

# 20th Century Sparks!

## World War Two

### The People's War

**At the start of World War Two, the country made preparations for Total War.**

**On this page and in Preparations for Invasion, Air raid shelters, Fire-watching, and Identity cards you can explore the memories of how local people prepared for War.**

I was on the hill watching the lark after I heard that the war had started on that fateful Sunday. I had been there quite a long time when suddenly with an almighty swoosh three planes came swooping in over the cliff top and came very close to the ground on the hill. Of course I thought they were Germans and jumped up, taking to my heels and getting back home in no time, but afterwards found these planes to be Spitfires. I had never seen one before as we only had a few. I remember afterwards selling flags in the High Street for the Spitfire Fund and after that seeing many of these planes in dog fights over the coast.

*Margaret Ward - Memories of Rottingdean*

War broke out at the beginning of September 1939 but for roughly eight months it was all quiet on the Home Front as the uniformed civilians, who made up the greater part of the armed forces, called it. But when the German tanks over-ran Belgium and France in May 1940, the epic retreat of the British army from Dunkirk brought the Kent and Sussex coasts right into the firing line of the war in the air.

*Michael Corum in Brighton behind the Front*

It was almost impossible for anyone living in Britain during the Second World War to avoid the war. It was a Total War for the British people, not as total as the war was for Jewish families living in Warsaw and Paris, or for the unlucky refugees caught in the fire-storm of Dresden, but the Second World War has rightly been called 'The People's War'. Wars fought by the British in the nineteenth century in distant parts of the world tended to be spectator sports for the civilian population. More British soldiers were killed in the First World War than in the second, but this situation is reversed when it comes to civilian casualties. The German conquest of mainland Europe and the advent of bomber aircraft meant that civilians found themselves in the front-line and were no longer merely spectators.



Air Raid siren, c. 1940  
*Brighton and Hove in Pictures*



## **World War Two**

### **The People's War - continued**

The Second World War presented people with a variety of experiences very different from the tradition of men going off to war, with the women and children waiting at home. In 1940, during the Blitz on London, men conscripted into the army from the East End found themselves safe in military camps, while their families were being bombed. During this same period opinion polls showed that the public considered that the Air Raid Precautions, fire and ambulance services were all playing a more important and dangerous role than the army in the war effort. This is not to deny the traditional horrors of war endured by the bomber crews, infantrymen, merchant sailors and many others who fought the enemy directly.

*Michael Corum in Brighton behind the Front*



## World War Two

### Preparations for Invasion

When the Germans occupied France in the summer of 1940 Brighton became a front-line town under direct threat of invasion from the sea. As part of their general invasion of England German planners considered a parachute landing on the South Downs to cover a seaborne attack on Brighton.

On the British side plans were made to defend Brighton and evacuate the town if the Germans invaded. Bank staff were informed that, if the Germans landed during office hours, they would not be able to contact their families, but would be evacuated with the bank's money and papers on a special train from Brighton Station. Individual citizens were told that when the invasion was signalled by the ringing of church bells, they should keep off the roads (to free them for military traffic) and walk towards London wearing bright clothing, so they would not be shot by mistake as advancing German soldiers. The ill-armed Home Guard and army must have waited anxiously behind the barbed wire and mines planted along Brighton sea front, until the summer of 1941, when the Germans marched east against the Russians and the threat of invasion was lifted.

*Michael Corum in Brighton behind the Front*

Life went on as usual. The war did not seem to touch us as much as I expected. There was a temporary lull before the Battle of Britain. At the very beginning we were all keyed up for the worst and faithfully carried our gas masks everywhere. When the air raid sirens wailed out we allowed ourselves to be shepherded into the nearest air raid shelters by vigilant ARP wardens, and sat there in the musty corridors until the all-clear sounded. But as the weeks passed by with nothing happening, when the sirens sounded they were mostly ignored by the people who continued on with their lives. Sandbags could be seen everywhere, especially around important buildings like the town hall and police station, and pillboxes were erected in prime positions. Windows were criss-crossed with paper to protect against bomb blast.

The beaches had been mined and barricaded with barbed wire, which stretched for miles along the coast. Even the two beautiful piers had been blown up in the middle. I never saw the logic of that demolition. In the pre-war days I had loved to wander on the piers, even though you had to pay to get on. I loved it especially at night when they lit up the sky with a myriad of twinkling lights. Now, all that had gone, along with the gaiety and fun. All we were left with was the blackout.

*Kathleen Wilson - International Service*

You couldn't go on the beach, but there weren't any mines, to my knowledge. We didn't take the boats out. The fishing boat that I took over was pulled up on the fishmarket beach, and there it died. It just rotted away.

And underneath the walk, along by the Aquarium, there was big, massive tanks of petrol, ready to roll into the sea, to set the sea alight in case of invasion. I suppose they must have held about ten thousand gallons. They were all the way along underneath the promenade.

*George Heffaran in Brighton behind the Front*

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### Preparations for Invasion - continued



**Anti-tank defences and barbed wire West of the Palace Pier**  
*Brighton and Hove in Pictures*



**Gap in Palace Pier made in 1940 in case of German invasion. The pier was not repaired until September 1945, four months after V.E. Day. All Sussex piers were cut in half and heavily mined for the duration of the war.**

*Brighton and Hove in Pictures*



## World War Two

### Air raid shelters

#### The 'Anderson' and 'Morrison' Shelters

The Government were anxious to protect the general public, householders and their families from bombing and blast, so they supplied a very thick gauge of corrugated steel bent in a circular shape. The householder dug out the ground in his back garden, setting the corrugated steel cover into the dug out ground. Then he would cover the whole with all the earth (and more if he had got it) and so make a large mound to protect the people and children inside the shelter from the effects of bomb blast. This particular shelter was called the Anderson shelter, because Sir John Anderson was the Home Secretary in 1939 and 1940. Two and a quarter million were made and distributed free to people who were earning less than £250 a year. Those earning over this amount were charged £7. Many families in London spent every night in their shelter during the heavy air raids.

There was another shelter for use in the home; called the Morrison shelter (I had one in my home). This was a large heavy gauge steel top about 48" x 36", complete with four heavy angled legs 30" high, bolted to the top. On completion this formed a table to have your meals on. When the Alert siren went the family would crouch down and get inside for security. Around the two ends of the shelter and along one side, was a squared sheet of steel mesh wire, bolted to the legs. Also a wire mesh to form a spring-wired mattress was bolted to the bottom and an ordinary bed mattress was placed on top of this for comfort. The children were put in this shelter at night to sleep, making sure there was enough room for us parents should we have to leave our beds and get inside same for a little safety. These also were supplied free to low income families. When the end of the war came the councils were ordered by the government to collect these shelters and pay the householders £1 if they were complete.

*Albert Paul - Hard work and no consideration*

At night during some of the raids or when the siren sounded, we'd sleep in the Morrison Shelter in the dining room behind the shop. This was a large heavy metal cage-like thing with a thick top which sometimes served as a table when the sides which were made of metal squares were removed. A mattress at the bottom, then sheets and blankets and pillows and it was quite comfortable to sleep in. We'd take our 'iron rations', flask, biscuits, candles, matches and torch, tuck in the dog and cat, put up the sides and we felt as safe as houses! Thank goodness we didn't need to sleep in it very often, but when the Doodlebugs started coming over, it was our refuge, many a time we dived for cover as one of these devilish things cut out overhead. They sounded like flying express trains, the first time we heard them. When I saw one going over with the flames shooting from its tail, it looked as if it had flown straight out of Hell!

*Doreen Blake in Brighton behind the Front*

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### Air raid shelters - continued

#### Releasing People from Air Raid Shelters

We quickly unloaded our tools and got to work, first removing heavy timbers and brick rubble from these shelters, and so releasing those families from their prisons, where some had fainted. While we worked on, the ambulance men were doing their wonderful job. We went through every street releasing and digging out trapped families. After we were satisfied that no more people or children were trapped in shelters or debris, we then set to work doing the first aid repairs. These people up north are wonderful sociable people, making us men happy with their hospitality, also plenty of cups of tea during daylight hours.

*Albert Paul - Hard work and no consideration*



**The building of an air raid shelter at the Royal Alexandra Hospital, c. 1938**

*Brighton and Hove in Pictures*



## **World War Two**

### **Fire-watching**

There were fire-watching duties to do at home, as well: seeing no one showed a light in the Blackout and keeping the stirrup pump, buckets of water and sand at the ready to deal with incendiary bombs. This was done on a rota basis and all the residents, if active and able, took their turn.

*Doreen Blake in Brighton behind the Front*

During the war years, housewives played a great part in extinguishing fires caused by German aircraft dropping incendiary bombs or Molotov baskets. These were a mass of incendiary bombs that burst into flames as soon as they dropped on buildings. These housewives formed themselves into groups in the various streets and roads where they lived. They were on duty throughout the day and night on a rota system. They would get together, making one a leader. The fire brigade supplied these women with water buckets and stirrup pumps also giving them training of how to use them. Wherever a private house had the water buckets and stirrup pumps - for the women to know where to go in a hurry - there was printed on the wall in black paint a circle with two lines crossed at the centre. In fact, there are still two houses in Grove Street, Brighton numbers 17 and 28 where this sign can still be seen.

*Albert Paul - Hard work and no consideration*



## World War Two

### Identity Cards

Rumours that a ban on visitors to the coastal areas was about to be enforced made the hotel very quiet with hardly any guests staying. We were issued with Identity Cards. If you went out of Brighton by road or train you had to show your card on your return, confirming that you resided in this area.

*Barbara Chapman - Boxing Day Baby*

Our firm had obtained many contracts from the Ministry of Works, which involved moving further away from the town, and all the materials were now delivered by the Ministry of Works. We had to make our own way to the sites, which included prisoner of war camps, fire stations and land army hostels, to name but a few. To reach our destinations we had special identity passes and railway warrants and, waving our passes, we sailed out through check points which made us feel very important. I am sure that in our way we contributed to the war effort.

*Tim Wren - Flying Sparks*

I had lost my identity card in 1943 and went into Brighton to renew it. This meant that the new one had a new number and was stamped the 21st June 1943...

Brighton came into view and to me it smelt wonderful. Just the thought of being home was enough and I could not get there quickly enough. As I arrived at the barrier a policeman asked to see my identity card, which I duly produced. I took this as a matter of course until I was grilled for some moments on why, if I was a Brightonian, did I have a card with a Wrexham address on it? And what was I doing in civilian clothes? I could see it was going to be my luck that after getting so close to home I was going to end up in prison without a choice.

I explained about being a **Bevin Boy**, which was to no avail. The identity card had nothing on it to say that I was a Bevin Boy. The policeman just did not want to know. Then at last, an old neighbour, who was a ticket collector at the station, came to my rescue. I pointed to Mr Lee and said, 'He will vouch for me.' Over he came and peered at me, and then at the policeman. 'Yes, he's OK, that's Les Wilson the Bevin Boy. He lives in Manton Road. I know him well.' Thank God for Mr Lee who saved the situation for me. For one horrible moment, I thought that maybe he would not recognise me and then I would have been sunk.

*Michael and Leslie Wilson - A far cry from a white apron: The story of a Brighton Bevin Boy*



## **World War Two**

### **Identity Cards - continued**

The south side of Brighton sea front was sealed off with barbed wire and tank traps during the Second World War. The beach was strewn with land mines. Western Road on the south side was also sealed off after dark, with an armed guard at each street running down to the sea. Residents such as our family were under curfew and had to remain indoors except under extreme circumstances. I considered my Boys' Brigade activities 'extreme circumstances' and came to an arrangement with the platoon on guard duty to let me through, as our activities took place most week nights, invariably after dark.

Challenged one dark night, I replied, "It's only me." The guard answered, "And who's 'me'?" The platoon had been changed. Under no circumstances would he let me through. Little Preston Street runs parallel to Preston Street. For some reason a guard did not stand sentry here, perhaps they thought it was a dead end. At the time, half-way down the street a passage, which is now sealed off, linked the two streets. It was pitch black, but the route was well-known to me as it became, when 'needs must', my illegal entry. Mum and dad never knew of this. I suspect they would have been most annoyed, thinking I would be shot!

*Tim Wren - Flying Sparks*