

FIFTY YEARS SINCE THE BLITZ



1940: SUBURB IN THE FRONT LINE

The late summer of 1940 was warm with blue skies daily, much as it was 50 years later. But by September 1940 the Suburb was about to become a small part of the front line in World War II. After the fall of France, Britain was alone in Europe and next in line for invasion. Churchill had told us what to expect. Historians say the ensuing and decisive Battle of Britain ran from 8 August to 31 October. The Blitz (the air attacks on London) began on 7 September. That night from the top of Northway we could see the flames above the East End where 430 people died in the raid. From then on until May 1941 the alert was sounded *most* evenings except over Christmas. Having failed to secure mastery of the air they tried instead to demoralise us by indiscriminate bombing.

On Sunday 15 September, now recognised as Battle of Britain Day, I sat in the garden, backing onto the Club House bowling green, playing Monopoly with old friends from Child's Way School. High above in the azure sky our fighter aircraft made silent con-trails. It was difficult to keep 12-year-olds indoors at such times. Few bombs had fallen on the Suburb in daylight and barrage balloons precluded low-level attack. But the night became deadly not least from the shrapnel of shells fired by four Ack Ack guns on the heath extension. Though we could peep out to watch the fortunes of bombers caught in searchlight beams. Many people slept downstairs for safety. Some used Anderson shelters of corrugated iron buried in their gardens. Hundreds of incendiary bombs fell on the Suburb but each household had been given the means to put out small fires. If worse you dialled 999 from a neighbour's phone, though the fire brigade might arrive in a converted London taxi.

As for morale, it seemed that the greater the tribulations the better was the community spirit, though the night habits of many

residents changed after Wednesday 25 September. That night I prepared for bed under the kitchen table. At about 10.20 pm the windows blew in silently, carrying away the black-out curtains which caught much of the flying glass. Half a second later there was a gigantic explosion followed immediately by another, all accompanied by an avalanche of tiles from the roof. The lights went out. Essential belongings were gathered up and we left for the only place we knew which could provide safety - the underground shelter beside the school. The raid continued. In total darkness we picked our way over fallen telephone wires and as we crossed Willifield Green there was this huge crater smelling of explosives with embers still glowing. The first shelter was full, but in No. 2 there was room for three to sit upright on wooden benches, to recover, rest and be reassured by those already there who produced those cups that cheer. Little did I realise that I would be spending nearly every night in that shelter that winter. But the experience had its humour, and the culture and comradeship it developed has

yet to be recorded.

At first light we left for "home". The view of the Green brought tears, but it was not like some have written. The Club House, the social centre of the Suburb, was still standing, if badly damaged, though the houses and our old school in the south-west corner looked in a bad way. There had been casualties but fortunately no deaths. The air raid wardens were our local line of defence. Their brick-built post was in the north-west corner of the Green, 30 yards from the crater. Our highly regarded chief warden, Bertie Hart, told me later that he looked out during the raid to see the dark shape of a parachute drifting downwards with the deadly load. He froze and was blown across Willifield Way, saved indirectly by the clay underneath the green which absorbed much of the shock as the landmine exploded. It was only a short walk down the twitten to Coleridge Walk where there was mayhem. The houses were closer together and 14 people lost their lives, including six from one family.

The King and Queen came, but time and security allowed them only to see Willifield Green. The spirit that arose from the Blitz endured for the rest of the war. What happened to the old Club House is another story. In 1940 government policy was to pull down any buildings which had survived near-direct hits. Later the policy changed to one of repair rather than demolition, but in either case restoration was available because the War Damage Commission invariably provided the means for housing to rebuild and refurnish. Except for the area of the Club House all the houses round the green which had been demolished were rebuilt to the similar elevation. One of the mysteries of the last war remains: why not the Club House too? Much as we love Fellowship House and its setting, and many of us contributed towards the cost, the previous building was big enough to serve the social needs of the community as a whole.

MH

BRILL ■ OWEN
CHARTERED ARCHITECTS

For a sensitive
and sympathetic approach
to architecture and interior design
we offer a full or partial service
to suit your requirements

NICHOLAS BRILL M.SC. DIP. ARCH. RIBA MBIM
ASSISTANT TRUST ARCHITECT 1987-88

5 DRYDEN STREET • COVENT GARDEN
LONDON WC2E 9NW • TELEPHONE 01-829 8436
FAX 01-240 5600

**TRADITIONAL
UPHOLSTERY**
CANING • SOFT
FURNISHINGS

Classes

10am to 1pm on Tues, Wed, Thurs & Fri

Tessa Hauxwell & Hilary Donaldson
071 485 4070 & 081 863 3519

ST. AUGUSTINE'S WORKSHOP
Landgdon Park Road, off Archway Road, N6.

50 years after the blitz we reproduce here an article by a Suburb resident, probably used for publication in American newspapers. Written in 1942 it is the story of John L. Young and his wife Phyllis.

THIS IS WAR'S COST-TO ME by an ordinary Englishman

There's no such person as an "average" Englishman, except perhaps on the stage or in novels, where too often he is a caricature of the ordinary man you may pass any day in the High Street of an English borough.

So infinite is the variety of social life in Britain, that, without falsifying the picture, you cannot portray just what the war has cost the ordinary civilian without telling the story of one or two real, live people; to "average" the human facts would be to present a picture of a fictitious and unreal person.

We Took A Cottage

Two years before the war my wife and I rented, in a pleasant, countrified garden suburb, a cottage, built early this century by a famous architect in the style of an old English cottage, the kind that might have been left by the Pilgrim Fathers, when they sailed in the Mayflower: plain, brick walls inside, distempered cream, oak beams overhead, a deep, wide red-brick ingle-nook, oak doors with wrought-iron latches, red-tiled hall, dining room and kitchen, bedrooms with sloping timbered ceilings, casement windows looking out on a pleasant garden full of apple-trees and old-fashioned flowers. It was no modern mock-Tudor "palace", such as the real estate agents used to advertise, but a quiet, restful, genuine reproduction.

We are fond of antiques, and we took to it, among other pieces, a Cromwellian chest of drawers in old oak; when the dealer found it for us it was covered with Brunswick black, but he bleached this off and my wife polished the oak until the chest was "alive"; some Chippendale chairs, a Queen Anne mahogany chest of drawers, a century-old yew-tree table, my oak desk, carpentered in 1760, and so on.

Pleasant Life And Pleasant Future

I had an absorbing editorial job which brought me £900 a year, and was contributing to an office pension scheme so that I could retire at 65. My wife looked after the house, tended the garden (she added an allotment to "dig for victory" when war began), played golf, and did a good deal of social work, mainly as working Chairman of school committees, which see that children are well fed and help them, on leaving school, to go into work in which they will be trained, instead of into blind-alley jobs. A pleasant life - and it might reasonably have gone on.

But the Nazis broke loose and ran amok across Europe. First casualty was my job; I left to do Government work at a salary £250 a year less than I had been earning; and, of course, bang went the pension scheme. Still, I was too old for the Army, and not physically fit anyway, so it was the best thing to do.

One night in September, 1940, early in the Battle of Britain, Jerry came over and dropped five large time bombs round our home, so we couldn't get back. We just had to wait to see what happened.

And something certainly did happen.

One Out Of Fifty

Five nights later Jerry came over again and dropped fifty incendiary bombs in the Lane in which we lived. Forty-nine of them fell in the road, in gardens and on the allotments opposite. One fell on a house -

our cottage. The district having been evacuated, the warden to whom we had given our keys for emergency use was away (one of the time bombs was 20 feet under his sitting room!) and so was the neighbour to whom we had given another key. The water mains were smashed, too, so that when the fire brigade arrived all it could do was to draw a drop of water from a tank some distance away and spray it on the adjoining house, to prevent the fire from spreading.

Result - nothing left of our cottage but four cracked walls; no clothes, except what we were wearing no books (our library of 2,000 was strewn in burnt leaves over the garden); no anything.

Well, that was that; one consolation was that Jerry hadn't done himself the slightest bit of good by that wanton act of destruction. For three hundred years that lovely chest, made from old English oak by a master-craftsman of the 17th century, had withstood time; now, in a moment, it was gone; you wouldn't have known it had been there except for a few burnt scraps of cloth, remnants of the clothes that had been stored in it.

Works 80-Hour Week

Three days later my wife took an unpaid job in the Women's Voluntary Services. To-day she's Centre organiser in one of London's slummiest boroughs, working 75 to 80 hours a week. She's worked through one winter's blitz, feeding, one night, nurses and patients dug out of the debris of a bombed hospital, the school which formed their temporary shelter rocking the whole time to the blast of high explosives; now she's preparing for the next blitz.

Meanwhile, she takes care that a lot of the food and clothing so generously sent from overseas gets to the people who need it; she runs welfare work in a big Tube shelter;

administering locally the Lord Mayor's Air Raid Distress Fund; organising 300 women to darn soldiers' socks; evacuating children; collecting for national savings; making comforts for the troops; many of them from American wool; and a hundred and one other jobs. She wears uniform; a good thing, too, for if she didn't the usual woman's excuse of "nothing to wear" would be almost literally true; neither cash nor coupons are sufficient to replace her lost clothes, though now and again I do have the privilege of seeing her out of uniform and in one of the two or three dresses she managed to buy after what we always refer to as the "affair".

Through the "blitz" we remained with relatives, sleeping in a protected basement; now we're in a furnished apartment, little more than a tiny one-roomed studio, for which we are paying the same rent as we paid for our whole cottage. I call it the Birdcage.

Well, here we are: lower income, no real home, no furniture, just enough clothes to keep us going, rationed food, continual work - night duty as well as day duty. We've got an assessment for our compensation to be paid after the war; less than what the books, clothing and furniture cost us; much less, compared with what replacements will cost after the war.

There are thousands like us; many worse off with husbands, wives or children buried under bombed homes; with husbands or sons somewhere out East or braving the German "flak" every night to raid Jerry; with limbs amputated, and so on. There's the old lady my wife knows, for example; husband and son killed, home bombed, and at 65 odd she works about 60 hours a week in a factory, making munitions.

Flood The World With Light
Blacking out in our cottage, we used to say, when peace comes and no more blackout is needed, we'll flood the Lane with light from every room. Well, we shan't do that now; but that light would have been nothing in comparison with the light which will flood the world, when Hitler finally goes down. We cannot re-fashion that lovely old chest, but we can fashion a new world.

Editors note:

The 'lane' is Temple Fortune Lane. Happily the Youngs moved from their 'birdcage' to a cottage in Willifield Way after the war. Here they led very active lives. John standing as a Liberal candidate, Phyllis a leading figure in the WRVS, a magistrate and an active RA council member.



Interior Design
&
Refurbishment
Consultants

atmosphere

01-455 0794