

Memories of The Blitz and After 1939 to 1945

by Robin W. H. Bonsall

The author spent the War years as a schoolboy, living in a house at Woodford Wells with his parents and older brother Brian. The family was on holiday in Minehead when War was declared (3rd Sept 1939) and returned to a very different way of life.

When we returned home all the windows in the house had to be prepared for “the blackout”. Nearly all our windows were of the sliding sash variety with some fitted on the inside with sliding wooden shutters. These had never been used in our lifetime, but they had to be hauled up out of their wooden casings, and fitted with new sash-cords. So that not even the tiniest chink of light might be seen by a sharp-eyed German pilot, thick black cardboard was tacked over the gap left at the top of the shutters, and small adhesive labels stuck over the small holes, provided for locking pegs, where the shutters met. One of them remained fifty years later.

A network of Air Raid Warden’s Posts was constructed, the nearest one to us being on the little raised ‘plateau’ at the mouth of Sydney Road, while another was at the junction of the Epping New Road and the road to Buckhurst Hill, just beyond Bancroft’s School. The road layout was more of a simple ‘Y’ junction in those days and the post was set back behind an old stone horse-trough (situated at the apex of the ‘Y’) looking up the High Road, towards London.

A Public Trench Shelter was dug, on The Green, at the top of Inmans Row, and the depression left when it was filled in can still be traced. Every household which had a garden was offered an Anderson Shelter, made of stout galvanized corrugated steel, which was to be partially buried, and the top covered with the excavated earth. Not being in a main target area, we turned it down, as none of us fancied sleeping out in the cold and damp, at the bottom of the garden.

Of all the early defence measures, by far the most impressive, and even beautiful, was the “Balloon Barrage”. If we looked towards London from our garden, we could see the outer balloons floating high and serene, and strangely peaceful and reassuring, particularly when the sun was glistening on their silver fabric.

An air-raid siren was mounted on the roof of Woodford Police Station which, in those days, stood at the top of Mornington Road, on the site now occupied by Mews Close. On the first occasion the siren was sounded I was in the back garden and its first deep growling notes rapidly rose to an ear-splitting, wailing crescendo which filled the air, forcing me to retreat rapidly indoors.

When the assault on London began in earnest, there was a raid every night for at least two months. Our first real scare was on the night of 14th August 1940 when we plainly heard the throbbing note of a German plane approaching, growing ever louder and more menacing. When almost overhead the engine note suddenly rose as though it was diving and we caught a faint descending whistle, which rapidly grew to a shrill crescendo, totally enveloping us and blotting out all else. There was a shattering explosion and a violent shock as everything heaved and moved like an earthquake. Even the coats hanging in the hall blew sideways, and a faint haze of dust hung in the air, but we soon realized that the house appeared to be intact. The next morning we discovered that the bomb had fallen several hundred yards away, in Sydney Road, at a point about 50 yards below the junction with Friary Lane, damaging a stable building, and just inside the entrance gates of about the only property which stood on that left side of the road.

The closest missiles of the whole war, fortunately just 2lb incendiaries, fell in the mouth of Barclay Oval across the main road from us, throwing a white glare through the glass panel of the front door. Brian and I were excited to find the base of the container (from which the incendiaries were released) in the flower bed in the front of the house. It was painted a dark cream colour, and the small circular marks made by the noses of the bombs could clearly be seen on the paintwork. To our intense annoyance, our parents insisted that it be handed in to the Police, although there was nothing remotely 'secret' about it!

During a raid we were constantly straining our ears to hear the chilling sounds of falling bombs and, in most cases, we could judge that they were sufficiently far away not to pose a threat. Several of the nearer bombs were either delayed action, or duds. When these struck the ground, instead of the expected shattering explosion, there was a jolt, followed by a prolonged shuddering of the ground when one could literally feel the bomb burrowing deep into the earth. One such fell near the mouth of Sydney Road where it joins Sunset Avenue, others in the grounds of Harts Hospital, at the bottom of The Green and one on The Green at the top of Monkams Avenue.

Easily the most devastating weapons of The Blitz were the parachute mines which were quite haphazard and indiscriminate. Three of these mines fell close enough to give us a severe shaking. The first fell on 27th September in Lords Bushes, close to Knighton Lane and Monkams Lane, causing severe blast damage in the houses fronting the High Road, and to many other properties. The closest mines to us fell on 16th November in the area around Tudor Close and the third mine fell on 5th January 1941 in Charter Road, in the area behind the Sir Wilfred Lawson Hotel which stood back from the Woodford High Road, beyond The Castle and at the top of Chingford Lane. We also had friends who lived in Eastwood Road, South Woodford, who had the awful experience of having a mine fall at the end of their road, but failing to explode because the parachute caught up in a tree. There it hung, precariously, until the Naval team came to render it safe.

One night there came the swelling rush of falling bombs and they were going to be close! There was the most tremendous crash and the whole house jolted and swayed. A large glass fronted cabinet, full of books, hanging on the bedroom wall, was jolted off its hooks and crashed four feet to the floor and there was a thud and rumble from the roof above us. In the morning we discovered that a chimney pot had fallen onto the roof above our bedroom and bounced off to land over the wall in the Convent Garden. The bombs had fallen in Sunset Avenue almost opposite what became Parkmore House, although another house stood there in 1943. Although these bombs had fallen further away than the earlier ones in Sydney Road, their blast effect seemed much greater, possibly due to the increased efficiency of the explosives at that late stage of the war.

We did not know then that the most frightening episode of all was yet to come - the V1, Flying Bomb, or "Doodlebug". It was in daylight, on 23rd June 1944, when we heard the awful rumbling sound approaching before the booming explosion. The bomb fell in Empress Avenue, near the bottom of Salway Hill, South Woodford, and there were many casualties. Two days later, another fell, comparatively harmlessly, on Ashton Playing Fields, Woodford Bridge, but on the following day, 26th June, a "Doodlebug" fell in Broomhill Road, near the top of Snakes Lane, demolishing much of the Congregational Church, which then stood where the Sir James Hawkey Hall now stands. A local coal merchant, his wife and six year old son, sitting in a lorry outside the Church were all killed. Three days later, on 29th June, a second bomb fell near the wreckage of the Congregational Church. Brian was walking past the Traveller's Friend pub and, as the "Doodlebug" approached he crouched down by a low garden wall. The engine cut, and he was aware of a dark line racing towards him up The Green. This was the visible blast wave of compressed air which hit him seconds after the explosion. The Church was damaged beyond repair, although the tower with its spire was left standing, relatively intact, only to be demolished after the War.