



Harry a London Blitz Survivor

Harry, born 1929, London Blitz survivor now in Lincolnshire



1939 I lived in Stanhope Street, northwest London, near Warren Street tube station in the borough of St Pancras, now known as Camden. The houses were terraced tenements over a hundred years old. There's a blue plaque commemorating Charles William McCready, a famous Shakespearean actor who was born there in 1792. My parents rented two rooms on the third floor, sharing a toilet with up to five other families; we used gas for lighting and cooking. My father was a costermonger.



The Second World War started three days before my tenth birthday. My father went down the pub as usual but there was great excitement amongst my friends and myself as there was talk of schools closing. After periods of no school, we had to attend a new one with very large classes. Many children were evacuated in the early months of the war but we stayed to see sand bags being filled, air-raid shelters built in



Regents Park and in the streets. (The Underground stations were not used as shelters at first.) We knew it was a very serious time although the war seemed far away until shops began running short of goods and rationing was introduced.



The bombing really started in 1940. Our house was hit by incendiary bombs. We children thought it was the best thing to happen to it. My parents decided my brother and I should leave London while they were given temporary accommodation in a hostel.

1940-41 Evacuation

We gathered at Starcross Street School one Sunday morning. Each child had a small suitcase, gas mask in a cardboard box, and his name on a label tied to his coat. We then marched in line to Euston Square Underground for the short journey to Paddington Main Line station. Our parents had no idea of our route or destination. Lots of tears. The train left Paddington to Goodness-

knows-where. To us children it was a great adventure. My brother and I were excited because it was our first long train journey. (He was four years younger than I.)

It was all interesting because it was the first time most of us had seen sheep or cows and it was different from northwest London. Eventually we learned that our future homes were to be in South Wales, in a small country village called Maescwmmwr.

There were about thirty or so of us poor little London urchins standing around, tired and hungry, very near to tears. We were the last to be farmed out to a family as not too many people wanted two young boys – and we were not going to be separated. A kind lady, Mrs Jones, took pity on us and our life in the village was happy. The house was large and seemed very posh to us. My brother and I shared a luxurious bedroom; there was a lovely bathroom with a real bath, not a tin one - and there were false teeth in a glass! We'd never seen anything like it before.

After a while family commitments made it impossible for Mrs Jones to keep us so we went to live with Mrs Griffiths. We called her Gran. She lived in a small stone house called Zoar Cottage at the end of the village. It meant going back to a tin bath and candles to light us to bed, but I liked it. Gran had been a schoolteacher. She was a stern, wonderful lady who had a big influence on me and we kept in touch long after the end of the war.



About **1941-42** after a year's evacuation, our family decided we had been away too long. They rented two rooms from the council and wanted us back in London. The Blitz was still raging so it was a dramatic change for us boys, from the quiet Welsh village to the guns and bombs of London. Some nights we slept on the platform of Warren Street station; it was crowded, noisy and smelly. In good weather I tried sleeping out with my father

in Regent's Park. Schooling was very difficult. Air-raids lost us a great deal of lesson time, making our way to the shelters so often. Among us boys, prized possessions were nose cones from ack-ack shells, shrapnel, unexploded incendiary bombs - we had no idea how dangerous these were - pieces of parachute, especially the cords. My most precious thing was from a V-2 rocket that exploded in mid-air. How lucky I was!



The smell of the London air was unforgettable: scorched fabric and paper, brick dust everywhere. Walking in Holborn with my father, I saw the Daily Mirror building burning fiercely. It was bombed the night before. The lift shaft stood out, brilliantly illuminated against the sky.

Static water tanks were set up on bombsites. The area would be cleared of rubble, bricked, covered with bitumen, then filled with water, mostly for the use of the auxiliary fire service.

1943 This year was my 14th birthday and I was due to leave school. I had no idea about a career or what to do with my life. My first job was office boy in the post room, taking the post to the company offices in the City. On one return journey, as I neared the top of the escalator at Warren Street, a “doodle bug” dropped in Tottenham Court Road. I emerged from the station covered in dust; the explosion had sucked the dust from the station. Outside, the damage and carnage was horrific, as it was an extremely busy area. Many people were killed and maimed, very distressing for a fourteen year old.

It wasn't easy to get to grips with the sight of people in the rubble of shops, on the pavement, still sitting, dead and injured, in the bus without roof and windows. People aren't quiet when they die like that; and they move.



At times one of our fighters, usually a Spitfire, could be seen trying to shoot the Doodle-bugs down. You heard them coming; if they stopped you held your breath and waited for the bang. The worst thing was the V2 rockets. They came out of nowhere without warning, a huge explosion and a tremendous amount of damage.

I changed my job and worked for a building company as an apprentice carpenter, the “gofer”. I went to the damaged areas with qualified men repairing and weatherproofing windows and doors, essential work.

1945 When peace was declared I was working in Tottenham Court Road on bomb damage. All work stopped to hang flags and bunting in the streets to celebrate Peace.





Pat, Harry's wife, attended the same school as Harry and lived in the same area of London. She was very close to her mother and was so traumatised by the separation caused by evacuation that she does not remember.



End