacturers, in Grange Road, May 1941.

There was a rocket hit us. There was never any warning. Everything in our booking office where I worked, everything collapsed and all the tickets... It was a terrible mess. The first thing you knew was, you heard the explosion and then everything about you just collapsed. There was tickets everywhere. It was a muddle. You are just trembling and you don't know what's going on. They just came and put you in a car and take you to a depot and give you something and see that you're alright.

Ivy Richardson

And then in the morning when it was light we used to go out in the garden and pick up the bombs, the incendiary bombs. Some were blasted but some were not. My brothers used to throw them at one another laughing. It was dangerous. You wasn't allowed to keep them really.

May Roberts

My sister and sister-in-law's husband and his sister and whole family were all killed. They had got home on leave - he got married in the day time - and then they were all in the club in the night time all singing and dancing, then an air raid alert came on so they went down into the public shelter in Camberwell there. A land mine came on. If they had stayed in the pub they would have been alright. They were just all killed. The whole family got wiped out.

Mary Clouter

Alexander's, the timber yard was all ablaze. It was a blasting bomb, like a land mine type of bomb. It blew the shelters out of the ground, over the wall, into the canal. Not all of them - the ones down the other end of the road, fortunately, from where we were. And these shelters - I remember seeing

them floating in the canal. Some people were killed there. A lot of people just had their clothes blown off. Their clothes were completely blown off and they were naked. I saw one little girl who came along who had nothing on. They took my coat and wrapped it round her. It was my new coat - blue, and it had a blue hat. They took this coat off of me and wrapped it round her. She was okay, very shaken but not a mark on her. Just all her clothes were blown off of her. It's amazing.

We all went down to Spa Road arches. Our family knew 10-15% of the people that went in, personally. There were bunk beds - lower, middle, upper. As kids we would be sitting on top watching everything, to make sure that you could see above everybody else. It was a tremendous experience. It was like going up to the pictures and seeing your hero getting the best of whoever.

Bill Winter

My father had gone out into the shelter in Donaghue Estate and was coming back to the post. He'd just come out of Donaghue Estate down onto the pavement in Fort Road and he said it was blinding. He said all you heard was a heavy "Pheeeew." There was a big blinding white flash and the whole building shook in front of his eyes and started crumbling. Next thing was, he came to when they were pulling him out of the drain cover where he'd been blown by the blast, up over the railings. They hadn't taken the railings away. They were about five foot six tall. They'd blown him right the way up and he had landed about forty foot away from where he had originally started. He lived. He came down on an inspection plate, on one of the covers. Smashed it. He was head and shoulders down the drain when they found him.

Bill Winter

If we woke up in the night and we didn't have time to get down to the shelter or Dad thought it might not be a big heavy raid, we'd get under the table.

May Roberts

It was October 25th 1940, and my brother was out with his friends and they went into the local billiard hall which was also being used as a shelter with lots and lots of families in there that hadn't been evacuated. And the bomb came in through the railway line. I think 190 were killed that night. He was one that was injured. But he was unconscious and burnt, and it took us three days to find him because his identity card and driving licence and all those kind of things were stolen out of his jacket pocket. They probably used them for illegal purposes.

On the same night, our house - it wasn't bombed, but the blast had made it unusable, and so there was no way of securing it. And in the corner there was a bookcase, and my mother's brothers and sisters were clever and they'd had prizes from school. And one of the books was Walter Scott's novels, and each illustration had tissue paper over it, and it was beautifully bound. And that bookcase just disappeared with all its contents.

Lil Patrick

AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS

We had to fire-watch once a month. I'm afraid we enjoyed ourselves when we had to fire-watch because it wasn't very far from a pub - there was two girls and about four of the men had to do it. We used to shoot up to the pub and all sit up there and when a siren went we all had to rush down.

Doris Platt

There were a lot of fire and incendiary bombs at that time, a lot of them. And we had a rota for night duty, to watch.

You dumped them in buckets of sand. I can remember going out onto a flat roof with all these buckets, and putting out the incendiaries. Apart from fire-watching, we played table tennis! There was table tennis in the Town Hall - in the Council Chamber. I was keen on table tennis. I can remember all the seats around it! After that, they put it in the basement, but it wasn't so good - we liked the atmosphere in the Council Chamber! And as long as somebody was watching, you could play table tennis, and then have your turn at watching.

There were about ten of us per night, watching for bombs. And if there were more than we could cope with, then we had to phone to get some assistance.

Edna Davis

I remember it. I was on ARP. There was a shop on the corner of our road, a laundry. We used to sleep on the racks of the shop. Because we had to be on duty, you see. We thought it was great fun.

Southwark pensioner

I was supposed to do fire-watching, but my husband got me out of that. He said I wasn't doing it. Why should I look after other people's property? I didn't do it.

Ethel Cadge

I was a telephonist, sending out the services you know, the police, to rack off the area and whatever was required, the rescue, the fireman and the van that collected the dead bodies. It could be rather gruesome really. You had to take an exam for it. I loved it. I didn't want the war to go on for ever, but the companionship among us was great.

Pensioner at Kennington House

Whenever the warning went, we had to report. Whether it was our turn on duty or not, we all turned up. You were all available. The rest of the time you had duty rotas, so that there was always a presence there. And this was in the early hours of the morning. My patch was Tooley Street, around the foot of Tower Bridge, around the wharves and around that area, and I was standing in the shelter at the block of Devon Mansions - flats in Tooley Street which are still there - and we saw this thing come over. It was making this dreadful noise and we saw it come over, and we said, "Three cheers, that's one we've got!" - thinking it was an aircraft that had been brought down by anti-aircraft fire, and it went on and on. And it took from that time, which was the early hours of the morning, until about mid-afternoon before we actually found out what it was that was happening to us. Yes, it was quite frightening.

Lil Patrick

Where I worked, we would leave off work at 5 o'clock and sign on at 5.30 for fire-watching. It came a turn around every ten days and we split it because it was a big building and there was eight on each fire watching. We had little beds. It was a nuisance sleeping there all night when they were sending bombs down, but if your turn came around you had to turn up on a Sunday night as well.

Mrs Ward

Going back one day, walking towards the Elephant when we lived in Peckham, during the night there'd been a really heavy raid, bombs were dropping all round. I walked along towards the New Kent Road, along Old Kent Road. I turned the corner there, and there's two buses, one with its front up against the wall and the other one was on its side. There was wardens and ambulances. The ambulances they used weren't like today's ambulances, they were just vans with a sheet over them. One was just pulling them down, others were loading up people. The one that was just pulling away, a fella there had got another body he wanted to put on. He said, "Another one here Charlie." He said, "Sorry. Full up. Be back in a minute." I carried on walking down towards the Elephant. You just took it in your stride. It was happening so much all around you that you took it as a natural thing almost.

Southwark pensioner

I think all through the war you will find this: most people will say the mothers were the focal point. My Dad didn't go into the army but he spent most of the war either fire-spotting or on warden patrol. Your mother was the one, and your grandmother. Grandmothers were a great mainstay. I view my grandmother with great affection because she

was our second mother, you might as well say. Although we saw Dad, he was a fleeting figure at times because he'd come in and he'd have his shave and after a night of being out patrolling the sector of bombing he'd be off to work. By the time he came home in the evening, we were packed off down the shelter to go to sleep again.

Doreen Davis

The worst bombing was Stainer Street arch. I had a relation who was on the Rescue, he was a civilian. He was too old to go in the army, he was a foreman on the Council. They made them rescue people who were bombed out. He was never right for two or three months after what he saw in there. Where you get the railway arches, Stainer Street and Druid Street, there was all people in there because it was a shelter. The bomb went right through first and then exploded inside. It was all arms and legs all over the place. He was really bad for two or three months with shock. It is well known amongst old Bermondsey people because hundreds got killed in there. They reckoned nearly everybody in Abbey Street lost somebody.

Joe French

In the daytime I worked in a bank in the City, and at night time, after I was registered, I was put in the fire service, for nights. I didn't go out - I was in the control room, sending the others out. I thought it was a bit hard actually, because I had to stay on the phone all night and the crews all went into the shelter in the garden. I had to sit in control. And if you had any trouble they had these little 'Green Goddess' fire engines - it was a sort of van, green.

Jeanne Quick

I got a job on the Council as an ambulance driver because there was a man away on holiday. I remember going to Guinness's buildings in Page's Walk. I was supposed to stay with the lorry. There was a huge bomb dropped there. So I went in, I don't know what floor it was on - it's so long ago - and there was a woman sitting by the fire with a little baby, looking at the baby. I said, "Come on lady, you can come out now. It's more or less clear." They were dead. The shock. Like that. And her husband - this is true - was embedded in the wall. The blast had - right in the wall. As they pulled him out all his clothes and flesh was left on the wall.

Leonard Whitlock

I wasn't called up. I was more or less 'reserved' working for the public utilities. I was working on the London Fire Brigade. On the outbreak of war I was putting extra appliances in school buildings because the Fire Brigade then moved into the schools permanently. They appealed for volunteers. You went to the headquarters and then you got posted. I joined as a volunteer and I went to New Cross Fire Station. In addition to that I used to do fire watching on the Gas Company's show-rooms. Then I had to join the Home Guard. So it was quite busy really.

Mr Samson

My uncle was in the Auxiliary Fire Service, and we made a game of when a fire bomb dropped, to get there and put it out within ten seconds - you had to get on your hands and knees, crawl, get there within ten seconds, put a sandbag on it and run away. And then if it exploded, that would kill the explosion... I done that twice, twice I did that. And I'll never forget. I cut a very heroic figure once, because Bermondsey in those days, you

could smell Bermondsey. When you got near Bermondsey, there was three smells: you could smell Hartley's jam factory during the day time - beautiful, oh, this beautiful strawberry jam being made! - and a biscuit factory, Huntley and Palmers biscuit factory. But all day long, the pervading smell of leather; it was an area where leather was being tanned. And the other smell was vinegar. Up near Tower Bridge there was a big vinegar distillery, Sarsons I think, and you could smell that. And we used to go out at night and we used to have these adventures, and dash about and do all these things; and one night there was a couple of girls with us, and I thought, "Right now, this is my big chance!" and I charged off to do something brave in Bermondsey! And it was all dark - there was no lights on except fires burning, and then I ran across the road, and as I ran, I suddenly disappeared, and I put my foot in a thing where the firemen got the water from to put the fires out - the hydrant thing. And I put my foot down there, and I had a wellington on and it got all full up with water and it ruined my night! Everyone was laughing, so I had to try something else to impress the girls.

Joe Scala



Civil Defence training in 1940: how to put out a fire.

FOOD AND RATIONING

You joined a queue, and you didn't know what you were queuing for sometimes! Everybody joined a queue.

Deborah Playne

If ever you saw a queue, you joined in - you didn't know what it was you were queuing for.

Iris Wilkins

Over the road there was a beautiful veg and fruit shop, Michael's. Their girl, the middle girl that was the same age as my David, they used to go up to school together. They got very friendly and he liked her and she liked him. She used to say to David, "Tell your mum that Dad's having the oranges in tomorrow". So I knew before anybody else knew, the day to go up and you lined up and you could get things. That's how we existed. We just had to.

Ivy Richardson

The messages used to go around, you know, "They've got bananas down there, and oranges up here! You're only allowed one!", and then the queue would form, and you'd have this long queue. The fish queue - that really was something! You can imagine the shortage of fish. Groves', down near St James' Church - "He's having fish in this morning" - so you'd get in the queue. And it could be miles long! And you'd move along slowly as he sold the fish, and probably, by the time it got to your turn, that was the last, and you were just too late. You'd stood there for a couple of hours, you know, and there was no fish left!

Lil Patrick

We used to have corned beef sausages and pork pies that my father used to sell in the shop. Once we was indoors and my Dad came down and said, "There's a bit of meat for you. Put this meat in the oven." So Mother put the meat in the oven. He sort of had this look and he said, "We've got a bit extra this week. I don't know how." Anyhow she put this meat in the oven and she'd just about got it ready to put in when the street doorbell went. When he went and opened the street door this lady said, "I haven't had my rations this week." Well, father got the meat out and off she went with it. We ended up with corned beef.

Member of Southwark Pensioners group

Opposite where I lived there used to be a very nice shop where they sold butter and eggs and things and I didn't get the egg ration which I thought I should. The eggs were in but I wasn't getting mine. And when I asked her about them, sort of insisted, she was being a bit funny - "Smash yours when I get them." And I said, "And I'll smash your face for you as well." But on the whole you didn't get temperish.

Mrs Quinlan

I think we got better food in as much as that you could always go in and get a cooked breakfast, even if it was only egg on toast, or some streaky bacon. I don't think the civilians could do that - their rations never ran to it. And there was always a sweet! I'm sure the civilians never had enough food to have a sweet everyday. So I think we were better fed.

Mary Gibson



Girls from Southwark Central School gardening while evacuated to Newton Abbot, Devon. They are being visited by Mr Davies, Chairman of the London County Council.

15

They dug up the grass outside our flats and they said we could have an allotment and people had these terrific allotments so we decided we were going to have one. So we had this square outside our bedroom and we put carrots in and different things in and then we was playing a game one day and we decided to play cooking, so we dug up all the carrots and ate them!

Member of Irish Club at Amigo Hall

I had an aunty living in Guildford who we visited from time to time, just to keep in touch. You know, eggs appeared, and they used to keep chickens. It was great to have an egg - you thought you were really.... it was luxury!

Then when we worked over at Highbury, we had to go into the cafe for our dinner. We had baby's head - that's what they called it. And it was a little individual meat pudding, it was made from bullock's cheek. And we had rice with custard on it. You know, all the men used to come in and shout out, "baby's head and two!" That's meat pudding and two veg.

Lil Patrick

I used to go up every Saturday to Nunhead, and walk up and back, and queue up to get horsemeat. Horse flesh. We had it. It was quite nice! They didn't know what I was feeding them!

Nell Todd