

## BRITAIN ON THE FRONT LINE

The twentieth century saw a significant change in the way in which warfare was conducted. The front line was no longer a demarcation of opposing military forces but wherever shells and bombs could reach. One of the things that fascinates Helen Dunmore about Leningrad is the way it demonstrated how civilians were forced to become both combatants and targets during the war, rather than bystanders.

Bomb damage Temple Meads, November 1940



In anticipation of air attacks in the event of a war with Germany, Britain created a volunteer Air Raid Wardens' Service in April 1937 and in March 1939 every household was given a booklet entitled 'Protection of Your Home Against Air Raids'. Public shelters were constructed by local authorities in areas deemed to be at risk from enemy bombing and by early 1939, over a million Anderson shelters made from steel sheets had been distributed to homes with gardens. Eventually more than two million would be erected. Those without gardens could make use of the indoor Morrison shelter.

With the declaration of war on 3 September 1939, the blackout was introduced and air-raid warning systems put into operation. One of the responsibilities of the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) wardens was to ensure that everybody had a gas mask. Bristol's ARP headquarters were in Broadmead and posts were set up across the city at intervals of roughly a quarter of a mile. Units of Local Defence Volunteers (the Home Guard) were formed and deployed along the British coast following the fall of France in June 1940. Signposts were taken down and place names painted out to confuse any German spies who might parachute in. There were drives to collect scrap metal for use in the production of armaments and pig bins were issued to collect edible waste. Rationing was introduced and the government thought up the slogans 'Mend and make do to avoid buying new' and 'Dig for Victory', as well as 'Keep Mum. She's not so dumb' and 'Careless talk costs lives'.

At the outbreak of the war, the government implemented its evacuation plans, moving thousands of children, mothers, teachers and disabled people out of high-risk urban areas to rural reception areas where they were billeted at local homes. By January 1940, around a million had returned to the cities, as the expected bombing had not taken place: many were evacuated again with the start of the Blitz attacks later that year. The Children's Overseas Reception Board arranged evacuations to Canada, the USA and Australia, a scheme that was brought to a halt when the ship *City of Bernares* was sunk by a German torpedo in September 1940 killing 73 children. Children from Bristol began to be officially evacuated in February 1941, many going to Cornwall and Devon.

The German air force had at first concentrated on military targets (radar stations, aircraft factories and air fields) in a deliberate attempt to destroy the Royal Air Force prior to an invasion. This became known as The Battle of Britain. Between September 1940 and May



Palmyra Road, Bedminster, following raid

1941, the Germans changed their strategy and focused on attacking cities, making a total of 127 large-scale night raids. Around 60,000 civilians were killed during this period, the majority in London. The main targets outside the capital were industrial cities and ports. When a raid was expected, the ARP sent up enormous barrage balloons moored to wagons by heavy cables. These were designed to make it difficult for the Luftwaffe to fly low. German spotter planes would precede the bombers, dropping flares to identify targets. After London experienced devastating incendiary attacks in December 1940, civilians undertook compulsory fire-watching duties organised by the ARP.

Bristol first experienced bombing on 25 June 1940 and there were further raids in August and September of that year. Targets included Temple Meads Station and the Bristol Aeroplane Company Works at Filton. The Winter Blitz saw six major attacks between November 1940 and March 1941. There was a short raid on Eastville and East Bristol, 26-27 February 1941, and the last big raid on the city was on Good Friday, 11 April 1941. Bath was attacked during the later Baedeker Raids, which targeted historic sites identified by the Baedeker guide books.

At the start of the war, there were 3,500 shelter places available in Bristol, although it had been calculated by the Home Office that 25,000 were needed. Many of the shelters were defective and people did not trust those that were constructed above ground. Tunnels, mines, caves and other sites were utilised by citizens dissatisfied with the authorised provision. Serious confrontations broke out over the Portway tunnel between the civil authorities and the large number of people trying to use it as a shelter. Complaints about the city's shelter system appeared in a damning report by the Mass Observation social survey organisation whose observers visited Bristol three times between 19 December 1940 and 2 April 1941. Among the comments recorded was 'It's just like our Council. They always realise their mistakes about ten years too late'. The observers found that morale in the city was low and that there was 'a rather poor quality of local leadership in this area'. The observers felt that defeatism and depression were likely to increase 'unless something is done to give the people positive feelings of pride and purpose'. The Corporation reacted to the condemnation by promptly commissioning its own survey, which concluded that spirits were high and that 'the issue of this war... will be decided in the hearts of the men and women of Bristol'.

Damaged Bristol house



During this period, Winston Churchill wrote to the Lord Mayor of the city:

*My thoughts have been much with the inhabitants of Bristol in the ordeal of these last weeks.*

*As Chancellor of the University, I feel myself united to them and I have heard with pride of the courage, resolution and patience with which they have answered these detestable attacks on their families and their homes.*

*It is the spirit of such as theirs which makes certain the victory of our cause.*



Ice covered fireman's ladder, Bristol



In 1944, the Rev Paul Shipley compiled a book of eyewitness accounts from those who recalled the Bristol Blitz, based upon diary entries, letters and newspaper reports. The following extracts are taken from this publication and give some flavour of the front line experience in the city.

The sky is now lit up with different coloured flares; the barrage is terrific, and the air is filled with the constant drone of Jerry planes, the scream of falling bombs and the thunder of their explosions. See my mates. "We're in for a pasting to-night!" Both of them seem to think discretion the better part of valour. Can't blame them, anyway. Got a very queer feeling myself; I'm terribly dry, and I don't quite know what to do, but I decide I'll try and see it through.

Incendiaries start to fall in our own neighbourhood. Several fires in the City; more – and heavier – bombs dropping. Still windy, and the fires spread; new fires springing up now, adding a spectacular effect to the inferno of bombs and gunfire. Beginning to get used to it!

*Diary of Mr W A Hares, 24-25 November 1940, Merchant Street*

Car in Bristol bomb crater



Bristol was blitzed again last night. For twelve solid hours my neighbour and I sat in our cellar. My step-father was up and down all the time keeping watch. We had the two cats with us, and my Scottie... He seems to be able to sense [the bombs] coming, because his ears go up and then you hear that dreadful swishing and screaming as they reach earth. That sound gets me really more than the actual crashing...

It was a cruel and fiendish attack. Hospitals, churches and houses were all hit – no military objectives at all... We heard of many tragedies, too numerous to remember. But we came out all right once more, which every time I call a miracle, because we are right in the midst of it all.

*Diary of Miss M Fagnani, 3 January 1941, Colston Street*

Bombs were dropping all over the district by now, and yet the messenger-boy never hesitated to set off to the report centre. Perhaps he went a little white in the face, but never questioned his orders. Grand youngsters those boys!... The report centre was at least a mile from the post, and during his perilous journey he had two spills. He was never sure whether the blast blew him off, or whether he tried to duck for dear life – and dear life it was, for many were injured that night.

*Letter from Mr Rich, a Bedminster warden*

Searching through the rubble





Fireman at work after Bristol raid

Lots of wives lost their husbands these days; we were all in this fight – even the kids! They ran as great a risk here under the stairs as the wardens and ambulance-drivers; no one knew where or what the bombs would hit after whistling down. All the same, thinking of trying to manage without my husband brought a few tears which I could not hide from my eldest boy. “Are you worried about something?” he asked. “No dear,” I replied, “only tired,” and we ducked quickly under the pillows again.

*Letter from Mrs M Coleman, Coldharbour Road, wife of a warden*

On one occasion I was in charge of 50 children (the youngest 3½ and the eldest 5½) when, with no warning, a bomb fell just near, rocking the building to its foundations. This was followed by the wail of sirens, and we ran, in perfect order, to an outdoor shelter, with gunfire around and above us. Panting, and dishevelled we sat down on the hard forms – when “Donald” looked around him and remarked in a disgusted voice: “Well, if I’d known *this* was going to happen I’d have brought my pear to eat while I was waiting here.” In that moment the tension and fear were lifted and gone.

*Letter from Miss Wensley, Zetland Road*

