

WARTIME MEMORIES OF MOLESEY

In November 2010, to mark the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, the Society staged an event entitled "LIFE IN MOLESEY DURING WORLD WAR II", vividly recreating aspects of everyday life in Molesey during the conflict.

Part of the research for this event included interviews with people who had lived in Molesey during the War to record their memories of the period. During the evening, extracts from these interviews were read out by four members of the Barn Theatre, in the form of a conversation. The script for their performance is set out below.

Announcement of War and Precautions

I was fourteen and my mother looked at me and said "It'll all be over before you're old enough to go", and I ended up in Burma for three years!

We were at my grandmother's house in Arnison Road, listening to the wireless. After the announcement I went out to meet my friends from church and almost immediately the air raid siren sounded and we rushed across the road into the Hansler Grove shelter. The rest of my family went down Grandma's coal cellar. Of course it was a false alarm, but we all thought we'd be bombed or gassed almost immediately. Later that day a friend from Wiltshire drove up and took us down to stay with him. We stayed for six weeks but came back to Molesey when nothing happened!"

I was really upset – they wouldn't let me have a Minnie Mouse gas mask. They said I was too old.

There was a gas raid rehearsal one day at St Joseph's Convent School. The Headmistress came in to the classroom wearing her mask and shouted out "gas"! - not that you could shout very easily with a gas mask on! She didn't put her mask on in front of us. I would imagine it was no easy task to get it on over her nun's habit! We all had to hurriedly put our masks on and try to carry on with our arithmetic lesson at the same time. It was very difficult. It was quite hard to breathe in them and the eyepiece steamed up very easily so that you couldn't see a thing you were doing.

There was a 'smoke hut' at the corner of Molemer Road for fire-watchers to practice. They had to crawl on hands and knees through it keeping as low as possible to avoid the smoke.

There was a blue police box with a siren on a long pole up by the First Molesey scout hut. There were three signals: air raid, raid has passed and all clear! You could pick up the telephone in the box and you were immediately connected.

Shelters

Everyone was delivered an Anderson Shelter at beginning of war, and you had to dig them in and I remember helping. I was only eight. About a third of its height had to be buried and covered with earth for protection. People used to have a garden on top – and my brother and I shared it and we used to grow kids' stuff, like cress. It had door at front so that it could be shut at night to keep animals out, and there were sandbags at the front and up the side so you had something to protect it from blast.

We had a bit of a laugh because at one stage we went to go into the shelter ... my grandmother was with us by then ... and we always put the dog in first and she wouldn't go in,

so my grandmother got hold of her and said, "Go in Trixie" and threw her in and there was a splash, it was flooded. So, that was the end of that shelter.

It was all right at first – glorious sunshine. I built a crystal radio set as a hobby and took the wind-up gramophone down there until October when they switched to night bombing. I worked out it was going to flood so I used four deck chairs to make a suspended bed. The next-door neighbours ignored my advice and got flooded out. Mother applied for a Morrison shelter but never got one, so we moved a double bed downstairs and slept under it. It couldn't have protected us.

When the siren used to go when I was eating my dinner, I would jump up with my dinner and run down the garden and get into the shelter and finish my dinner off.

When the air raid siren went at lunchtime at Sunnymead School, you really wanted to panic, but you couldn't; you had to pick up your knife and fork and plate, stand up, turn round, and then go in single file down to the Sunnymead air raid shelter.

It was horrible – damp, dark and smelly. We slept in it once or twice and then stayed in the house every night, as my mother declared she would rather take the risk of us being killed in our beds than die of pneumonia!

We did not have an air raid shelter to begin with, because the Council couldn't let us have one, because it was a Victorian building and they couldn't have one outside. We used to go to the Europa and, being only children, we used to go there with our hair in curlers and our pyjamas and dressing gown and walk through the public bar to the cellars, and they used to wolf whistle us and make fun of us going down there, but that was our only means for an air raid shelter to begin with.

We ended up with a Morrison one indoors. It was a tabletop shelter and underneath the tabletop we had a bed always made up. When the sirens went, guess who got in first....the dog! We had to make it big enough for the whole family. It was crowded.

We had what was called a Morrison Table Shelter, made of metal, and the four of us used to sleep in that. I tried going to sleep on one occasion whilst my sister was having her supper and using the shelter as a table. Every bottle and jar she put down on it made an extremely loud reverberating sound which made it impossible for me to get to sleep! As it was such a squash for the four of us, my poor father slept outside it and rolled into it whenever he heard a Doodlebug approaching!

My parents did not have an air raid shelter, so my mother was given permission to take me as a baby to the shelter belonging to the owners of the Laundry in Pemberton Road. But there was no lying down, only for the owners. My mum had to sit and hold me until the all-clear, however tired she might have been as a new mother.

During the Blitz we spent our nights in the cellars of the Roman Catholic Presbytery in Vine Road. We used to sleep on mattresses in one of the narrow passages. There were ten of us down there. Every evening we would kneel whilst one of the priests said the Rosary, and then after we had all got into bed the other priest would come and sprinkle us with holy water from a special container and pray for our safety during the night.

Evacuation/Refugees

They asked us in school if we wanted to be evacuated, but I refused to go. I wanted to stay at home

I went to Lincolnshire. They had to put me in the top class, because the standard was not as high as my old school. I loved the school and made some marvellous friends.

In Chippenham the locals were stand-offish and I was homesick. Mother said I ought to come home.

We were looked after marvellously from the time we left Esher station until we were billeted. We were fed so well by the W.V.S. both on the train and at Chester. I was billeted in a lovely house with the kindest of people and what pleased me more than anything else was that my two children were made to feel quite at home

One day the teacher asked the class if any of us wanted to be evacuated out of England, so I just put my hand up. It was not because of the War, just because I thought it would be fun. I chose to go to Canada because my mum had always said that, because my father was in the Canadian Army, if I ever left I should go to Canada. I had to work really hard, because Mrs McBeth said, "you are here for nothing, we don't get paid for you". When I came home from school I had to clean the pigs out, make the dinner – I did all the cooking – I made pies and I made bread for the vicar when he came round.

I was a refugee and came to Molesey from Vienna. The owners of Mildred Lodge School took in several refugees during the early years of the war. They treated me with much kindness, even though I'm sure that my mother couldn't have paid the full school fees for me. I feel very grateful to the English people who saved my life and my mother's by taking us in.

Air-raids and Bombs

We moved here on Sept 3, the day war broke out. We used to stand on top of the shelter and look towards London and see the flickering glow of the Blitz, a bit like fireworks 14 miles away, and the glow and flash of bombs and anti-aircraft fire.

The first bomb to land in Molesey dropped in Down Street, at the end of Faraday Road, which in those days was open fields and prefabricated bungalows. Fortunately, if I remember right, no-one was killed.

I remember the first night raid very well. It was not long after the siren went that the familiar engine sound of the German planes got closer. As we got out of our beds to go downstairs I remember looking out of the landing window and seeing the sky alight with search lights looking for 'planes. The sound of our guns trying to shoot down the planes started soon after. My mother could see I looked worried and she said "Don't worry dear, God will take care of us". We had no air-raid shelter so the four of us tried to get into the cupboard under the stairs, which would have been the safest place had the house been hit. Nevertheless it was very uncomfortable sitting up the whole night with a gas meter in your back!

Sometimes the bombers would drop their loads on the way back home. I used to walk around the fields looking for bomb craters and I measured the distance between craters, which showed they were bombs that had been jettisoned. Some of the craters were very deep and filled with water. There were lots of newts!

A policeman knocked on our door one Sunday lunchtime. He told us to pack a suitcase and be ready to leave in ten minutes. A landmine at the bottom of Island Barn reservoir hadn't exploded and the police were frightened that it could have broken the reservoir wall and detonated the chlorine gas cylinders used to purify the water.

I remember this so vividly, Mrs Neale had run out of Rinso and I said I would go and get it for her. I met up with a Mrs Curtis who lived at one of the houses right at the end. The siren went, Mrs Curtis had her little daughter in a pram, and we went down the air raid shelter and we sat there together. Then, the air raid warden came round and told us that the bomb had dropped in Avern Road. I was so excited that I couldn't get home quick enough because I wanted to tell my mum that I knew where the bomb had dropped.

A bomb fell on a house near us. It was quite a big bomb or big enough because John, Mother and I were sitting in what was the kitchen then and it had a big range in there, an Ideal boiler, the old type, and everything blew up. All the soot came down and we were blown all over the place. All the windows went and the front door was blown open.

There were lots of German planes and Spitfires around, and one day an incendiary bomb dropped through the roof of our bungalow and landed in the hearth. My father picked it up with a shovel and took it out into the garden. We blocked up the hole in the roof.

At first they made us take all our books and work into the shelters – we were expected to work. The light wasn't enough to see with, let alone write. You certainly couldn't read. It was terribly hot with no ventilation, we got stifled. After a while we pleaded with the teachers to let us go and stand outside and after some weeks they gave in. We were allowed to stand outside, with our backs to the brick walls of the shelters, it fortunately had an overhanging roof about 2 feet or eighteen inches all the way round and we watched the Battle of Britain going on. For us it was thrilling. If an enemy aircraft was shot down, and we did see planes shot down, and they crashed perhaps miles away, we all cheered. We could recognise every aircraft – the British, the Italians, the Germans and on one occasion we were sitting at lessons and without warning (the sirens had not gone), we heard machine gunning overhead and the teachers said, "Everyone to the shelters, stop what you are doing, go to the shelters immediately." As we got to the door the sirens did go but by then there were enemy bombers overhead, twin-engined heavy bombers, escorted by German Messerschmitt fighters, and being attacked by British Spitfires and Hurricanes. We still don't know to this day whether the German fighters were diving on the British fighters and machine gunning them and the bullets just spraying our playground or whether the German fighters were machine gunning us children because by that time we were all running to the shelters and when machine gun bullets started flying and spitting off the playground the teachers who were in the building shouted to their children, "Stop, stop! Come back, come back!" and by then we were halfway across. There were other teachers already in the entrance to the shelter saying, "Come on, come on!" So we rushed on and again we took our positions with our backs to the wall of the shelter on the outside and the teachers ordered us inside which we ignored. And we watched this gun fighting going on above us and however anyone didn't get killed, I do not know to this day. Bullets were still hitting the playground as children were running to the shelters. That stuck vividly in my mind ever since.

When the doodlebugs came, they were quite frequent. They were more frightening than what actually happened, because you would hear the noise cut out. It always sounded frightfully near, but sometimes it wasn't.

A doodlebug landed when there was a big entertainment of the Welsh Guards. They weren't supposed to have large crowds congregating at that time but they did. We lived at Ember Gardens, just nearly opposite, and my mother was lying on the settee before she went shopping. Anyway, she decided to go shopping and while she was away this doodlebug landed. When she got home all the windows and the glass had broken and were on the

settee, so she would have been killed. But then my father had to go over with bags picking up all the bits of bodies, which was a pretty awful experience.

My husband, Sid, was in the ARP (Air Raid Precautions), and they were trying to piece together the bodies to see how many had been killed. It was terrible.

Basher was buried in Pemberton Road for 8 hours. He and his father were dug out alive, but his mother wasn't. She would have been my mother-in law. When he was found, he ran off, and just kept running. He was only dressed in his pyjamas. He was found after an hour and taken to Molesey Hospital, where he was treated for cuts, and he had lost his hearing, (which did come back after a while). They were told 'Ok you can go home'. Well, they were black, they had been buried all that time, they were in pyjamas, they had no shoes on their feet and they had no home to go to. They went to his Gran's in Avern Road. Gran didn't have room for them to stay there so they went to Basher's aunt in Beauchamp Road. Auntie Vee took them in until her two boys came out of the services. Then she didn't have room. By then I was courting and Bash came to live with us. He always slept with the light on and had nightmares until the day he died. The cat was pulled out of the rubble eight days later. He certainly had nine lives!

My friend lost her sister at Vickers. They both worked there and had just gone back to work after lunch when the aircraft came. She said there was no warning, although there were spotters on the roof. The planes came out of the sun and they did not see the aircraft until too late. The roof of the factory was made of glass and when she heard the planes she ran, and someone pulled her under the stairs. After the 'all clear' siren, everyone went outside and she searched all the shelters. She found her friend who was all right, but they could not find her sister. Joyce had pieces of glass all over her arms and in her hair. She was taken in someone's car to Weybridge Hospital and then had to cycle home with everyone staring at her. The police came round later that evening to say that someone fitting her sister's description had been found. She was only 21.

German planes used the river to navigate their way to Vickers, and the Thames borders our farms, so we were right in 'Bomb Alley'. They used a tall chimney at the waterworks as a signpost and we saw lots of dogfights over the fields. We had Land Girls living and working on the farm and one of their early morning jobs was to pick up incendiary bombs, which had landed in the fields. One misty summer morning, the Land Girls were in the tomato fields. Around 11 am, the mist cleared and the sun shone through. All of a sudden a single German fighter plane swooped down firing at the women. They all managed to jump into specially dug trenches and survived. Later we heard that the plane had been shot down over the coast.

Food and Farming

There were lots of farms in Molesey, but we grew everything in the garden, everything, all the vegetables, and we had chicken and rabbits. We ate the chickens; that was why I went vegetarian. We grew some fruit, gooseberries and raspberries. The garden was very big – it went down to the bottom of High Street

There wasn't any room to grow food in our garden, but we kept rabbits in the little bit of ground we'd got. But I couldn't bear to see Dad hit them on the head, I used to say how cruel it was.

From 1940 onwards, to the time I joined up, food was desperate at times. I was getting hungry, and on one occasion my mother said "What on earth are we going to eat?" so I got an

eel hook, which was a hook and a line, and caught a duck. I took it into the shed, and after about three hours, I got it into a reasonably presentable state and took it into my mother, who nearly had a fit. But she cooked it and we ate it, but there wasn't much meat on it. Perhaps I should have got a hen instead of a cock bird.

You couldn't get sweets, although there was a shop in Kingston that let you have a pound of boiled sweets for a small price and a pound of sugar!

My mother was too busy in the shop at weekends, so my brother and I often went to the British Restaurant

I used to go there too, when I was delivering milk. I remember one day when I didn't get my lunch. I used to have this 'Tin Lizzie' to carry the milk – nobody, including me, wanted to take the Tin Lizzie out. On this particular day I was late and thought I'm not going to have time to come back for my meal, so I'll park Tin Lizzie and have my meal. Well, instead of coming gradually across, I sort of turned and hit the front wheel against the kerb and the milk shot off onto the pavement. Some kind gentleman picked up my crate and the broken bottles. Of course I had to go back to the depot, because I hadn't got any milk. The boss said "That was quick" and I said "I haven't been yet". So he had to reload me up, and I didn't get my dinner that day.

Industry

They brought in women to the toolmakers, where I was working when I left school. At the end we had to work through the night, which I found stressful and they built an area where the women all worked. They seemed to be segregated almost.

There was a lot of industry here. In Central Avenue there were individual little factories making engineering parts for the services, the Army, the Navy. At the back there was all the waste, all the filings and all the bits, but nothing was wasted, all that was collected and melted down again.

There was the paper shop, and the bakers and from there right up to the last shop there were little engineering shops, and the last shop was a Plaster of Paris place that used to make chalk models, wedding statues for cakes, even during the war.

A lot of the garages had little workshops in them, with two or three lathes in them. They made nuts and bolts. It doesn't seem a lot, but it all helped.

Yes, and all the MTBs used to be at Thorneycroft. Watercraft used to have MTBs and air sea rescue launches there for repair. When they re-launched them, I used to watch as they would slide the bridge out of the way and put them into the Thames. I was fascinated.

Children

Yes, but it was a good time for children during the War and we did not feel fear. We used to watch the dogfights and get shrapnel and if you got a nice piece of hot shrapnel, that had just been fired, you were really one up with that. It gave you more kudos than marbles and I used to keep my collection of shrapnel on the windowsill of the outside toilet.

On our way home from school we would pick up machine gun shells from the road and they were blue where they had been fired and they were still hot when we picked them up, some of them. To us it was quite thrilling. We didn't give it a thought that we could have been killed.

Do you remember the Americans stationed in Hurst Park, because we used to say when they went past, "Got any gum chum?" If you were extremely lucky they would throw you some gum and you were well chuffed because there was no chance of sweets.

One thing I do remember, we used to go out picking up cigarette ends for the internees working on the fields. They put them in their little tins and would roll them up, and they used to give us bits of chocolate.

They used to sing opera while they worked. They wore brown uniforms with a yellow patch and a target on the back for if they tried to run away. We used to see them over Cow Common where they were clearing the Mole bushes and riverbank. They learnt English from us and had sweets to give us. We liked that. They worked well and were happy to be here. Do you remember Heinz, the German, who died recently? He stayed on and became the caretaker at Rivermede School and was wonderful with the children.

Victory Celebrations

Did we have a street party? Not half! Our mothers must have saved up their rations for ages, because we had a real good tuck-in, I mean jelly and cake, the sort of things you never saw appeared for that party. We were in our best, but one of the girls was in a paper skirt, and Johnny Pink had his feet out of socks - we always had holes in our socks.

Yes, we had a street party with balloons and flags. Everybody from the street helped and the food was laid out in the centre of Upper Farm Road. There were trestle tables and we had jelly and ice cream and cakes and sandwiches. That was during the day and in the evening my father turned all the furniture out of the house into the garage, except the piano, and invited all the grown ups. My brother and I sat on the stairs and watched. We didn't go to bed until late.