

Extract from ten year-old David Whittle's diary of 1942 that describes the blitz of Coventry City in 1940/41 provided by his brother Ian Whittle.

At this point in the narrative, I would like to inject some relevant text derived from my brother David's 1942 'Journal' written during the year after the broken leg affair. He was only ten when he began writing – turning eleven in May that year.

The journal begins on March 19th when he felt well enough to write after suffering from whooping cough and being bed-ridden for several weeks. The purpose of reproducing these extracts is to relate our grandmother's harrowing description of the Luftwaffe's 'Blitz' of Coventry City in November 1940 and again in April 1941. The story has been dictated in stages. The text is reproduced without corrections to the few spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. The original handwriting is clear and bold – a creditable achievement for a boy of his age:

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He was soon in bed again with a high fever and stayed there for the next several days. The journal continues sporadically during March and April but is taken up in earnest in July:

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I hear that we will be having a dozen new boys next term which will bring the number up to thirty-five, as it is only a small school.

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We have been making gooseberry jam, I myself helped, eating them at the same time.

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I remember this tunnel very well. It was indeed a prodigious work. We called that part of the garden "The Digging Place". I cannot remember if David put in any supports to prevent us being buried alive. One hopes he did!

He continues:

It's beautifully sunny this morning, and warm.

My grandmother is writing a story about the Coventry blitz, while I write it down. It is quite a good story too.

By the way I forgot to mention that I went inside the tunnel. I only went down two and a half yards where there is a turning point and it becomes very narrow. Anyway I was astonished to see some funny white stuff on the wall at the corner. I could not make it out, so I named the tunnel the 'Haunted Tunnel of Broom' for the name of the house was Broomfield.

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The 'Old Man' alias Mr Attock alias the head master told me with some other chaps to role (roll) the cricket pitch twenty times over, only half of us were titches and the roler (roller) was a big heavy one. We missed four times over of the pitch because it was awfully heavy.

After the dinner we were able to have brake (break) and in that half hour we did our gardens. I was in with a gang of chaps who call themselves the 'United Gardeners'. The 'Old Man' was in a bait (bate) because we hadn't put sticks to our tomatoes.

By the way it has come back to me, that the very first diggings of 'The Haunted Tunnel of Broom' were round about this date: 15th April 1942. That is very near the exact date.

We have been getting on with my grandmother's book nicely. In fact I will relate it daily. Here is the first bit.

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At the time we were reading, and all of a sudden we heard a dreadful bang. Up we jumped and went into the hall where more people were assembled from the other flats. We stared at each other in dismay, and agreed to go downstairs. What was our horror to find the place smothered in smoke. The brother and sister who lived in this flat told us how whilst in bed (by the way it was early about 9:30 only they were tired) they heard the window crash, and a dreadful noise. Having no curtains to the window, they had to dash in without a light. They found the couch burning and the carpet. An incendiary bomb had dropped in. One of them having picked up a cushion and grabbed the bomb, they threw it into the yard.

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A man came to our house today and bought a box of gooseberrys.

Grandma's story is taken up again:

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The brother and sister who lived in the flat came to spend the night with us.

That was the first shock we had.

The personal journal resumes:

We have had the History exam today.

I have lost my cap at school and have had to borrow a cap off one of the borders (boarders).

I am now sitting writing at my grandmothers Mahogany desk with a big bottle of ink in front of me as well as a silver plated vase. And piano about a foot away from me which was once my grandmothers. I am in the spacious lounge of Broomfield. On the four walls there are four or five pictures, one of which was painted by my mother herself.

Adorning the tables and window sills and the mantle shelf are photographs one of which is my father as a Flying Officer, while another small one shows him in America as a Wing Commander.

The photograph of Father in the USA must have been sent by post as he didn't arrive back from his trip there until mid-August.

Grandma's story continues in the July 23rd entry:

My husband went to Chester on business not very long after the first do. So I went to my daughter's house to stay. (Broomfield) About three nights after that Coventry encountered the first big blitz. It was a piece of good fortune that I was not there.

We were up all night in Rugby, which was twelve miles from Coventry, and could see flashes in the sky and we knew poor Coventry was being hit.

I remember this well; being allowed to stay up and made to wear my 'Siren Suit'. This was a children's top-to-toe garment designed to be put on quickly in case of an unexpected air raid. We all stood on the tennis court and watched the dreadful progress of German bombers amongst the explosions of anti-aircraft artillery and probing searchlight beams. We saw the ever-expanding glow in the sky above the agony of the city. For me, just turned six, it was a mixture of excitement and horror. For my parents and grandparents, it must have been terrifying and deeply distressing. Sadly, there was a dearth of British fighter aircraft available to help counter the attack.

The personal journal resumes with various anecdotes of school life and then takes up the story again on July 24th:

This went on all night and no one went to bed. Even the house in Rugby shook.

I intended to go back by bus after lunch, but that was impossible, they would not allow anybody into Coventry. On the Saturday, for the blitz was on the Thursday, my husband and Wing Commander Whittle (who is my son-in-law) went by car to Coventry. They had a job to get in because of the inspections. If it hadn't been for Wing Commander Whittle, my husband would not have been able to get in. And what a sight it was to see. There was no water gas or electricity, and one main street that had some splendid shops was completely blitzed. Nothing to be seen but bricks and debris and as I and my daughter went to see it our eyes filled with tears. Again we walked down another street which was nothing but mud and water where the pipes had burst. Most of the shops were in a dreadful state.

Now we visited the flat. The windows were all crashed in, and heaps of glass was on the floor. It looked very desolate, and so had to be left until the windows were put in.

We didn't return there until the new year owing to the cleaning of the flat, the windows having to be put in, and no gas or electricity, and the water wasn't drinkable. We were very pleased to return to our home, but not for long.

I forgot to relate I visited one road where my friends lived, and I stood in consternation as I looked at the destruction. They were large houses, and every one was damaged, some down to the ground. In one house we saw a parrot's cage hanging. In another we could see the furniture which must have blown into the gardens. In another house, the father mother and three children went down into the cellar, as they thought for safety but the water pipes burst and they were drowned.

The story continues under the entry for Sunday 26th July:

We had a little piece (peace) in the flat for a short time, but in April we had the great blitz. The last and the worst came on April 7th and April 9th.

April 7th is the night I shall never forget. We went to bed very early just to have a little rest before the usual bombing began. Luckily we had not undressed when we heard the alert. I thought to myself I must get up this time, but when we heard a bomb come whizzing down and guns going we seized a suitcase and together went with the two ladies from the upper flat, we rushed into the downstairs hall, taking with us deckchairs to sit on and rugs. At 9:15 the lights went out and we were in utter darkness. The bombing began in earnest and we were terrified. Windows breaking and doors were flung off their hinges, while several screams were heard from the other side of the road. This lasted without any stops until 5:15 A.M. and then came the final blow. A bomb dropped somewhere very near, and that shattered the outer door to the entrance hall. It was rent into splinters, and a door just near us belonging to the other flat came off and we thought our end had come. Anyway we were spared that night for no other bomb dropped. A warden put his head in and asked if we were all right.

The personal journal continues with a descriptive account of further work on the Haunted Tunnel of Broom and mentions that I broke a Dutch Hoe "trying to use for what it was not meant."

On Monday July 27 the story concludes as follows:

After that although the all clear hadn't gone we went outside, and what a sight met our eyes. The road was covered with debris and glass. So very downhearted, we went upstairs into the lounge. The all clear had gone by then. Glass was thick all over the carpets and the furniture. We lay on the bed with our clothes on until 7:00 in the morning and then got up.

It was raining very hard and with no doors in the flat it was bitterly cold. It took me all morning to gather the glass in the buckets from the carpet and then throw it outside.

I was very tired indeed. Then my husband and I decided to go to Rugby to stay with our daughter.

Whilst in Rugby there was another big air raid on the Thursday night. The people outside could feel the heat from the dense fires which lit up the sky.

We little knew when we started to go to Coventry on the Friday morning, our house had gone. It was very hard to get there, the policemen stopped us, and said that only doctors were allowed to go into Coventry that day.

So we all got out of the bus and we were preparing to walk when another bus came along and took us in a roundabout way. Of course we did not know that the flat had gone until we really came to it. A bomb had dropped on the house next door and brought all of ours down with it with the exception of the back bedroom and part of the lounge.

Every house in the road had been hit. Some were standing up like shells, the inside having vanished.

About two houses higher up, three people had been killed, and next to that, two. It looked like 'no man's land'. Many people came to see the ruins and they all looked very sad.

We got some men to do a bit of rescue work. Our kitchen had not been hit, so they set about and rescued my stock of provisions, and other items belonging to the room of which I was very grateful.

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It seemed strange to see everyone in the flats looking for all the bits they could save.

On that day we stayed in Rugby till 27th of July 1942. And during that period we were very happy.

So concludes our popular Grandmother's narrative as dictated to my brother. The journal continues on and off with personal activities until 1943.

A small boy's diary - The Blitz of Coventry City

Share your story here: (Please note there is a character limit on this box. If your story is more than 10,000 characters long, you should upload your story as a separate document instead.)

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