



## World War Two

### Air raids

**Advances in aviation ensured that one of the key horrors on the home front was to come from the skies, in the form of enemy air raid bombings.**

**On this page and in [Scavenging and looting](#), [Excerpts from the minutes from the log book of the Intermediate Girls School, York Place, Brighton, school year 1939/40](#), ['Diary of a teenager in 1943'](#), and the darker ['Account of an Air Raid on Brighton, Sunday afternoon, 14 September, 1940 \[at\] 3pm'](#), local memories of bombing raids and the impact on daily life are explored.**

**For a version of events during the bombing of the Preston Street viaduct read the story of [Molly Mitchell and the Canadian soldier](#).**

Brighton was not bombed as badly as London, Portsmouth, Coventry and many other towns; but throughout the war it suffered from 'tip and run' raids. The town was very close to German air bases in northern France, so very vulnerable to surprise attack from the air. Small groups of German fighter-bombers would come in from the sea, with little warning, bomb and machine gun the town for a few minutes and then disappear out to sea again. Some of the worst casualties occurred in these attacks, when people were caught unprepared and outside their shelters.

The heaviest death toll in an air raid was on Saturday 14 September 1940, when a bomb from a single German raider landed on the [Odeon Cinema, Kemptown](#). Fifty five people were killed in the cinema and surrounding houses. In the heaviest raid on Brighton, at midday on 25 May 1943, twenty five German fighter-bombers 'swept in at wave top level and made a circuit of the town, dropping bombs over a wide area and gunning people in the street, including children coming home from school. Twenty four people were killed, two young boys and two policemen among them.'

There were fifty six air raids on Brighton although the sirens sounded 'the alert' 1,058 times. One hundred and ninety eight Brightonians lost their lives in air raids. The last raid was on 22 March 1944.

Much disruption of ordinary life took place in civilian Brighton, even more in London, so constantly raided from the air with incendiaries and high explosives by day and night. But Brighton had many unpleasant 'incidents' as they were called in ARP (Air Raid Precaution) language.

*Michael Comm - [Brighton behind the Front](#)*

The war was really affecting us. Most nights we were woken up by the Air Raid Sirens and as we lived on the fourth floor flat of a large house, I used to go down to the lower floor and sleep on a blanket. My mother would not go down; being deaf she said, "I can't hear what is going on, so it don't worry me". Sometimes she did feel the house shudder when a bomb landed nearby.

# 20th Century Sparks!

## World War Two

### Air raids - continued

I used to be very frightened and was always glad when the All Clear sounded. One day when the Air Raid Siren had sounded, I was walking down a side road by Carlton Hill, a short cut to our house in Grand Parade, when I heard a plane diving down. I heard a whistling noise and thought it was a bomb, so ran into the middle of the road, only to realise it was machine gun bullets coming down. I screamed and stood still until an arm pulled me into a doorway. The arm belonged to an A.R.P. Warden. He took me home and I was glad he did because later I had a bad attack of nerves.

*Barbara Chapman - Boxing Day Baby*



**Bomb damage in Sussex Street, 1943**

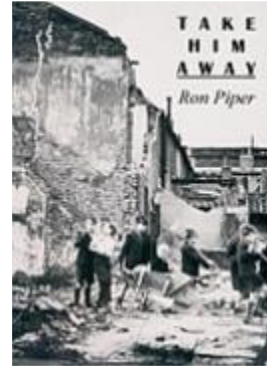
*Brighton and Hove in Pictures*

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## World War Two

### Scavenging and looting

**Ron Piper was a young lad during WW2, and a naughty one at that. This extract taken from his memoir 'Take him away' recount some of the thieving he got up to in the bombed out buildings and houses of London. Was he too young to know any better? You decide.**



So there was a war going on, but to me as a seven year old boy it didn't matter. People dying, being wounded, bombs falling all over London, blasting homes to the ground, it was no great fuss. What it had done for me was to fetch an excitement to my life, the bombed houses becoming dangerous playgrounds to be searched for anything that could be taken home as legitimate booty. All sorts of things were found by the gang of kids I hung around with (mainly boys, with a few girls now and again). There was money and the odd bit of jewellery which we gave to our mothers (the jewellery that is, the money we kept quiet about) but the most important find of all was shrapnel. Shrapnel was something that could be bartered with; the bigger the piece, the more that was offered by other kids who had not been so lucky in their search. A whole week's sweet ration could be asked for and got. So the hunt was on each day.

During these hunts things could become a bit macabre, especially after a night-time air raid; a night spent by whole families in the crypt of the local church, used as an air raid shelter. Emerging from the church to go back home after the all-clear had sounded, eyes were everywhere, looking for fires still burning, seeking out houses that had taken direct hits. Because as the day progressed, us kids knew we would be searching these bomb-damaged buildings for whatever could be found, to take home as our booty for the day.

People were always looking around for things for their homes, especially if their first homes had been damaged in an air raid or ruined altogether. They wanted furniture, pots, pans, any-thing to build a new home with. What I couldn't make out was that with all the bombed houses there were around, with some perfectly good furniture in parts of them, and no one living there, why they just didn't go along and pick it up and cart it off back home. A couple of people who were moaning about wanting this and that, I told where they could pick up the stuff that they wanted. But I was told by them that they couldn't do that as it was looting.

*Ron Piper - Take him away*

# 20th Century Sparks!

## World War Two

### Excerpts from the Log Book of the Intermediate Girls School, Brighton, 1939/40

'There's a war on!', was the valiant defiant cry of the ordinary men and women of wartorn Britain. Civilian life in Brighton carried on in difficulties such as grief, danger, loss of belongings and lack of sleep. This might seem to us unbearable for people who, along with all this, had to fend for a family. But they not only bore them, but bore them without fuss, almost took it all for granted.

In particular, the typically unemotional, unexcited style of the Intermediate School Log Book (see below), taken from 'Brighton behind the Front', gives a vivid picture of the dark days of 1940-43.

It depicts clearly the awkwardness of staffing a school divided between Brighton and Yorkshire; of losing members of an already depleted staff almost without notice for a week or two when husbands came home on leave; of lessons interrupted by air raid warnings, are never mentioned. This was the real stuff of the Home Front. The final entry ushers in a new era in education, hoped and worked for throughout the dark days of war.

#### Monday Sept 18th 1939

School reopened with sessions 11 am - 1 pm and 1.30 - 3 pm war having broken out on September 3rd. The expected Year 1's were not admitted.

#### Thursday Sept 21st

Respirator drill was successfully practiced, and respirators were tested by two Air Wardens.

#### Thursday Oct 5th

School closed at 4 pm for three days, to allow the staff to make a billeting survey.

#### Wednesday Oct 11th

School reopened at 11 am and the new Year's pupils were admitted in the afternoon.



Children Going to Air Raid Shelter, c. 1940  
*Brighton and Hove in Pictures*



Roedean Tunnel Air Raid Shelter for Roedean School, c. 1939  
*Brighton and Hove in Pictures*



## **World War Two**

### **Excerpts from the Log Book of the Intermediate Girls School, Brighton, 1939/40 - continued**

#### **Thursday Aug 8th**

For the first time the Air Raid Siren sounded during school hours - at 9.30 am. The School went down to the trenches, and the 'All Clear' was given at 9.50. A second warning was given at 11.45 am and several girls already dismissed, returned to the school shelters.

#### **Monday Aug 26th**

At 10.45 pm last night the Boys' Department was hit by enemy incendiary bombs, the roof and top storey being badly damaged. It was decided not to open School until September 16th, the week from Sept 9th being, in any case, a holiday.

During this enforced holiday, two pupils who had just left the school were killed in a daytime bombing raid on Saturday Sept 14th at approx. 3 pm.

Joan May Cordier d.o.b 11.2.25, Flat 2, 47 Essex Street, Brighton Freda Harris d.o.b 29.5.26, 26 Freshfield Street, Brighton. [These facts had been clearly marked against their names in the Admissions Book in red ink.]

#### **Thursday Sept 24th**

A German lone raider suddenly swooped over the School, which was providentially saved, and dropped bombs on two streets off Albion Hill, and a time bomb near the Technical College. Two pieces of bombs were found in our playground. Last Friday Sept 20th, whistling bombs were suddenly dropped in Franklin Road by a lone raider. Year 1 at games for the first time, had to fall on their faces on the ground. No siren was sounded on either occasion.

#### **Monday Sept 30th**

Sirens having sounded, the School was in the trenches from 9.30 - 11.50 am, from 1.30 - 2.30 pm and in the case of some girls shopping locally or still near school, from 4.15 - 6 pm.

#### **Tuesday Oct 1st**

The School was in the trenches from 1.30 - 3.30 pm.

#### **Wednesday Oct 2nd**

The School was in the trenches from 9.55 - 12.37 pm.

#### **Friday Oct 4th**

The School was in the trenches from 1.55 - 5.35 pm, though some of the parents came for their daughters after 4 pm.

#### **Monday Oct 14th**

The School was in the trenches from 11.40 am to about 2 pm when girls with their parents' authorisation were allowed gradually to go. Those without remained till the sounding of the 'All Clear' at 3.10 pm. There was no afternoon session.



## **World War Two**

### **Excerpts from the Log Book of the Intermediate Girls School, Brighton, 1939/40 - continued**

#### **Friday Oct 25th**

490 pairs of earplugs for distribution to the School, have been received. The School closed at 4 pm for the Autumn holiday. Owing to continued air raid warnings all day, except for brief dinner hour intervals, registers could not be marked, and only those girls who had arrived very early attended school.

#### **Tuesday Nov 5th**

School reopened at 9am, the hours of work being 9 - 1 pm and 9 - 12 pm Sats. Extra homework is being set.

#### **Tuesday Nov 26th**

Mrs Humphrey was absent attending by permission a 'Spotter' course for training in recognition of hostile planes. The course continued until Friday and was concluded the following Thursday.

#### **Friday Dec 20th**

For the first time, there has been a full week without an 'alert' period in school hours.

#### **Monday Jan 27th 1941**

Normal hours of work (9 - 11am & 1.35 - 4.30) were resumed.

#### **Friday March 14th**

The School has been closed every afternoon except Monday to allow for preparations for voluntary evacuation of schoolchildren.

#### **Sunday March 15th**

82 girls and 3 staff, including the Senior Mistress, were evacuated to Sprotbrough near Doncaster. The Secretary went as a helper.

#### **Friday April 4th**

The School practiced going into trenches while wearing respirators. The Headmistress resumed duty (off under medical orders from March 24th).

#### **Monday Sept 28th**

The School Canteen was opened, dinners being served to 152 girls. Members of the WVS [Women's Voluntary Service] did the serving.

#### **Monday October 12th**

The dinner girls, numbering 154, had a providential escape when a German lone raider dropped bombs near Preston Circus.

#### **Monday March 29th 1943**

The School was providentially saved when German raiders dropped bombs in districts including Gloucester Place and on the School Clinic.



## **World War Two**

### **Excerpts from the Log Book of the Intermediate Girls School, Brighton, 1939/40 - continued**

#### **Friday April 16th**

The School was closed in the afternoon as Brighton Schools had raised over £8,000 in 'Wings for Victory' week.

#### **Tuesday May 25th**

The dinner girls had a providential escape when German bombs attacked Brighton in a brief raid. Miss Garrow was absent, suffering from bruises and having her home seriously damaged.

#### **Tuesday October 26th**

Girls were measured for clothing coupons.

#### **Tuesday April 4th 1944**

The School closed at noon to allow the revision of billeting lists by the staff.

#### **Summer Term 1944**

School reopened at 8.50 am. Miss Bland was late, owing to being called out for Rest Centre duties when a German plane fell in St Nicholas' church yard during the night.

#### **Tuesday May 12th**

The School was closed in recognition of the large amount raised by the Brighton Schools during the 'Salute the Soldier' week.

#### **School Year 1944/5**

#### **Thursday January 24th 1945**

The Girls were dismissed as soon as they arrived because of the frozen state of the outside lavatories and the Housecraft Department.

#### **Wednesday March 28th**

This is the last day of the Schools working as a selective Central School in accordance with the new Education Act.

#### **Summer Term 1945**

#### **Wednesday April 11th 1945**

School reopened as a County Secondary School under the new Education Act.



## World War Two

### Diary of a teenager, 1943

**These diary extracts were written by A Simmonds, then a teenaged boy. Taken from 'Brighton behind the Front'.**

#### **21.5.43**

Evening. Phew! Daddy, Denny and I put up the Morrison Shelter. What a job - my hat!

#### **25.5.43**

A.M. at about 12.15 Brighton had it's worst raid yet. 25 planes came over machine gunning and bombing. I was having Geography and had to get under the desk - I saw one Jerry (*'Jerry' was a World War II-era nickname for Nazi Germany or its armed forces*) swoop past our window. I was really scared. One boy went absolutely green. The house opposite was gunned. At home Mummy got very scared and went under the shelter. Daddy, walking home, rushed inside a shop after seeing bombs fall out of several planes. Bombs were dropped at: top of Eaton Place, Chichester Place, the other side of the Hospital in Eastern Road (about 200 yards from here) which was the worst, Bennett Road (near Whitehawk), St Mark's school, ... the gas works, all our gas went, the flats at Black Rock (where we were on Sunday) and where a soldier on the roof was blown out to sea with his gun, the viaduct in London Road (1 span was destroyed) ... Arundel Road caught it, and Hove was machine gunned. Evening. I toured around the damage - it was awful.

#### **29.5.43**

Coming back on a no. 4 trolley bus we saw the funeral of the 2 children killed in Down Terrace, behind our school. And I saw 4 Jerry vapour trails.

#### **6.6.43**

The family went for a tour of the bomb damage. Gosh! Those gas works are terrible; so are the flats.

#### **7.10.43**

Just as the new series of Tommy Handley was beginning, Wailing Willy, or Moaning Minny went (*other names for the air raid warning siren*). We went in the shelter when we heard Jerry. Then about 9 o'clock he dived. There was terrific gun fire. Some bombs may have been dropped - I don't know. All Clear went at 11 o'clock . Wow! what a long siren.

#### **16.10.43**

We had another night of it tonight. The siren went at 7:30 . The all clear went - the siren went again - the all clear went again and as there is gunfire now, I have reason to believe the siren's gone again.

#### **17.10.43**

Wow! I'm fed up. At 2 o'clock morning the W.W. (siren) went and we went down S (shelter). Then at 8 am another W.W. went and heavy gunfire.

#### **18.10.43**

What a day. Last night Herr Jerry came over again we went down shelter.

# 20th Century Sparks!

## World War Two

### Diary of a teenager, 1943 - continued

**21.10.43**

Again last night our at about 1 am our sleep was disturbed. J (Jerry) came over, there was heavy G and we went down S.

**22.10.43**

H.J. came early tonight and 2 sirens went at different times in the evening. A good many J's came over and dropped a bomb in Bonchurch Road . Why don't they leave us alone?



**A Class Wears Gas Masks During a Drill, c. 1940**  
*Brighton and Hove in Picture*

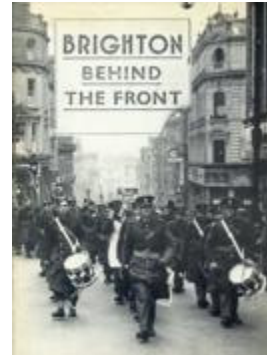
# 20th Century Sparks!

## World War Two

### Account of an Air Raid on Brighton Saturday Afternoon 14 September 1940 [at] approximately 3pm

I don't remember when the air raid warning went but heard what sounded like cannon (machine cannon which had been heard before during dog fights over the town).

As I stood at the door opening to the yard 'cannon fire' very loud; heard some things falling, and thinking these might be empty shells went in - as I did so I heard a bang definitely very loud and close, quickly land on face in scullery floor and put head under sink - another bang preceded by a whistle about one second long - all within ten seconds. Heard more stuff coming down - glass and rubble - heard mother shout 'yes OK' and shouted myself 'OK mother'. Mother came out and we met in the kitchen. Shouts from father upstairs, mother said to me 'go up and see if guests are alright' (bedridden invalid and her husband were the blind customers of the family boarding house) Did: found father in shirt and pants with head round number 4 door. 'They're OK. That one missed our turning.'



Went down leaving father talking. Mother said that some of our windows were gone - go up and see: rushed up, looked in nearly all the rooms. Saw from number nine window on top landing a tall column of smoke rising in St George's Terrace direction. Rushed down very fast, planes audible when I got to basement. Mother with neighbour on hall floor, advised them to go down and they did to basement, found camera and exposure calculation. Argued a bit with mother about going out. Father down in basement by then. Went out into area and up steps, saw people on their steps, came back (may have heard a plane) in area found a bomb fragment still too hot to hold - which shown to mother and neighbour retained its heat a long while.

Wandered into area and up steps and up slowly to St James Street, where on the corner glass from Second Hand Shop in the road. Walked towards the direction of the smoke ie along St James Street, a few smashed shop windows along it: at the bottom of Bedford St I saw wreckage across the road and walked towards it. Appeared to be a direct hit on Clapham's Baker's Shop - thought poor old Clapham. APR and Police and other people running around. Two men covered with blood sitting on left hand pavement groaning and being attended to by unskilled friends. Argument over getting an ambulance or taking them to First Aid post. People running into remains of shop, went over to try to help. Didn't know how to start and there were plenty there.



## **World War Two**

### **Account of an Air Raid on Brighton Saturday Afternoon 14 September 1940 [at] approximately 3pm - continued**

Saw bloke about 19 I knew by sight for 15 years crying etc. Supposed his people hit, felt no sympathy, but only wanted him to shut up. Saw ambulance coming, wandered further up and looked along Hereford St, another bomb there, thought of girlfriend and walked up to Coalbrook Rd and looked: all OK in her terrace; went back, warden stopped me going down Bedford Place again, went along Eastern Rd, where many broken windows and down Lavender St houses in Hereford St damaged warden ask through broken windows 'all OK in there'. Woman's voice, 'young lady injured, not serious' and he went on further.

Wandered around again looking at damage, Lavender St, Essex St along to Bedford St wrecked. Into Bedford St, wounded gone, blood about on the pavements, scarred walls. Hung about a bit and then saw friend and father going off to hospital (I then had a job overnight as night stretcher bearer - auxiliary fireman at the hospital).

When we were at the hospital told 'this is no use she's gone' - or something like that - another - that doesn't matter 'take her in', and we did and put her on a space on the floor and left her. Then I think another worker turned up and asked sister and we took another dead woman on a wood and canvas stretcher out of a room behind the main hall out onto a barrow and wheeled this across the road, where bumping it swayed unpleasantly up to the mortuary. Having brought out two others, wheeled trolleys and turned her over onto one from the stretcher, then back again on a second trip. I had the legs end, which were a pale pasty flesh colour with the back part of the left leg shattered at the knee and being just meat. Took her in, stuffed some corpses closer together on mortuary floor and cleared up to make room for a lot more.

Went back to FAP and a worker asked in a whisper for more deceased and nurse said she didn't know but she didn't think so - felt strangely disappointed - the nurse 'oh yes, there are two children in there'.

Went into room behind the main hall and two small, still bodies on stretchers, picked up the nearer - a girl - carried her out in the same way and up to the mortuary. She bumped and swayed a bit on the way across the road so I said 'be careful or she'll be in the road and we shall be in the soup'. He said 'yes, we shall by God. Dumped her down on the mortuary floor close to the others. Uncovered her face and had a look at her.

Elementary school girl, her face a little dirty with some dried blood on it and skin a queer soft waxy colour. Came away to get the other. When we got there there was a nurse and a couple of men wanting either to take it - a little boy about 8-9 years out the back way or cover him up better with the blanket or get another. After much talk saw a blanket on the stretcher and the boy was covered. 'His mother out there, she's hurt, we want to spare her the shock of seeing him like this', carted out dead through a hall full of injured. Shifted him out the back anyway down an awkward flight of stairs, after a lot more talk up to the mortuary and so on doing similar job all the afternoon.



## **World War Two**

### **Account of an Air Raid on Brighton Saturday Afternoon 14 September 1940 [at] approximately 3pm – continued**

Was taking the barrow down just after this when a light van, with Ambulance on it in red, drove up and we directed it and helped it back towards the mortuary: two more, built to take four, two per side. Moved the lower one on side first. Then the second one higher up was a job and while doing it grazed the thumb and finger of my hand.

First one was a very heavy old woman, second a man - only knew from the stockings, shoes and trousers, as they were covered and left them so. Thumb was bleeding, asked where I could get some antiseptic - First Aid Post - but wasn't going to worry them when they'd got near dead folk needing attention. Thought of nurse on duty in nearby Howard Ward and she fixed it with iodine, tho' said I should go over to FAP as if wound turned septic she was responsible. Saw dead woman I'd lifted into FAP brought into mortuary. In there in the chapel, which seemed to be thought a terrible thing, was a man with a dark blue tin hat on the stretcher with FAP on. There was a small hole torn thro' the rim of the helmet - three thicknesses at the edge. 'His tin hat didn't save him'.

Recurrent thought quite without any joy of memory of girlfriend, wondering where she was and if OK and imagining, almost at times unemotionally, her looking like these people, thought going from enlarging portraits of a girlfriend to carrying corpses about was a bit of a contrast.

Later in FAP - a bit cleaner - saw a woman (Civil Defence) clearing up blood patches from the parquet floor - thought what a bloody waste of time - she could be doing something more useful.

Saw someone, a fool I'd often given lines to at school, with a dozen cuts to his face, daubed with yellow iodine, looking like a hero; swearing 'bloody shame, our shop ruined'. Much later saw his arm in a sling, got splinter in it, not serious apparently. FAP being cleared. I went to friends room in hospital for 'cuppertea', which was welcome and good. Then after some other things I suppose, I don't remember - home looking at damage on the way. The all clear from the lethal raid had gone two thirds of the way through and another warning gone, so had stopped at the hospital until all clear again. (Had not previously seen a corpse, hence the interest in them).

*This extract is taken from 'Brighton behind the Front' and is reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of the Mass-Observation Archive, the University of Sussex.*

# 20th Century Sparks!

## World War Two

### Molly Mitchell and the Canadian soldier

**This story is from *International Service* by Kathleen Wilson. During the war Kathleen worked at the International Grocery Stores in Preston Road. On the morning of May 25, 1943, the Luftwaffe attacked Brighton in the worst bombing raid of the war. We start her tale just after the attack to the local area - the walking wounded need taking care of, but luckily, for the good of all, Molly Mitchell, the shops mangeress, reaches for the brandy...**

We viewed the destruction with horrified eyes. The shop windows had imploded leaving us open to the elements. The bacon rashers, under their covering of dust, were speared with splinters of glass and nearly everything had blown free from the shelves. As I made my way to the shop door, I noticed cans of food rolling across the pavement into the gutter. Across the road, there was a gaping hole in the viaduct, and a few soldiers were emerging from the old school building. The air was still thick with dust as the rubble subsided into an ungainly heap.

Our branch of the International was licensed to sell wines and spirits, and Molly Mitchell made her way to the fixtures that held these expensive items. Amidst the carnage and destruction, it was unbelievable to find that these bottles remained intact. She sent the apprentice to the cellar to bring up some clean cups. She emphasized the word 'clean' and she removed a bottle of brandy from the shelf. The apprentice was a little reluctant to go. I am sure he thought the shop was going to collapse on top of him, but he decided to go rather than let anyone think he was scared. With the cups now assembled before her on a hastily-wiped counter, she opened the bottle and gave us all a drink, which she insisted that we all consume.



Molly Mitchell and Kathleen Wilson  
*International Service*



London Road Viaduct after the bombing  
*Brighton and Hove in Picture*



Staff at the International Stores - L-R:  
Peter, Jean, Joan & Derek  
*International Service*



## **World War Two**

### **Molly Mitchell and the Canadian soldier - continued**

Then she went to the entrance and called to the soldiers to come across. They were a lot more shaken up than us because they had been a lot nearer to the explosion. They shambled slowly across, supporting one of their comrades who had blood pouring down his face. They were really grateful for the brandy. Then Molly Mitchell took the Canadian soldier up to her flat and gave him simple first-aid by placing a plaster over the nasty gash above his eye. The Canadian soldiers had been doing a course in the school building when the bomb came down.

One very important question remained to be asked. How was the empty bottle of brandy going to be explained away to head office? Molly Mitchell had the answer to that as, without hesitation, she promptly smashed the bottle and threw it down amongst the debris waiting to be cleared up.

Now that only authorized people could come near us, Molly Mitchell sent us all home for an early dinner break. There was nothing to be done at the moment, and it would relieve our relatives to see us all in one piece. My mother's reaction was very disappointing. All she said was, 'Why are you home so early? I haven't got your dinner ready yet.'

As a matter of interest, many years after the war was over, the Canadian soldier who had been cut over the eye, made a pilgrimage back to the shop. He looked such a different person in civilian clothes. He was very sad at not being able to see Molly Mitchell, because for years he had always remembered her kindness to him on the day of the bomb. He had now lost the sight in his eye. I could not fix up a date for him to meet her because he was leaving England later that evening.

*Kathleen Wilson - International Service*