

## An evacuee in World War Two – by John Robertson

My back garden in what is now West London, some four miles from Hyde Park, is all I seem to remember from the days before the war. I had come out of hospital after an unbroken two-year stint in 1938 and spent most of my time in the garden reading the favourite comics of the day. Fortunately, the weather always seemed perfect and it was in the garden that I heard the announcement on the radio that War had been declared on Germany. As a small boy the consequences were initially lost on me and life continued much as usual for another year.

In September 1940 the Blitz began. The bombing of London was intense for about seven months and initially I had the impression we felt well prepared. Every house had an Anderson air-raid shelter, a prefabricated kit consisting of curved corrugated iron sheets. We erected ours at the end of the garden, with an earth and sand-bag wall around the open door. It was cramped for my mother, my two brothers and I but at least my father worked nights at the large 'Hoover' factory, down the road from us, which was then working on munitions.



The theory was that we would go to the shelter when an air-raid siren warning was sounded but the German bombers did not come on time so we used to trek to the shelter at about the same time every night (about 8pm I believe) and stay there until dawn.

You soon knew when there was going to be a raid when the anti-aircraft guns in two batteries, one to the west and another to the east of us, opened up, often making more racket and dropping shell splinters than the Germans did with their bombs. On one particular raid we seemed to be the centre of attention with bombs whistling down all around us, one landing in the next-door garden. Its blast blew in the earth bank and sand bags and we had to dig our way out. Across the road from us a whole block of houses was destroyed and at least one of my school friends was killed.

Early in the Blitz we heard a huge explosion one night. It was the first 'land-mine' or parachute mine (version of a naval mine) to be dropped on this country and it destroyed my school as well as many houses. This left a particularly large collection of shrapnel to collect, our favourite pastime, filling tins of the stuff!



The King and Queen actually visited the site of the explosion and I remember well lining the road with many others, waving flags or anything we could get hold of! Exciting!



But, it was time to go. Obviously, my parents felt the risk to us children was now too great and we were put on the evacuation roster. One day my middle brother and myself were kitted out with our gas masks, documents, labels around our necks and luggage and delivered to Paddington station, where we were placed on the train to Devon, along with many other tearful children. It was truly heart-breaking to say goodbye to our parents

We were taken to stay with an old couple in a lovely house near Newton Abbot only to return home a few weeks later as we were too naughty for them! Shortly afterwards the authorities had another go, returning us to Newton Abbot where we were billeted with an old lady in a terraced house in the middle of the town. I still remember her, and her name, and she looked after us like a mother. We were very happy with her but one day there was a knock on the door and a telegram was delivered telling this lovely lady that her son had been killed in a Royal Navy action. She was broken-hearted and eventually felt she could no longer look after us so, again, we returned home.

I was lucky whilst at Newton Abbot as I sat my 11Plus exam (called something different then but equivalent to today's 11-Plus) and passed with flying colours which won me a scholarship at the Ealing County School, a great honour. But that school was in the process of evacuating entirely to Buckinghamshire so I too had to go, this time without my brother. But I had repeated health problems and spent more time in hospital. There were frequent air raids, even there, and I remember well one evening when our beds were pushed at high speed round corners and down ramps to get to the basement area of the hospital, all while a raid was going on! But we survived and again I was reasonably happy there. Until...

My parents decided that they themselves would evacuate, partly because my mother had become ill. They rented a house in North Devon and after some time I joined them there. I moved to the Bideford Grammar School where Londoners were not welcome and I soon learned to defend myself, not easy in my state of health. And I was very much a rebel, getting myself suspended from school several times until eventually I was expelled. I will not excuse myself too much, but I had many, many problems at home, not least learning that my mother was terribly ill with tuberculosis and had little time to live. I don't know for sure, but I believe she must have begged the Grammar School to take me back because of our circumstances and, astonishingly, they did. I worked hard to pay her back and became one of only some six or seven pupils in both the boy's and girl's top schools in the town to matriculate.

My mother died as the War ended. I believe it was the long periods spent in an often-flooded air-raid shelter that contributed to her death.

It would take a book to tell the full story.