

BLACK SATURDAY

STORIES FROM THE FIRST DAY OF THE BLITZ

Saturday 7th September 1940 — or 'Black Saturday' as it came to be known — marked the beginning of the Blitz on London.



German 'Dornier' Bombers Attack Silvertown — 7th September 1940

Silvertown Way can be seen curving round the bottom of the picture where it becomes North Woolwich Road. © Imperial War Museum

There had been earlier raids over East London — the first bomb having fallen on the borough at Beckton Road on 8th July 1940. Other incidents that followed were:

- 18th July at East Ham Sewage Works
- 24th August at the Barrage Balloon site, Beckton Road
- 31st August at Plaistow Park Road and Milton Avenue, East Ham (8 people killed)
- 1st September at Milk Street, North Woolwich
- 4th September around Royal Albert Dock
- 5th September around Prince Regent Lane

On the night of 6th September and the early hours of the 7th, there were 30 reported incidents in the south of the borough from North Woolwich to Canning Town, in which 4 people were killed; this though, was just a foretaste of the horrors yet to come.

September 7th was a lovely summer's day, with the sun shining in a clear blue sky. Just before 5 p.m., the wailing of sirens began and the distant sound of approaching aircraft was heard — rapidly swelling to a roar — as the enemy armada of an estimated 300 German bombers escorted by hundreds of fighters, appeared flying high from the east and following the River Thames.

The first bombs dropped on the Ford Motor Works at Dagenham, closely followed by a rain of high-explosives and firebombs on Beckton Gas Works.

Next to be hit were the Royal Docks and factories of North Woolwich and Silvertown, together with the workers' houses. As the bombs continued to fall all over the boroughs of East and West Ham, great columns of smoke rose hundreds of feet into the air, obscuring the light of the evening sun. Brilliant orange and yellow flames leapt from the factories and warehouses.

Fire Services fought to extinguish the flames whilst Civil Defence staff tore into the debris of demolished buildings looking for survivors.

By 6 p.m., the raiders had gone, and the men, women and children were dazed and shocked — many rendered homeless but thankful to have escaped with their lives. By 7.30 p.m. however, the bombers had returned and the attack on London continued.



South Molton Street, Canning Town — 6th September 1940

This photograph showing the devastation caused by a high-explosive bomb, was one of the many images censored by the government during the war. © London Borough of Newham



Cundy Road, Custom House — 6th September 1940
Damage caused by a high-explosive bomb which fell at 9.43 p.m. © London Borough of Newham

For hour after hour, the docks, factories and warehouses were bombarded. Schools, churches and hospitals were also hit, with streets of small houses being reduced to rubble as successive squadrons of enemy bombers kept up the attack. Bursts of anti-aircraft fire could be heard from the local defences on the ground and Spitfires attacked the enemy fighters in the air. Gas and water mains were fractured and telephone and electricity services were disrupted. Rescue operations were carried out by ARP Wardens who evacuated people to rescue centres.

The 'all-clear' finally sounded at 4.30 a.m. on Sunday morning. That night, 146 men, women and children were killed and hundreds more were severely injured in the County Boroughs of East and West Ham alone.

There followed a further 56 consecutive nights of bombing, and the raids continued with little respite throughout that winter, culminating in the boroughs' heaviest raid which came on the night of 19th March 1941 in which 183 people died.

The bombing continued until the end of May 1941. The total number of victims, from the first death on 31st August 1940 to the end of May, stands at 1,151, rising to 1,656 by the end of the war.

The German Luftwaffe aimed to break the spirit of Londoners and destroy the working communities of the East End. However, the sheer repetitiveness of the bombing, combined with the extraordinary adaptability of working people to conditions of deprivation and hardship, ensured that people soon became used to even the heaviest bombing, giving rise to the famous phrase: 'We can take it'.

The first-hand accounts in this exhibition reveal the startling clarity with which local people remember those first days of the Blitz.



North Woolwich Station — 7th September 1940
High-explosive and incendiary bombs caused much damage and completely destroyed the goods and parcels office at 10.56 p.m. © London Borough of Newham

W. A. Gillman
— West Ham Councillor and
Assistant Outside Controller, ARP

“They wanted me to go down to Woolwich Depot [Drew Road] because they’d lost contact — all communications had been cut. I found that the Silvertown Bypass had been hit and the bombs were coming down all over the place. It was a very bad raid. I had to take the long route round by the Beckton Gas Works which was alight, and hundreds of incendiaries were dotted over the grounds at Beckton. There were fires going on all over there. I drove over the swing bridge — part of that was alight and ships in the docks were alight.

“When we got there, they were glad we’d turned up because they were all dusty and without food and water. The mains had been busted and they couldn’t get any water, so I went back and reported to the control that we should close the depot because there was no place to serve; there were only a few dogs running about — that was the only sign of life.”

Win Hardy Née Huckle

“I remember that first day of the Blitz, I was working at the Standard Telephone Company, North Woolwich; I was 23 at the time. There were so many aircraft with little specks coming out of them — some of them on parachutes [land mines]. I could see some of the bombers being attacked by Spitfires.



Beckton Gas Works — 10th September 1940
Beckton Gas Works, being a prime target, was repeatedly bombed. © London Borough of Newham

Doris Pykett
— Aged 12 in 1940

“The first day of the Blitz was a nice day ... plenty of people about ... and someone suggested that we go to Silvertown Arches. We’d never been there before. We knew it was rat-infested and I was frightened of the rats. It was dark, dank and dirty but we made the best of it. It was not an official shelter. Someone got some forms [benches] from Pinchin & Johnson for us to sit on.

“We heard the bombers coming over and when Pinchin and Johnson got hit we could hear the paint barrels blowing up. Looking out the door, we could see the flames; it was like daylight as the Docks were burning — no matter where you looked there was fire.

“The raid was terrifying; some people were crying. I don’t think it was so much the bombing but we thought we were going to be roasted alive when we looked out and saw everywhere alight — it was daylight with flames. Black Saturday should have been ‘Orange Saturday’ as it was orange with the flames.”



Queen Mary’s Hospital — 7th September 1940
Two of the wards with staff quarters above were demolished by a direct hit from a high-explosive bomb at 6.10 p.m., killing six patients and two nurses. © London Borough of Newham

Cyril Demarne OBE
— West Ham Fire Brigade

“North Woolwich — they had an unbelievable time down there. The whole area was cut off and it got so bad that the authorities decided to evacuate the entire civil population. So everybody was marshalled and they were marched down the road — the old and the young; the active and the infirm — down to North Woolwich pier and then put aboard various crafts ... skiffs ... and sailed off up the River Thames to safety.

“The area from Woolwich up to Tidal Basin was just one mass of flames. There were soap works, tar distilleries, cable works — they set the lot alight and they were all roaring away. They burst the tar stills and molten tar flooded across North Woolwich Road. The road was blocked in several places and fire appliances, rescue vehicles and ambulances couldn’t get by to do what was necessary.

“People came out and they were surrounded by fires; the bombs were dropping and they were running here and there for a means of escape. Some of them found their way over to a shelter — a public shelter at the swimming pool in Oriental Road, Silvertown — only to find themselves a target for a random bomb.”



Wise Road, Stratford — 7th September 1940
A high-explosive bomb completely demolished this house at 6.00 p.m. © London Borough of Newham



Anderson shelters in Croydon Road Plaistow
These corrugated iron shelters, partly submerged and covered with earth, could withstand all but a direct hit. © London Borough of Newham

Eileen Roper

“On Black Saturday we were told to leave our house because there were unexploded bombs underneath [dropped the night before] so we went to my aunt in Jersey Road. The air-raid warning went about half past five. During that night we were buried alive [in the Anderson shelter] because a bomb exploded in a yard at the back of my aunt’s garden. Rubble blocked the door and we couldn’t get out. You could smell that smell like when fireworks go off.

“None of us were hurt. There was my grandma and granddad Allen (my mum’s mum and dad); my aunty Lucy and my mum; Michael and Tony my cousins, and myself. Aunty Lucy and I were taking turns pumping Michael’s gas mask — you know, the ones the baby laid in.

“The next morning the wardens called out to us that they were getting it [the door] clear. When the lady saw we weren’t hurt she was quite upset — a bit hysterical really — because everywhere else she found people hurt. They got us out at about 8 o’clock in the morning and we had been buried from about midnight. We were nervous but we weren’t all that frightened. I kept saying to my grandmother, ‘It’s alright grandma Jesus will look after us.’”

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Ivy Alexander Née Hicks — 1940
 This photograph was taken the week that Ivy left Russell Central School, just a few weeks before the start of the Blitz.
 Photo from the private collection of Ivy Alexander.

Ivy Alexander

— Reproduced from her book: 'Maid in West Ham'

"As we have been kept-in most of the week owing to the air raids, Irene and I decided to go out cycling in the country. We were in Epping Forest when the air-raid siren went. From the Forest we could see hundreds of planes crossing to London. Many air battles were going on and there was plenty of gunfire. We saw five planes brought down and saw several airmen bale out. Shrapnel was falling everywhere, so we sheltered under trees for protection. When things seemed quieter we decided to go home.

"As we approached London we could see huge black smoke clouds and thought we were in for a storm. We later discovered it was smoke from the many fires started by bombs. Damage became more severe as we approached home, and on arriving at Stratford, everything seemed to be burning. To get home we had to go by the Leather Cloth Factory but we could not get near it as it was on fire. We could not get near home at all as we were turned back by policemen. Eventually we made a detour and went along by a canal [the Cut] at the back of the factories. Most of these were on fire and we were both drenched with water from the firemen's hoses.

"From the Cut we arrived at the sewer bank and walked along this until we reached West Ham Station, which was badly damaged. Nobody seemed to be about and as we went to get to Rene's house we were stopped and told by a warden that a time-bomb was in her front garden. In fact there were time-bombs all along the route we had taken from Stratford. After some time we found Rene's family in Gainsborough Road School with a lot of other families."

Eric Green

— From the book: 'Maid in West Ham' by Ivy Alexander

"When we heard the big 4.5 guns on Wanstead Flats open up, we knew something different was up; then we saw the big formations of German bombers coming over. We were in our Anderson shelters; we had two facing each other, with a sandbagged dugout entrance between them. The bombs began to whistle down — some with a dreadful screaming sound.



Gainsborough Road Sub-Fire Station No.16
 The two men seated in the middle and wearing round caps are regular firemen from West Ham Fire Service: Charles Capham is wearing the double-breasted tunic and Frederick Dell, wearing the single-breasted tunic, was the officer in charge. All the other firemen are Auxiliary Fire Service.

Frederick Dell was one of seven firemen killed when Gainsborough Road sub-station received a direct hit on 8th December 1940.
 © London Borough of Newham

There was a bang in the entrance. We thought a bomb or something had fallen in the entrance, but to our relief it was Rover, our scruffy sheepdog, crashing in at full speed. Poor thing! He was terrified. We crouched in our shelters — pretty frightened I can tell you — with our first experience of the terrors of war at first hand. This went on for about three hours — the whistling of bombs falling and the ground shaking from the explosions. We all thought it was our lot. We thought nobody could survive this.

"Then, as things began to quieten down, my father and I climbed out of the shelters, and to our relief, we saw our house was still standing; but when we looked to the end of our row of houses, the last couple were not there. They had been blown up. Then on our right, where there were blocks of flats four stories high, sticking out of the roofs, were big pieces of metal about 20 feet-long. My father said that they were pieces of railway line.

"The front and back door had been blown off and a lot of glass from the windows was strewn everywhere. My father said, 'I'll check upstairs.' I went out of the front door — or at least where the front door should have been. The first thing I noticed was that the signal box opposite our house was tilted at an angle of 45 degrees and debris was everywhere. Between our front door and the house next door, I saw this big hole about 5 feet across and about 4 feet deep. Jumping down into it, I could see some metal sticking up. Then my father came out of the house and seeing me down the hole, all excited, took one look and grabbed me by the collar and hauled me out. 'Quick!' He shouted, 'Get everyone back into the shelters; it's an unexploded bomb!' The metal I could see in the hole must have been the top of the tail fins of the bomb and I had jumped down on top of it. My mother was in a terrible state, what with the bombs and being told that our neighbours, a few doors away, had received a direct hit on their shelter and that their bodies were found on the railway line opposite."



Frederick Road School, Canning Town (seen from Invicta Road) — 31st March 1941
 The school suffered four attacks between 7th October 1940 and 19th April 1941, being hit by incendiary, high explosive and delayed-action bombs. © London Borough of Newham



Manor Road Buildings — 7th September 1940
 The residents of Manor Road Buildings looking at a section of railway track which has landed on the surface air-raid shelter. © London Borough of Newham



Canning Town Women's Settlement, Lees Hall, Barking Road
 Showing blast damage from a high-explosive bomb dropped nearby on 11th September 1940. Photo from the private collection of Colin Marchant.

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The ARP Depot and Ambulance Station, Abbey Road
The depot took a direct hit on Black Saturday. Thirteen men were killed when a high-explosive bomb caused the building to collapse at 7.15 p.m. © London Borough of Newham



Cyril Demarne OBE
Cyril Demarne joined West Ham Fire Brigade in 1925. During the Blitz he was sub-officer instructing the Auxiliary Fire Service. He was later to become the Chief Fire Officer of West Ham Fire Brigade.

Cyril Demarne OBE

— West Ham Fire Brigade

“During the evening I received word that Wally Turley, with two members of his crew, had been buried when a bombed building collapsed during fire-fighting operations. Two fire pumps had arrived and sub-officers Turley and Webb together ran into the burning building with their crews. A quick reconnaissance and Wally shouted to his colleague: ‘You take the back, Harry; I’ll look after this side.’ Webb and his crew ran out of the building with the intention of attacking the fire from the rear when, to quote Harry Webb: ‘The whole bloody guts of the building fell in, burying the lot.’ The shocked survivors tore at the debris but found the great slab of concrete that had buried their comrades far beyond their ability to move.”

Roy Lee

“I certainly remember Black Saturday as where we lived in Abbey Road, on the corner of Bakers Row, we were barely 100 yards from the Corporation Depot in which they had the ARP fatalities. One of the lorries’ engines, blown up by a bomb, landed on top of our air raid shelter.”

Bert Maskell

“I was in the Broadway Cinema, Stratford, with my girlfriend, Ellen Warwick. Air-raid sirens sounded, which did not disturb us, or, it seemed, anybody else in the cinema. This was followed by thumps and tremors — still the audience showed more interest in the film. Then on came the lights and onto the stage came the cinema manager. I’ll always remember him for his cool control of the problem. Calmly, he said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, there is an air raid in progress and bombs have been dropped in our area. We are closing the cinema, so would you kindly leave in an orderly manner. There is an air-raid shelter outside the cinema.’

“There were no signs of panic. We all calmly left the cinema just as if the show had normally ended. Ella and I went into the large brick-built surface shelter outside the cinema. It was already overcrowded, so after a few minutes I suggested we made a run for her house. Above we saw bombers and our RAF fighter craft.

“When we got to Ella’s house she was concerned for her parents, who had gone to the Rex Cinema, Stratford. They later arrived home, cursing the fact that the German bombers had curtailed the film they were watching. That night, while the bombing continued, Ella’s uncle was killed and his wife had a leg severed by a direct hit on their house in nearby Vicarage Road.”

Alan Fry

— Ambulance Man, Abbey Road Depot

“We didn’t expect anything to happen. We’d go on duty for a 24-hour shift and sometimes do some sleeping during the night; nothing would happen and next morning we’d be off again and that was another day gone.

“The air-raid warning went and we were all looking up in the sky and we saw a black mass of planes coming over. Everybody was shouting out, ‘That’s alright, they’re our planes’ and before we could say any more they started bombing us.

“I made a dive under my ambulance. The next thing I know, the whole place came down on top of us. We were completely buried. One bomb had penetrated the back of the building. I could just see the daylight through the dust. I realised that I couldn’t walk properly — something had happened to my leg. My helmet had been blown off. I managed to crawl over to this hole. When I got out, it was chaos. Everything was alight and there were craters everywhere. There were tons of sulphur alight at Berk’s [Chemical Works] which was next door. I seemed to be the only one to get out.”



West Ham ARP Main Control Room — 19th March 1941.
This image shows the remains of the 2nd floor store and the hundreds of gas-mask filters that were stored there. © London Borough of Newham

W. A. Gillman

— West Ham Councillor and Assistant Outside Controller, ARP

“A bomb had made a direct hit on the Abbey Road Depot and it was serious. I went there straight away. The concrete roof which was about a foot thick had been blasted and had cracked across and crashed down on a number of rescue vehicles and ambulances that were lined up underneath. The crews were standing by there and there were some underneath.

“I crawled under the wreckage — even while the firemen were running their hoses across the roof. It was smoking at the back and they were scared about the petrol underneath in the vehicles catching alight.

“I crawled under there and saw the arm of one of my DDs [Dare-Devs] there. I pulled him and I couldn’t get him ... couldn’t shift him ... he’d been crushed. I knew it was hopeless. They kept getting on to me ... the firemen ... to come out, and I came out.”



St. James’ ARP Rescue Depot, Forest Gate — 31st October 1941.
A barrage balloon can be seen on the ground to the right of the image. © London Borough of Newham



Barrage Balloon over Abbey Mills Pumping Station
The war office decided that the risk of one or both of the 210 feet-tall chimneys being hit by German bombs was significant, and could cause the chimneys to topple onto the station. They were therefore taken down in early 1940. © Thames Water





Unexploded Bomb at The Foresters Public House, Plaistow, c.1950
Peggy Wright, Mrs Crosby, Barney Crosby (Landlord) and Florrie, the barmaid, stand by the defused UXB that had been discovered under the floor of the premises.
Photo from the private collection of Dorothy Wright.



St Mary's Hospital, Plaistow — 15th September 1940
Looking across Upper Road to the construction site of the Out Patients' Department in London Road.
© London Borough of Newham

Danny Comber

"I remember Black Saturday. I was 15 and I was in my dad's hairdressing shop: 'Comber's' on the Barking Road — on the corner of Prugel Street. We'd had a bit of spasmodic bombing at the time and then suddenly they came over; I don't how many planes there were in the sky but they started bombing and we had a shop full of people. Dad had dug out a shelter in the back room; it was propped up with 4" x 4" bits of wood, and we all went down there. One woman had all perm curlers in her hair; two men came down there — one had shaving stuff all over his face. We stayed down there till the shop shut.

"Later that night when we came up from the shelter, my dad was sitting in the doorway. It was a lovely summer's night and we saw all the people coming from the bombing, walking down the Barking Road from Custom House and Canning Town. They was [sic] leaving their houses; they wanted to get out of the area. My dad had big stone bottles of ginger beer and was giving them a drink.

"That night the sky was bright red because the docks was [sic] aflame. That sky was red — bright red; the fires went on for days, because they had all sorts down there — petrol and the like. The Bombing was terrible; the worst thing you can be in is an air raid. My dad said to me 'We've got to get the women out of here.'"



Doris and Danny Comber in 1940
Danny Comber and his sister Doris on the Barking Road, Canning Town, shortly before the start of the Blitz.
Photo from the private collection of the Comber family.

Ron Binnington

"I lived in Ham Park Road during WW2, and the day the London Docks were alight, the sky was anything but black. We had to get used to sleeping on wooden bunks in a musty, candle-lit Anderson shelter, half-buried in the back garden. It was very difficult to stay asleep, for with the Luftwaffe in their searchlights, the anti-aircraft battery across the street in West Ham Park made far more noise than the bombs.

"As Mum and her sisters lived in adjoining houses we had plenty of company, and rather foolishly gathered together when the air-raid siren wailed. The docks and the East End were hammered and we were badly affected. After one particularly bad night an ARP Warden called and said we had to climb the back fence and go live in a school for four days, whilst they defused an unexploded 500lb bomb a few yards along the road. The red sky at dawn over burning London as we walked to safety carrying a few essentials, made me shudder with fear."



Plaistow Road — 19th September 1940
An entire row of bombed-out shops in Plaistow Road.
© London Borough of Newham



Croydon Road, Plaistow — September 1940
This photograph shows the damage from a high-explosive bomb. The image was censored by the government for the duration of the war.
© London Borough of Newham

Arthur Dance

"I was down Rathbone Street; there was quite a mob of us and it was a red hot day. The planes came over and the bombs were falling before the sirens had even gone, and we just made one dash for it. We didn't even know what was going on. We knew it was war but being kids of 11 we had never seen anything or heard anything like it before — it was quite a shock.

"A sister of mine was running up Hermit Road looking for us; she dragged us back home; she threw us down the shelter. My sisters were lying on top of all us young 'uns [sic] and we lay there like that for two and a half hours. You could actually feel the bombs as though they were hitting underneath the shelter — like there was someone underneath punching the mattress from underneath. It was murder ... it was murder.

"The 'all clear' went and when I came out of that shelter I was awe-struck because no matter which way you looked the sky was full of smoke. When it started our tea was on the table. We couldn't eat none [sic] of it; it was full of glass, ceiling and dirt — that's how the whole street was and every street you looked at; there wasn't a window left."



Riles Road, Plaistow — 19th March 1941
© London Borough of Newham





David Twitchett

"I copped it at 35 Geoffrey Gardens and was dug out of the shelter. Grandfather had sheltered under the dining room table. When they got him out they wondered what I was up to, and found me on top of the Anderson shelter, wearing my tin hat and shooting at the aircraft with my Tommy Gun, which worked on the football rattle principle. I was four years old at the time."

Donald Wharf

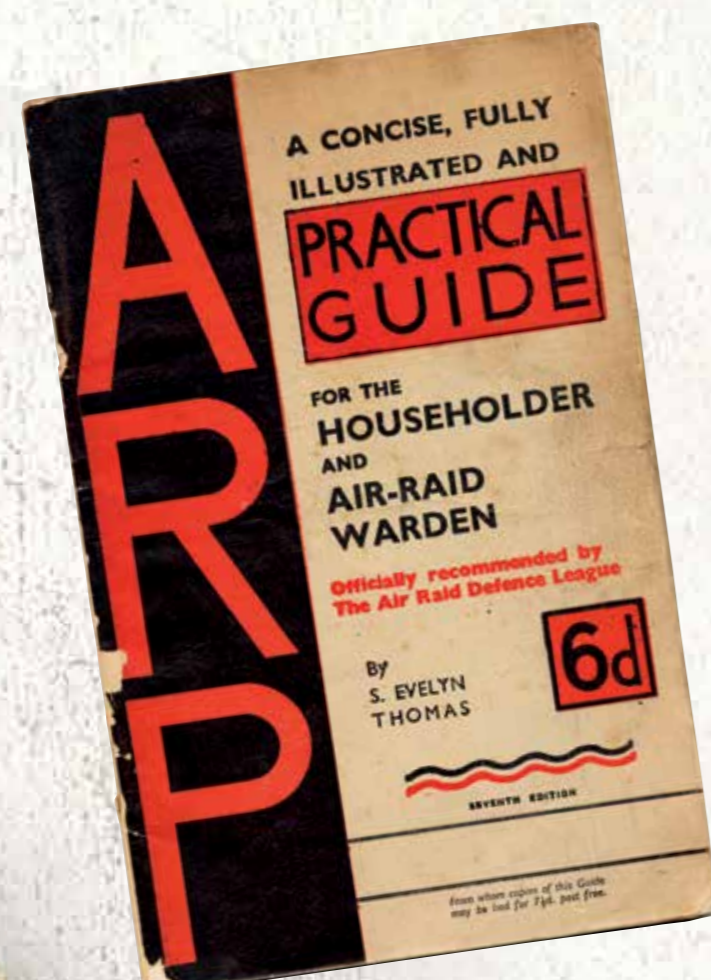
"I sat in the garden, digging away at the sun-baked soil, making a trench for my soldiers. I sat there transfixed by the grey puffs of smoke that were gathering high in the sky; then they began to move closer. Somebody yelled, 'Look, anti-aircraft fire' — that was when dad, and then my mother, appeared and whisked me away to the shelter."

"The noise from outside was getting steadily louder and louder. Then they were right overhead — our ears were bombarded with sounds: gunfire, the throbbing of enemy aircraft, but worse, the 'crunch' of their bombs. Slowly though, after a massive explosion, it all simply faded away. What was no more than a lull in the storm, soon ended and more Dorniers [aircraft] came in another great wave — their bombs crashing all round us. I wished it would end but the bombers kept coming — dozens and dozens it seemed, dropping their bombs more or less as they pleased."



ARP Depot, St. James Road, Forest Gate
— 13th October 1941
© London Borough of Newham

"The 'all-clear' came, and we slowly climbed out of the shelter. The daylight had turned strangely yellow and millions of black bits — like miniature tadpoles — were raining down out of the sky, settling on everything. I saw what was obviously causing it all — a sight I will never forget. The whole stretch of sky to the south of our garden glowed like a vast sea of fire. Smoke billowed up many hundreds of feet while sparks flew in every direction. The three of us stood there, just staring. 'Is it the docks?' I asked in the end. My father looked down, and then nodded."



Romford Road, Forest Gate — 29th April 1941
The Queen's Cinema was completely destroyed and blast damage can be seen on the adjoining Westminster Bank and the public air-raid shelter. © London Borough of Newham

Manuscript

— East Ham Fire Service

"The first fire call was for Woolworths in High Street North, and what a job it was with the fresh westerly wind that was blowing, to keep the Palace Theatre intact. After that it was calls and calls; 512 [calls] was the total for the night."

"Beckton Gas Works was out of action. Cyprus had been sacrificed to save the Oil Tank Farm and water had to be relayed from the Royal Albert Dock into Beckton, there being no water south of Barking Road. Appliances sent out to one fire, put out frequently six, seven or eight. It was noticed how the general public felt perturbed upon a fire appliance arriving and putting out a fire being dealt with by members of M.A.G.N.A. [Mutual Aid for Good Neighbours] with their stirrup pumps."

"This first blitz started at approximately 5 p.m. and no one had had tea. By 2 a.m. on the Sunday morning, there was no doubt that the personnel were flagging for want of refreshments and beverages. There was neither water, gas, nor electricity south of Barking Road. By about 6.30 a.m., most of the fires were out. By Sunday evening, the only thing that was left burning was the coke dump at Beckton, which was finished off on the Monday."

Irene Poole

"On the Saturday afternoon, when the fire blitz on the Docks and London started, I was in a cinema — the 'Premier' — in East Ham High Street, with my fiancé and my sister, for her birthday treat, watching 'Charley's Aunt'; Arthur Askey was Charley's Aunt. The air-raid warning was put on the screen and we decided to stay, not expecting anything to happen."

"Then, all hell broke loose. Anti-aircraft guns on Wanstead Flats could be heard and bombs started to fall — one near the cinema car park. We waited until the "all-clear" was given and came out of the cinema to an unimaginable sight. The top of the High Street was enveloped in smoke; a bomb had fallen on a store and many people were killed, including some who had been in the reinforced cellars of shops, which were used as air-raid shelters."

"We returned to my fiancé's parents' home. The parents had been in their Anderson shelter in the garden and when they came out they found a huge piece of a piano in their garden."



Blitz Wedding — 20th April 1941
On the morning after approximately 150 incendiary bombs had gutted St. Bartholomew's Church, East Ham, Helen Fowler and her Canadian sweetheart, Cpl. Christopher Morrison of the 48th Highlanders, were married. They stood proudly amid the ruins of the bombed-out church and made their wedding vows, while firemen played their hoses on the wooden beams which were still smouldering.
© London Borough of Newham



High Street North, East Ham — 30th April 1941
© London Borough of Newham



Mountfield Road, East Ham — 19th April 1941
© London Borough of Newham

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Gillman's Dare-Devils
Gillman's 'Dare-Devil' volunteer messengers in 1939.
© London Borough of Newham

Cyril Demarne OBE

— West Ham Fire Brigade

"Boy-messengers on bicycles; they did a marvellous job. They went chasing down the streets, skidded round heaps of bomb debris; got blown off their bikes by delayed action bombs going out, but they got up and carried on. And very often they came into the Control Room with their message, smothered in mud ... grazed knuckles. A few Victoria Crosses earned that night, but none of *them* got them."

W. A. Gillman — West Ham Councillor and Assistant Outside Controller, ARP

"I realised the value of despatch riders. Men were being called up for service, so there were only the boys you could rely on, aged between 14 and 16. I had the idea to recruit those into a band of cyclists. I wanted them to provide their own cycles, and paint them yellow, so they would always be recognised, but not challenged too much by the authorities when they were travelling from place to place.

"I asked if the Council would agree to supply them with a steel helmet and a leather armband with a big metal number on it ... I was to be No.1 and I only wanted another one — No. 2 — at Headquarters. The others would be scattered over the borough, stationed at wardens' posts and depots and then given orders and instructions from there ... trained to know what to do in case of emergency and to carry out orders.

"Thirty-six answered the adverts, from all over the borough. They were good kids. I told them there was no pay — this was voluntary and they were doing it for West Ham; it was to help in case the wires broke down. They took to it like a fish to bait, and they were great kids."



The King and Queen Visit Custom House
King George VI and Queen Elizabeth inspect bomb damage at Freemasons Road, Custom House, on 23rd April 1941.
© London Borough of Newham

Charles Robinson — Dare-Devil 29

"After a period of unemployment, my Mother saw in the Stratford Express, the advertisement that they wanted boys between the age of 16 and 18 for messenger work — ARP. So I applied for that, and I was taken-on: 'D.D. 29'.

"The bicycles were available, the very tall parson type 'yellow canaries' all painted yellow, so that they could be well recognised. But if you used your own bicycle you got half-a-crown extra for wear and tear. So I used my own, the half-a-crown was handy.

"I reported for duty at Silvertown. They didn't send me out in the first part of the Blitz, as the phones were still OK. Later in the night, I was sent to Stratford, to Headquarters. There were a lot of burning buildings and bits and pieces everywhere. On the first run out I had to push aside cans of blazing paint from the paint factory, just up the top of Camel Road in Silvertown, and in doing so, set my tyre alight with paint. I rubbed it along the kerb until it went out and carried on until I got to Stratford, where I handed-in my message. I'd only done the one run on that particular night — pretty hairy ... scared out of my life ... but it was quite an adventure."

Alderman George Blaker

"Runners had to be sent out to the wardens' posts which were out of action. These runners were youths who could ride cycles. Some only just in their teens, they were called "Gillman's Dare-Devils" — named after their O.C., Councillor Gillman — and dare devils they were: keen, reliable, and efficient.

"They were negotiating roads that were blocked in the worst of the blackout, to get to their destinations and return to the nearest post for messages to be relayed to Control. Even out in the bombing, sometimes blown off their bikes, falling in craters in the road that had not been previously reported; their courage was undaunted. It was with the utmost difficulty that they had to be restrained from going out when the bombing was heavy.

"One lad, named Mick by his pals — great tall lad, hair always dishevelled, face dirty — knew no fear. He would go out in any weather or heavy bombing. He went on this particular night to the farther part of the borough; he could be trusted to do his job. I was rather anxious about his being delayed in his return, but he came in to the Centre, reported, and then stated that he had been blown off his machine by the explosion of a bomb, into a crater in the blackness, and was stunned. When he came to, he cycled back as hard as he could to the Centre, pleased and proud that he had accomplished another task, ready to go out again. Good British bulldog breed this; so were all these Dare-Devils. Hitler could not even break their spirit and we in West Ham are proud of them for what they did in the hour of their country's greatest need."



Rochester Avenue, Upton Park — 19th March 1941
© London Borough of Newham



Gladstone Avenue, Manor Park — 26th February 1941
© London Borough of Newham

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Such was the mayhem on Black Saturday that when a burning German fighter-plane crashed into a West Ham street, it did not receive a mention in the incident reports.

Winston Graham

— 'After the Battle' Publications

"There had been a persistent rumour that a German aircraft crashed in West Ham in September 1940" wrote Winston Ramsey, Editor of 'After the Battle' magazine. "Two people, who worked for us at Plaistow Press, even claimed to have seen the burning aircraft falling — Les Frost, the composing room overseer, stating quite categorically that it fell in Meath Road. Les said that he started to run in the direction of the crash but then bombs began to fall and instead he took shelter.

"I could not marry the crash with a known aircraft loss, partly because no one could then give us a reliable date. There is no official report of an aircraft crashing in Meath Road, West Ham, or in ARP records for the Borough; neither are there any clues in Ministry of Defence records. Whilst researching 'The East End Then and Now' in 1996, I resolved that the matter must be settled once and for all.

"A search of mortuary returns preserved at the reference library in Water Lane gave us the vital clue, for there, against the cause of death for Agnes Rapley and Ada Goldspink living at No. 75 Ranelagh Road, were the words 'Aircraft through shelter'.

"We decided that an on-the-spot investigation was necessary to try to establish the identity of the aircraft concerned, and with the kind permission of the current owner, in August 1996 we ran a metal detector over his paved garden. Strong readings indicated that it would be worth excavating the area underneath the table and chairs. The 'After the Battle' team began work, uncovering vital pieces of wreckage, proving that it was the crash-site of a Bf-109.

"Now that we knew the type of aircraft, we re-examined RAF records. Just after 5 p.m. on Saturday 7th September, Leutnant Gunther Genske, flying a single-seated Messerschmitt Bf-109, had been attacked by a Hurricane, most probably piloted by Flight Lieutenant G. Powell-Shedden of No. 242 Squadron. He filed a combat report stating that the 109 he fired



Excavation at Ranelagh Road, West Ham
The After the Battle team at work in the rear garden of 75 Ranelagh Road in 1996.
© Winston Ramsey

at 'disappeared down out of control in flames over Thameshaven.' Blinded and burned by the flames, Leutnant Genske jumped from his burning machine and drifted to earth at Rainham where he was captured. However, for over 50 years the fate of the burning Messerschmitt was unknown as the RAF report on the incident simply said pilot down at 'Rainham Road, Hornchurch'.

"During the excavation we also found the remains of the air-raid shelter and personal possessions. The story of our investigation was covered in detail in 'After the Battle' No. 94. After we had published the story in November 1996, Mrs Joy Carter (née West) came to see us. In 1940, she was living at No. 91 Ranelagh Road and her mum pulled her, her brother John and younger sister Pamela, into their shelter when the warning sounded. When they emerged, there was the tail of a plane sticking out of the ground and news came that Pamela's playmate, Audrey, had been killed along with her parents Alice and Michael Redman. They lived at No. 73 — the

house next to the garden of the one we had excavated; so the crash killed five all told. The ironic thing was that had they remained indoors, they would have survived.

"Then in January 2010 a letter arrived at our office from Freddie Burgess. He explained that in 1940 he was 17 and a member of the Local Defence Volunteers and was living with his parents at 76 Meath Road. During his off-duty hours at St Andrew's Hospital, Bow, he kept a diary and described that day."



Section of Anderson Shelter from 75 Ranelagh Road
Winston Ramsey with a piece of the Anderson Shelter in which five people were crushed to death.
© Winston Ramsey

A 59. M.O. 11 42. Police yes. FORM C.W.D.	
DEATH DUE TO WAR OPERATIONS.	
Name and Address of Mortuary..... MUNICIPAL BATHS, E 15 ROMFORD ROAD.....	
A.—TO BE ENTERED IMMEDIATELY UPON RECEPTION OF THE BODY AT MORTUARY.	
Date..... 8/9/40.....	Hour..... 12.00..... of Reception.
1. Place of Death* 75 Ranelagh Rd. Area Ruth Goldspink	175 Ranelagh Rd. E 15
* Cross out whichever is inapplicable. Full postal particulars of house or street.	
2. Date and hour of Death* 7/9/40	3. Sex. Female
* Cross out whichever is inapplicable. 4. Probable Age. 15	
5. Cause of Death [see Note 1]. Aircraft through shelter	
Signature..... J. Butler	Official Description..... Baths Dept.
Date..... 10/9/40	
B.—BODY CLAIMED AND REMOVED FOR BURIAL BY RELATIVES OR FRIENDS.	
1. Signature of Relative or Friend..... A. M. Martin	
2. Address..... 75 Ranelagh Rd. E 15	
3. Deceased Identified by Relative or Friend as..... Ada Ruth Goldspink	
4. Serial Identification Number (if any)..... A-59	
[See Note 2.]	

Mortuary Certificate
Mortuary Certificate for Miss Ada Ruth Goldspink of 75 Ranelagh Road, West Ham, clearly stating cause of death as 'Aircraft through shelter'.

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Freddie Burgess — Diary:
Saturday 7th September 1940

"Feeling tired and harassed after the usual hectic Saturday morning, I wended my way homewards to Meath Road during the inevitable raid warning. When I arrived at No. 76 there were the usual odd things to do and five o'clock soon came with the usual teatime alert. I woke up my father and everyone settled down to tea.

"Gunfire! Said father; and we hustled mother into the family shelter in the garden, but he and I stayed outside to watch the 'fun'. A flight of planes appeared. I focussed my very weak binoculars on them and counted thirteen flying in perfect wedge formation. Three or four flights appeared and suddenly the sky seemed full of aircraft. White puffs of smoke from the guns burst in and around them, whilst a hopelessly small group of our fighters ceaselessly nipped at the tails of the German armada. They came on, heedless of all defensive measures and I saw at least five of them scream down to earth in trails of smoke and fire. But shrapnel then began falling with its peculiar 'whizz' and I hurriedly leapt into the safety of the shelter as a large piece hurtled down quite close to my body.

"We crouched down, feeling terribly excited and also comforting mother. Suddenly there came the whine of an approaching plane. 'Ah, that's got one of the b*****s' said my father. The whine rose to a groan and this rose to a crescendo of noise. 'My God, lie flat!' The noise grew unendurably [sic] loud to our tortured ears until it seemed as though the world was going mad. Suddenly there was a terrific crash. An ominous silence followed. For the space of two or three seconds we lay bewildered. Then came a sudden roar and a fierce crackling. I leapt out of the shelter and saw to my horror a burning plane in the next garden but one.

"There was no time to lose as the wreckage was already burning furiously. I had little realised to what use our much maligned stirrup-pump would be put. However I was soon mounted on the remains of a garden shed, playing the jet on the fire as if I had been in the London Fire Brigade all my life. My methods of fire-fighting were no doubt rather unorthodox, but by this time many other neighbours had arrived and at least a dozen pumps were belching a dozen streams



Freddie Burgess in 1940
Photo from the private collection of F. Burgess

of water into the heart of the smoking, flaming mass which had once been a proud German fighting plane.

"The ammunition began to explode with remarkable effects. Spent cartridges began flying in every direction, and other neighbours in shelters actually thought that we were being machine-gunned from the air by the raiders overhead. After a moment of hesitation, it was found that the spent bullets were not particularly dangerous, thus we carried on with the task of putting out the fire.

"One of the amateur firemen shouted: 'Here son!' And I ran over to him to find that sparks had penetrated into the bedroom of the house opposite. In a matter of seconds, all bedding was heaved from the room and several jets directed therein. And now came the AFS men with a monster of a hose, who were soon applying their training in good stead.



German Messerschmitt Bf-109
A German Messerschmitt Bf-109 similar to the one that crashed in Ranelagh Road

"I had now time to look around and I saw for the first time that an Anderson shelter had been crushed as the plane had reached the climax of the hell-dive to earth. All helped to loosen the many bolts and at last the steel sides — still very hot from the nearby flames — were laboriously bent back. The combined strength of all five of us was necessary to bend back the shelter. Someone exclaimed: 'Can you see anyone in there?' As I looked down I felt really like vomiting for the first time since it all began, for the wretched man was standing full on the face of one of the unfortunate occupants of the shelter. He also looked down and, rather shamefacedly, drew an old sack over the face. It was useless to search any further. The force of the impact had heaved the earth and the occupants almost to the roof of the shelter, that was itself bent to a width of about three feet. It was my first sight of air raid victims and I felt sick with horror.

"We were not given long to ponder over the dreadful end of the poor folk whom we knew as neighbours, for the fire suddenly leapt into a fierce flash as another of the petrol tanks caught fire. All hands were again busy. My father then suddenly clutched me by the waist and threw me to the ground beside the fire. A screaming sound followed and an explosion which seemed to burst my very eardrums. I looked round amidst the smoke and saw that two houses about 200 yards away had become literally non-existent.



Winston Ramsey and Freddie Burgess
Winston Ramsey (left), Editor-in-Chief of *After the Battle*, together with Freddie Burgess, standing at the spot where Freddie fought the fire in 1940.
© Winston Ramsey

"I saw three or four shapes like large black pears hurtling through the air on their way to complete the tale of horror and destruction. The whistling of the bombs; the drone of the planes above; the screams of frightened women, all contributed to the general uproar.

"Meanwhile I was absolutely embracing the earth beneath me and my father was so heavy on my back that I thought it would crack. More bombs came but suddenly the day seemed bright again as the raiders passed over the district. My father and I picked ourselves up, dirty but unhurt, and we climbed over the fence back to our own back garden, not saying a single word."

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South Hallsville School — 10th September 1940
 Hundreds of people were sheltering in the school in Agate Street when it took a direct hit at 3.45 a.m. on Tuesday 10th September 1940. The heavy bomb demolished half the building and brought down hundreds of tons of masonry. The official death toll was 73.
 © London Borough of Newham

Bill Bartley

"I was 18 years old at the time of the bombing of South Hallsville School. I was then living at Kerry Street, Tidal Basin, with my parents, sisters and brothers. On September 9th we were all told to go to South Hallsville and Frederick Road schools which were quite close. We were told that buses would take us away from the dock area to a safer place.

"My family and myself went to Frederick Road School and a lot of my friends went to South Hallsville. During the evening I went over to South Hallsville, to get my mate [Alec] and his family to come over to Frederick Road. His mum said she was settled and would stay, but my friend Alec came over with us. At about 2 or 3 in the morning I was woken to be told that South Hallsville had been hit. We all rushed over to the school and for the next 7 or 8 hours we were helping the Fire Brigade, Police and Ambulance Service to get the bodies out of the debris.

"The last time I saw my friend Alec was when he was pulling away debris looking for his mum and family. His father was away at sea in the Merchant Navy."

Win Hardy Née Huckle

"I had just got home after working a 12-hour nightshift. I was living with my sister Clare and her husband in St Albans Avenue, East Ham. My sister asked me to go and look for our brother Jack, who worked in the docks at Canning Town, as we hadn't seen him for about 3 days. He worked in the docks during the day and was doing fire watching or something like that, at night. I was tired and I didn't really want to go, but my big sister insisted, and so I got back on my bike and cycled down to the docks.

"The bomb damage was really bad at Canning Town. I saw a warden and I asked him if he knew Jack Webster, and if he had seen him. The warden said he hadn't seen Jack, so I started to cycle off when he pleaded with me to stay and help to get casualties out of the bomb-damaged buildings.

"I stayed with him and helped to remove bodies from the rubble. There seemed to be hundreds of them — this was at Hallsville School. It was just heartbreaking. There were Dockers digging frantically hoping to find members of their families. I didn't know it at the time, but my brother Jack was also there helping to get out the casualties. Afterwards, I went into shock and lost all of my hair, but it did grow back in time."

Winston Churchill in a Broadcast Speech, 11th September 1940

"These cruel, wanton, indiscriminate bombings of London are, of course, a part of Hitler's invasion plan. He hopes, by killing large numbers of civilians, and women and children, that he will terrorise and cow the people of this mighty imperial city and make them a burden and anxiety to the Government, and thus distract our attention unduly from the ferocious onslaught he is preparing. Little does he know the spirit of the British nation, or the tough fibre of the Londoners whose forebears played a leading part in the establishment of

Parliamentary institutions and who have been bred to value freedom far above their lives.

"This wicked man, the repository and embodiment of many forms of soul-destroying hatred; this monstrous product of former wrongs and shames, has now resolved to try to break our famous island race by a process of indiscriminate slaughter and destruction. What he has done is to kindle a fire in British hearts, here and all over the world, which will glow long after all traces of the conflagrations he has caused in London have been removed. He has lighted a fire which will burn with a steady and consuming flame until the last vestiges of Nazi tyranny have been burnt out of Europe, and until the old world and the new, can join hands to rebuild the temples of man's freedom and man's honour on foundations which will not soon or easily be overthrown.

"This is the time for everyone to stand together and hold firm, as they are doing. I express my admiration for the exemplary manner in which the air-raid precaution services in London are being discharged, especially the fire brigades, whose work has been so heavy and also dangerous.

"All the world that is still free, marvels at the composure and fortitude with which the citizens of London are facing and surmounting the great ordeal to which they are subjected, the end of which, or the severity of which, cannot yet be foreseen. It is a message of good cheer to our fighting forces, on the seas, in the air and in our waiting armies, in all their posts and stations, that we send them from this capital city. They know that they have behind them a people who will not flinch or weary of the struggle, hard and protracted though it will be, but that we shall rather draw from the heart of suffering the means of inspiration and survival, and of a victory won not only for ourselves, but for all — a victory won not only for our own times, but for the long and better days that are to come."



Winston Churchill Visits Silvertown
 The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, toured the East End on Sunday 7th September 1940, to view the damage caused by the bombing. He is seen here at the ruined India Rubber Company, Silvertown.
 © Imperial War Museum





War Memorial, East London Cemetery — September 1940
So many were killed in the early days of the Blitz that they had to be interred in mass graves, including those killed at South Hallsville School.
© London Borough of Newham

ARP Warden

“At about 8 o'clock on Monday evening, we were preparing ourselves for another all-night ordeal when the warning sounded again. Up to now our Rest Centre [Hallsville School] had been rather more than just full, but by the time we had crammed everybody into the shelters, we were — literally speaking — bursting at the seams.

“Tonight's raid proved to be somewhat different to what we had already had; the numbers of bombs were very much less, but they were definitely heavier and bigger bombs. They were, in ARP language, Heavy Calibre Bombs. The first one that fell seemed to be right on our doorstep, but was in fact several streets away. As more came down one after another, they seemed to get nearer and nearer and soon everyone was beginning to feel that the next one would be ours.

“During the 'all-clear' periods, we had many ARP and other such personnel coming in and out of the school, all trying to do the best they could in a worsening situation. As soon as the warning went, it was duty stations for everyone, and consequently there were only two wardens on duty in the school: a young cripple girl who was a full-timer, and myself, a part-time volunteer. We stationed ourselves one at each end of the shelter, and tried to keep contact with each other by periodically moving down the length of the corridor and exchanging notes. As time went on, this was becoming increasingly difficult because the whole place was getting more and more like the 'Black Hole of Calcutta'.

“It was getting near to 2.30 in the morning and I had not seen my colleague for half an hour or so. I tried to worm my way through the crowds but it was hopeless. I decided to come out of the school at my end, make a run for it across the playground and go in again at the other end. Out in the playground I heard something whistling through the air. I threw myself down flat; there was a terrific crunch and as I lifted my eyes I saw one half of the school disappear in a cloud of smoke and dust. My first thoughts were for young Vicky but as I picked myself up she came running out.

“The school itself was quite a formidable building. It consisted of two floors, and the flat roof of reinforced concrete and asphalt formed an elevated playground for the senior boys. In the normal sense the building was a very good air-raid shelter but with a direct hit, it became a death trap.

“Instinctively I knew that it might be some time before we could get any services. During the weekend, two of our rescue depots had been knocked out of action. As the Warden Post was almost within sight of the school, I knew it would not be necessary to report the incident. I don't know who it was but I grabbed the first one I could and shouted: 'Run like hell to the Police Station and tell them what's happened.'

“Whatever may be said about our wartime Police, they certainly came out tops this time as also did the Home Guard Officer who seemed to appear from nowhere. I often wonder who he was, but just as he appeared, so also did he disappear sometime after our task was completed.

“Very soon the scene was becoming a hive of activity. Policemen, Firemen, and St. John's Ambulance — every service that one could mention besides many, many others who thought nothing of their own safety but were only concerned with helping others worse off than themselves — they were all there.

“Dealing with the lightly — or even seriously injured, was a comparatively easy matter; but when it came to the trapped, there's not much we could do except scratch and scrape at the tons and tons of concrete reinforced with steel girders. It was about 7.00 a.m. and daylight was beginning to break through. Already a message had been sent to control: 'Cancel the buses; send us morgue vans and ambulances.'

“A small group of us were standing on the edge of the crater. Near to me was Cllr. Paton who was at the time, 'Staff Officer in Charge of Public Shelters'. He had in his time been something of a churchman. As we stood there surveying the scene, he lifted his head to the sky and with tears streaming down his face he cried 'My God, my God, this should never have happened.'

“The official figures give somewhere around 80 or 90 killed but doesn't allow for those who were never found. Only the German Luftwaffe can be held responsible for the bomb that hit the school, but the fact that many people lost their lives who should not have been there can only be attributed to the people who failed in their responsibilities to the public.”



Dedication Service, East London Cemetery — 24th April 1940
The dedication service at the unveiling of the memorial in East London Cemetery where 260 people were buried.
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