

My Memories of the Blitz in WW2

We are close to the 80th anniversary of the worst of the raids on Plymouth which were on 21st and 22nd March 1941. I note the date in my mind each year but this anniversary will be more notable than most.

It seems a good time to write down my memories of the Blitz. I was a little less than three years old in March 1941 and so although I remember events, I am not sure of the sequence or of the dates when they happened. Historic details of what happened; how many injuries and deaths; amount of damage can all be found elsewhere. Of course the bombing of Plymouth started much earlier, the first bomb being dropped on 6 July 1940 and the last was on 30th April 1944. I remember details of that.

The event of our evacuation, which I have often told, was, I think, on 22nd March. The Air Raid Warden knocked on our door at some point after the raid was over and told us that we must leave at once as there was an unexploded bomb in a house up the street. It was number 8 and we were 29, and so not close, but no one would know the power of an individual bomb. The one in Exeter in March 2021 has taught us that. I think I remember being in my pram and going around in the dark – unusual for me. We went to 4 Restormel Terrace where Mr & Mrs Stephens lived. My father and his brothers had lodged there before his marriage, and they went to Mutley Baptist Church, as did my parents. It was not far. Apparently they said “Yes you can come in and stay, but we have had a lot of the ceilings blown down in the bombs last night. We have sent our two sons to their grandparents near Kingsbridge”. They, and we, lived very near to the station and so were targets.

As well as my parents there was my maternal grandmother. Her home was Cambridge, and being near the east on the country, was assumed in 1939 would be a likely target for bombs. Plymouth would be safer. No one imagined that France would capitulate to the Germans and that bombers would attack west and northern Britain from bases in northern France.

The next day my father's manager suggested we go and lodge with him at Ringmore, near Bigbury. He was a widower and lived with his mother-in-law, Mrs Rutherford. Her husband had been the doctor at either Modbury or Ivybridge. They had a maid who came each day – I remember her. I also remember they had about 7 cats but only two had four complete legs and tail. The others had lost bits in traps. I suppose they roamed the fields and got into traps set for rabbits. We were there until October and returned when there was a bit lull in the bombing. Also, my grandmother had 'heart trouble' and it was a long way to call the doctor from Modbury.

I gather we were almost the only ones living in our street. Most families would leave Plymouth in the evening to sleep in surrounding villages with friends, or in church or school halls or even in hedgerows, to avoid the nightly bombing. Day light raids were fairly rare. There were also false alarms because bombers were going over us to get to Swansea, Cardiff and so on. Then more alarms when the bombers came back. I'm told that I was having a hair cut at Spooners when there was a day time air raid warning and we got to their shelter until the 'All Clear' and then finished the hair cut. This must have been early in the war because Spooners was bombed in March 1941.

We had a cellar under the house and that was our air raid shelter. When the Air Raid Warning sounded everyone had to go to an air raid shelter and stay there until the All Clear was sounded. Our street was a bit of a slope and alternate houses had quite big cellars. It was two long terraces – even one side and odd numbers the other. Ours was the alternate that was not supposed to have a cellar, but my father – being in the ironmongery trade – knew the builders and persuaded them to dig out a cellar. It was not very big and adults could not stand up in it. There was no heating, of

course, but a lot of blankets on planks of wood on the bare cement. A trap door had been cut in the floor of the kitchen to gain access without going outside. This was a dangerous thing to do. One night my mother wanted to go to the outside loo in our yard and she put on a tin toy helmet that I had. When she came back there was a dent in the helmet where shrapnel had fallen. We've still got that shrapnel, and it would have killed her if she had not worn the helmet. Shrapnel is very sharp and coming down very fast. I learned my nursery rhymes in the cellar!

Another story I have often told was one I do not remember personally but was told. My father would go up to the kitchen now and then to make a cup of tea for everyone. One time he came down and said "There's no electricity". Later he went up to the kitchen again and came down saying "There's no gas". To this my mother said "Don't come down next time and say there is no water". We were without gas for six weeks. We had been connected to the gas works at Cattedown and they were bombed and we had to wait until we were connected to the one at St Levan's Road. It was probably at this point that my mother persuaded my father to get carpenters at his work to make a hay box which we used a lot. We also had a Primus stove.

Our house had a small front garden and a wall separated this from the street. It was low, and on it was an iron ornate railing and the path had a similar iron gate. Between our house and next door were two long metal railings from the post between the gates, up to the house. One day I saw men cutting down everybody's gates and railings and I asked my mother what was going on. The metal was being taken away for the war effort. Some people got wooden fences to replace the lost ones but we did not. It rather depended on the drop to the garden – we were on a hill.

One day we had a visitor. He was shown in to the front room so I could tell he was not a friend. We didn't use the front room at all and that may have been due to the bomb damage, or because it was another room to find blackout for. After he had gone I was told "We are going to have someone to live with us". It was the Billeting Officer from the Womens Auxilliary Air Force. So we had a WAAF to stay. We had Miss Southward and then Miss Toye who stayed longer. They had the small box room; grandma had the back bedroom and my parents had the front bedroom. I was in their room in either a big cot or a camp bed until probably mid 1944. The WAAF lady got transport from probably Mutley Plain quite early and worked at RAF Mount Batten until quite late and had transport back. I suppose she had a day off sometimes. I remember she took me to St Gabriel's Church, Peverell to a service.

Blackout was important and if you had a light showing, the Air Raid Warden would come and tell you of it and you could be fined. I remember my mother feeling against the blackout in the bedroom after we had come back up after an air raid. She said she was feeling to see if any glass was broken by a blast. We only had a little blast damage. In the front bedroom upstairs, plaster came down around the chimney breast and window glass was broken and a wooden window frame a bit splintered. In the downstairs front room a window was badly splintered and couldn't be opened. I don't think it was enough to claim War Damage Compensation later on.

I remember going on the buses, of course. A lot had a piece of wood in place of glass. There had been a big bomb at the Milehouse Depot and there is a press photograph of a bus on the roof – from the blast. Glass could not be obtained so we had to do with wood – and it rattled in the frame!

I remember the city centre being flat over an enormous distance – as can be seen in press photos. It seemed normal as I don't remember it as being built up. Later, the first pre-fab (prefabricated house) was built in one corner of the bombed sites near the Guildhall for people to go in and examine it. Always long queues and we didn't go it. Later saw on in detail just before its completion,

in Central park Avenue. St Andrew's Church was roofless and in the spring daffodils grew along the aisles where pews would have been.

I don't remember much details of air raids, although there were plenty. There had been an air raid destroying houses at the bottom of Sutherland Terrace and Ermington Terrace and chips in the pavement opposite. They were there for years after. Also, one Sunday we went by bus somewhere and passed the Western National Depot which was on the left just before Laira Bridge. I think I was going with my father to Hooe Baptist Church where he was to preach. There had been a direct hit on the Saturday night and a lot of damage and glass everywhere. I later learnt this was the last air raid, Saturday 30th April 1944.

I remember the end of blackout. It was probably later in 1944. It was about when grandma went back to Cambridge. We three went for a bus ride when it was dark and there were street lights. I remember Wilton Street having so many lights. I'm sure it meant we didn't have to bother with blackout in the house.

By this time I was old enough to note things and remember them. I had started school after Easter in 1943. I was supposed to go to Hyde Park School, but there had been some bomb damage and I went instead to Public Primary School, North Road (West). By the way, Christopher did his food service training in the restaurant there which was in the room which had been my first class room – in the corner of the building – when it was CFE Catering School. Later it was part of the School of Ciropody and I lectured in that same room. The building had been Plymouth Corporation Grammar School and it still says that in the stone work – apartments now..

I'm not sure how it was that my father was not called up. One day he tapped the newspaper and said to me "If they do THAT Daddy will have to go away in the forces". Even so, everyone did their bit on the Home Front. We had an allotment to grow vegetables and that did very well, right up to the early 1960s. My father was also a Special Constable, attached to the Octagon Police Station and their area was from the Union Street bridge (where the Pavilions is now) to the Stonehouse Bridge. He did so many evenings a week after work until midnight.

There were frequent marches of troops through the town and I suppose they were announced. Anyway, I can remember going with my mother to see a lot of them – usually at Pennycomequick, along Stuart Road. I suppose many were US troops and I suppose they sang as they marched. This was in the lead-up to D-Day in June 1944. I remember US troops and the boys (not me!) running up behind them and shouting "Got any gum chum?" I would not have been allowed chewing gum.....not nice....not what nice boys do!

I remember VE day and the flags. We had some and stuck a banner out of the broken upstairs front bedroom and had paper chains around in the house in red white and blue. Had they kept them from pre-war days in faith and hope? I can't imagine they were available at the war-end due to shortages in everything.

The war had enormous effect on the civilian population. Our family got off so much more lightly than many. It must have been quite terrifying for the adults – facing shortages, rationing, uncertainties about invasion as well as bombing. I was frightened – terrified - of the dark until I was quite grown up, as were many others of my age. I used to associate this with going to the pictures which I did not like – the dark! – but it must have started with being in the cellar and hearing the bombs.

A few years ago Sir Gary Streeter MP suggested it was time to get rid of Charles Church. I think he must have been told to shut up about that – we didn't hear any more about it. He is not from Plymouth. We must never forget what the blitz was, and Charles Church is our reminder.