MOSELEY AT WAR
WORLD WAR II

THE MOSELEY SOCIETY

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heritage lottery fund

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The First World War was declared 'the war to end all wars', but just 22 years later, another global conflict began.

Some Moseley residents heard about the outbreak of World War Two while they were in church:

"The church service had started about ten to eleven and we were sort of really awaiting a statement from the Prime Minister – or somebody at eleven o'clock. Shortly after eleven o'clock … Father Denis, came beetling across into the church and he went up to the pulpit and as soon as he got a bit of a pause from the celebrants he announced that from eleven o'clock that day we were at war with Germany and if anyone wished to leave they could do so and their Sunday obligation could be considered as complete. What impressed me is that not one person left."

PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

The declaration of war prompted defensive preparations, which were soon visible across the country.

Barrage balloons over London

Birmingham, as a major industrial area, was likely to be attacked and Moseley's proximity to the city centre and industrial areas left it susceptible to air raids.

"We were very intrigued as kids when a lot of barrage balloons appeared all round Birmingham, which we could see from the garden. There were outside, when it got dark, searchlights playing over the sky."

Moseley families began to make their own preparations:

"The old man said 'Right! We'll get organised for the war! The first thing we've got to do is to tidy up the cellar'. So we went down the cellar and luckily the cellar was fairly tidy. … a camp bed was brought down from upstairs for me to kip on and various chairs were taken down from the kitchen. A table was taken down there. The ventilators were covered with slates and sacking to keep out gas and over the doorway on the inside the old man nailed a big piece of curtain or blanket or something like that and there was a bucket nearby full of water to which we would add lime as needs be to soak the blanket as a prevention for gas.… various slippers, boots, trousers, woolly pullovers were put at my bedside for when the warning went. Nothing happened. We had a blackout, of course. We had several practice blackouts the week before but, of course, this was the proper thing and all the street lights were out."

GAS MASKS

A new part of wartime daily life was the gas mask. The use of gas as a weapon in the trenches in the First World War had prompted concerns that it could be used against the civilian population.

"I do remember Mr. Cook coming round and checking we'd got our Gas Masks and he then gave us each a fitting. We put our Gas Masks on and he checked we'd got our straps and things right and the adjustments right and his little catchphrase, particularly for the women, was that you mustn't have your hair … down the side of it sticking out of it because if the hair was there the gas could get through it into the mask."

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EVACUEES

Children from the inner city areas of Birmingham were offered the chance to go on the official evacuation scheme, which saw them being sent to Wales, Shropshire and Worcestershire.

Some people chose to evacuate their children privately. Following a near miss earlier, the Reeves family were one of those who took their own precautions.

The late Graham Reeves, a member of the Local History Group, remembered it well:

"Myself, my older brother and my mother went down to Snow Hill station to catch a train to Borth in Wales... Meantime my father and older brother and two sisters stayed in Moseley at the flat as they had work there in Birmingham."

The two boys stayed on a farm in Borth, but later their mother *"... came back to Borth to say we were going back to the Midlands to join up with the rest of my family."*

Evacuees to South Wales - Old Moor Street Station
http://themakingofmodernbirmingham.weebly.com

At the same time, evacuees were actually arriving IN Moseley, even some from abroad. The late Frank Jones, a member of the Local History Group, recalled seeing a *"Consignment of evacuees from the south of England who were duly brought up here. We had one, a little girl, aged about seven or eight, might even have been less, who had come from Southend-on-Sea. All these evacuees duly went up with their care person the following morning and signed on at the local school round the corner in School Road and were taken in without any hassle whatsoever."*

AIR RAID WARDENS

There was a national recruitment drive for volunteers and posters such as this one soon became familiar.

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The official base of the Air Raid Wardens for Moseley was in the cellars of numbers 12 and 14 Cotton Lane. One warden we know about was W.H. Cook of 19 Ascot Road. The late Frank Jones knew him well:

"Cook – or Cookie as he was known - was an Air Raid Warden. To me he was quite an old man. I dare say he was probably about sixty years old, but he was saying that he was in this war, he'd been in the previous war and he would have gone in the Boer War if the family had let him."

The lack of any enemy activity in this period saw a sense of complacency creep in:

"As we got more and more blasé to all this, when the air raid warnings used to start, myself as a kid aged about 10 years would rush out with the old man's whistle into the front garden and blow the whistle because there was a bit of a competition between the wardens as to who could be available and on parade first"

Sometimes the raid warnings were not quick enough. Graham Reeves recounted a childhood experience he never forgot:

*"One night we had a very bad air raid. Bombs were falling in the distance. Also incendiary bombs were coming down into the Park and hanging in the trees. It was getting dark and I was in my bed. My mother woke me up and, half asleep, I was taken to the main (*Alcester) *road in my mother's arms. Outside W. H. Smith's Bookshop my mother started to cross the road. An air raid warden took me out of her arms and started to cross the main road towards the corner of the road and towards Woodbridge Road. Just then an incendiary bomb came down, hitting a tree above my head and exploded sending flaming phosphorous towards the ground. The warden bent forward and the flaming phosphorous hit his helmet and luckily it went down his back towards the ground. The warden was not hurt by the phosphorous and handed me back to my mother on the far side of the road. We then made our way to the shelter and safety."*

Woodbridge Road, 1940

MOSELEY BOMBED!

A major risk came from incendiary bombs, as Frank Jones recalled:

"… one night three incendiary bombs hit the house. The first two hit the main part of the house and, as that is tiled they smashed the tiles and bounced off and fell into the garden, but the third one came through the kitchen roof, which was just an ordinary slate roof. It went straight through and set on fire in the kitchen. …. Apart from the hole in the roof and the burning up the wall there was no human damage at all. The canary, which was covered up, even slept through it in the kitchen. The kitchen, I'm told, because I wasn't allowed in, was completely full of black smoke."

Another lady remembered:
"… what it was you see was the railway, they were after the railway. Every night you could hear the pom-poms on the railway going pom-pom-pom."

Another resident recalled her experience of the bombings in Moseley:

"We had some unexploded bombs in the area about 1940. This was before Moorcroft Road was built, so they dropped mainly on the allotments. This was on the same night that the Market Hall (in Birmingham City Centre) was bombed. This was our first experience of bombing, and we were terrified. We did, of course, have to get out and, stupidly, were moved just around the corner, to my grandfather's house in Amesbury Road, where we lived for a fortnight. We couldn't see the point because we weren't much further away from the bombs than we were in our own house (in Salisbury Road). Still, fortunately we survived! …Our aid raid shelter was in the china pantry which had been reinforced with a corrugated roof and a brick wall on the garage side. My mother and I slept in there, and my grandmother slept under the stairs with the dog. The anti-aircraft guns were in Cannon Hill Park, so you can imagine the dog going crazy with all the noise."

TAKING SHELTER

The early days of the Second World War had allowed a period of preparation. This included getting used to your air raid shelter, if you had one.

"In our garden we had an Anderson Shelter. My mother had covered it with garden soil and some grass."

tunnelwall.blogspot.com

At the height of the bombing, some families opted to spend the night in the shelter rather than be disturbed and have to leave their beds in the middle of the night. Frank Jones and his family had created a cosy retreat in their cellar:

"I'd got a camp bed and my sister had a similar sort of thing and my mother had a big kitchen chair to sit in and the old man was out playing Air Raid Wardens. If it was quiet and he wasn't wanted he would come back and join us. We had a kitchen table down there. Chocolate and things like that were very scarce. The odd microscopic bit of chocolate we'd got was always saved and put into a tin and put into the cellar and that was a bit of a treat. When the warning started we went down stairs, we got the chocolate out and the biscuit tin out (we had a few tins of biscuits). Occasionally, of course, mother would go and get a cup of cocoa from the kitchen while it was quiet and bring that down. Also, we used to play cards and, although we were only kids, the old man taught us to play bridge and we quite enjoyed ourselves down there.

After a while we were more or less resigned to sleeping down the cellar most nights and we did do that. We had an electric fire there and the place was quite cosy and so when it was quiet and not much happening my mother had a mattress upstairs on the ground floor in the lounge at the back and she would sleep there until the air raid warning went. Sometimes the air raid warning would be going and nothing much happened and we as kids would probably sleep through it."

myweb.tiscali.co.uk

Other families would also head for outside shelters. A Moseley resident remembers a swift awakening one night and being dressed in her "... *dark green dressing gown, which my mother had made – with an orange chicken on the pocket to make it pretty - and being carried down the garden to the shelter. There always seemed to be lots of stars in the sky – and often you could see the moon."*

Graham Reeves' family had three options for safety to pick from:

"We spent a few nights in our Anderson shelter. It was cold and damp and my mother did not like it much. We also used our cellar for a few weeks until they opened a deep shelter in Woodbridge Road near the Police Station. We started to use this shelter sitting on wooden benches."

There were also communal shelters placed in some of the back gardens of Moseley. One resident recalls the arrangements in Greenend Road – a relatively new road to Moseley, only occupied since 1934:

"Before we had our shelter we went into Vi Jackson's large flat-roofed shelter (at number 22) *with other neighbours (the Kershaws from number 18) and later into the shelter at Number 37 belonging to Mary and Leslie Taylor. That too was a very large flat-roofed shelter which took up more than half the back garden. It had light and was warm and it was much better to have other people around and not just mother who seemed anxious."*

One communal shelter remains today underneath the Post Office and Telephone Exchange, still with the benches, the air filter and escape hatch.

Whilst down in the shelter, this lady heard one raid that hit close by Elmfield Crescent and Greenend Road itself:

"I do remember hearing aeroplanes overhead when we were in the shelter and hearing the whine of a bomb and the silence before the bang. I don't remember venturing into Elmfield Crescent, so I didn't see the bombed houses. We had all our windows shattered one night and had tarpaulin nailed up until the glass could be replaced."

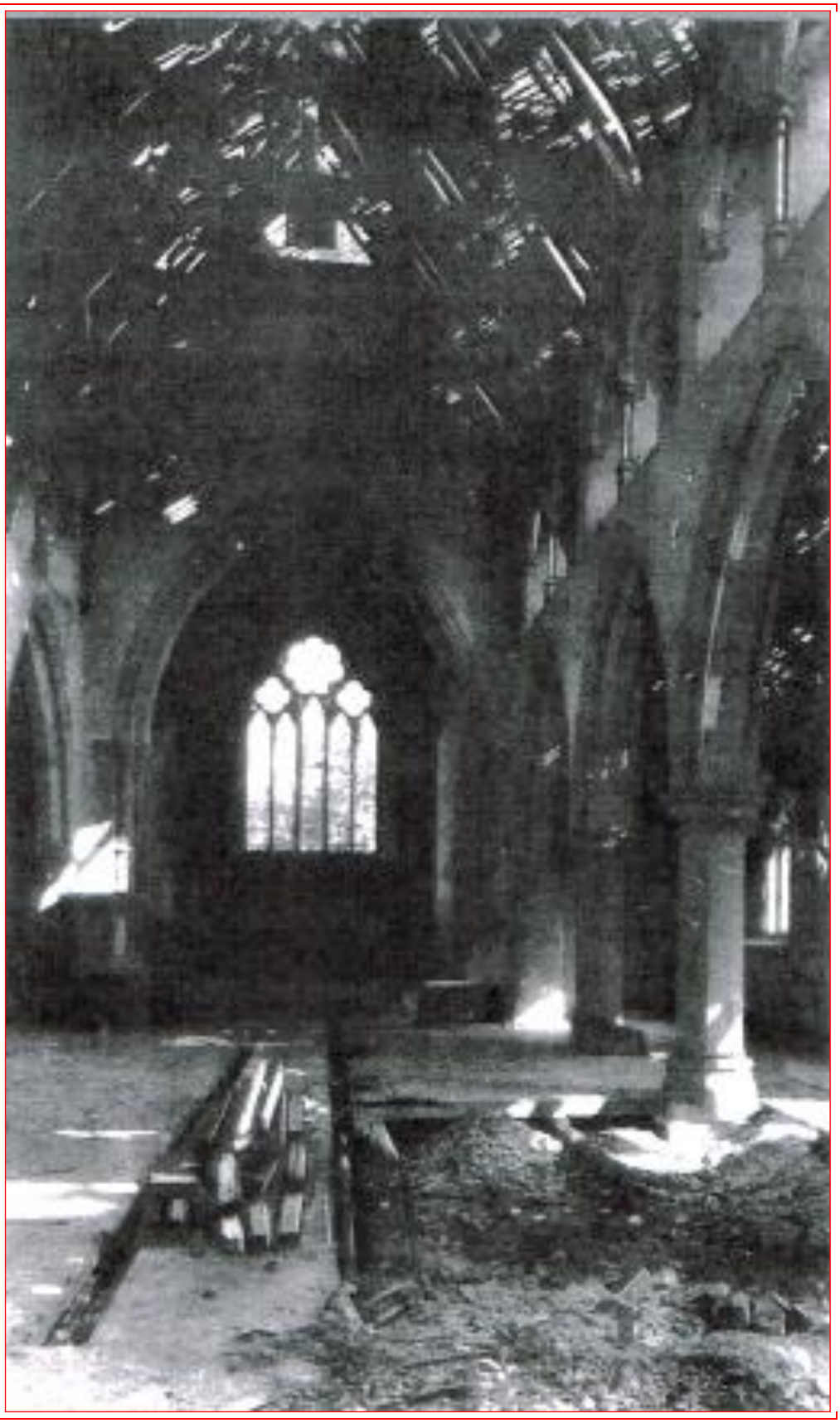
This wartime photograph is dated November, 1940, but the exact location in Moseley is not known.

NOT JUST HOUSES …

It wasn't just domestic residences that were bombed of course. Among the public buildings that were hit during the war was Bedford College on Wake Green Road.

"The school buildings were damaged by a high explosive bomb during an air raid in about 1940. There were no casualties but the school never reopened and the edifice was subsequently demolished."
(Recollections of Bedford College, Wake Green Road, Moseley (1935-1938): Dr D.J.M. Ford)

St. Anne's Church was badly damaged in December, 1940, when a bomb destroyed the roof, scattered pews and blew out windows. The walls, tower and columns survived, but the church stood empty for almost eight years, until it became "*the first badly-damaged church to be repaired and re-opened after the war,…"*
(G Hindley, 'B13', 2010)



Frank Jones recalled a dramatic incident involving St. Mary's Church:

"… the Air Raid Wardens realised that this mine was caught in the trees just over the entrance to the railway, that is, the left-hand side of St. Mary's Row coming up opposite the Meteor. … The Air Raid Wardens were ringing door bells and telling people to stay down because this mine was a huge thing blowing about and the damage would be tremendous….after a while there was the father and mother of bangs and rattles and everything else and this mine had caught on a tree and had finally gone off and, … in fact, the east end of the church was quite damaged. But what I do remember is, as a kid, going to look at it next day was the fact that all the trees that were there growing over the tunnel had completely lost all their heads – they were sheared off completely and the first house up there was quite shattered. There wasn't very much left of it at all."

Bomb-damaged window in St. Mary's Church

Fire damaged pew in St. Mary's Church

A BRIGHTER SIDE TO THE BLITZ!

For those youngsters who had not been evacuated, there could be a brighter side to the blitz. Playing on the bomb sites was a great diversion and Frank Jones and his friends amused themselves with bragging rights in the aftermath of a raid:

"With regards to our schoolboy childish outlook on this situation, when we went to school the following day after an air raid we never seem to have been worried about whether somebody had been killed. We would point out, 'Have you seen the house at so-and-so? All the windows have gone.' 'Ha!', somebody would say, 'That's nothing! The house of so-and-so in my road all the roof has gone!' and that would be trumped by someone who would point out where they lived there was a house that was completely gone."

Then there was the fun of collecting debris:
"Our favourite activity on the way to school was to look out for fins that were left over from incendiary bombs and the old man would probably say, 'Well, there's dozens of fins.

They're all over the road', but, you know, by the time we got to going to school some other school kids had been out earlier and pinched the lot. We usually thought we were pretty lucky if we got a few bits of shell fragment that the anti-aircraft guns had been using."

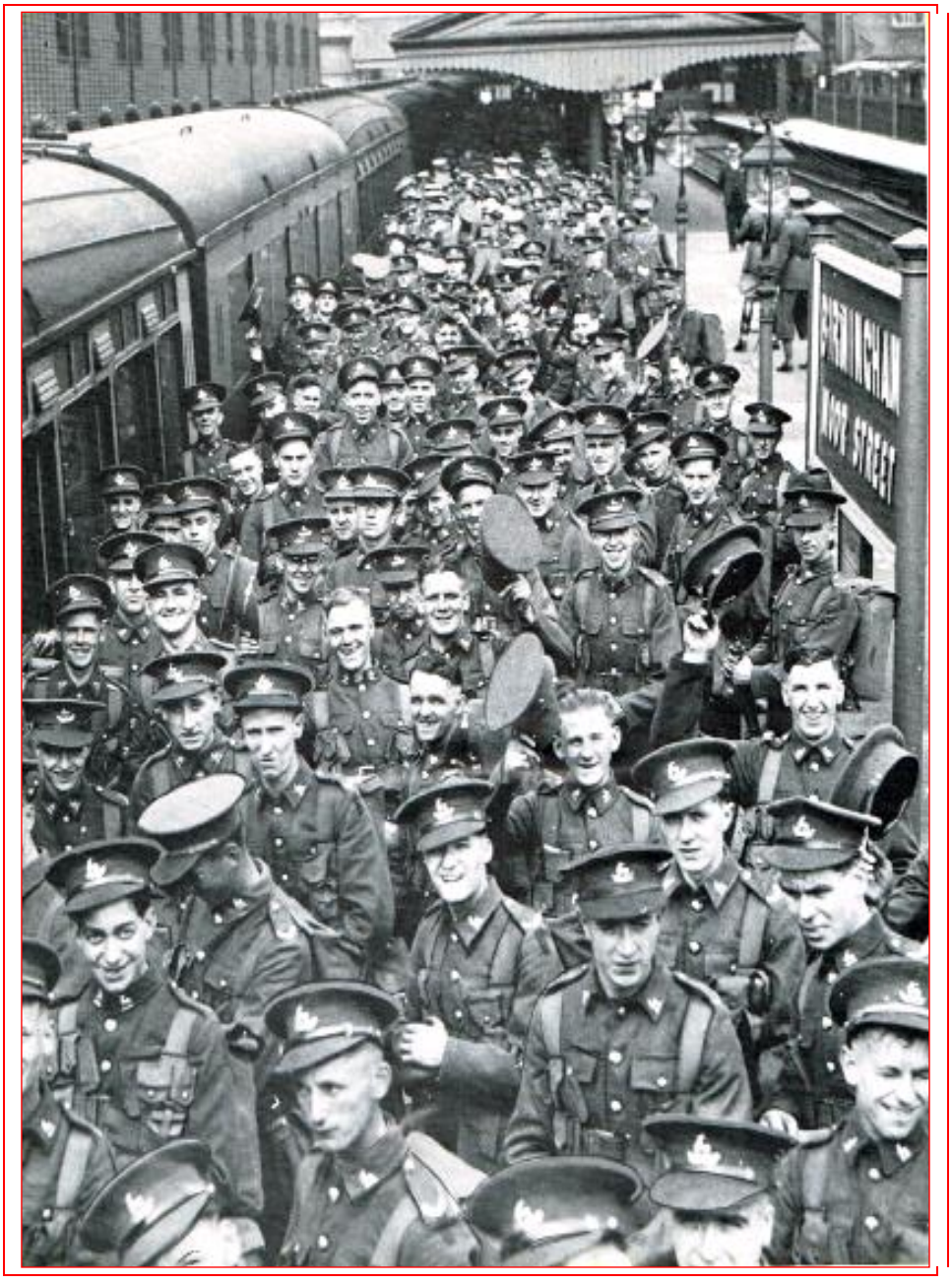
http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections© IWM (D 4017)
A view of bomb damage to a house in the Seaman Street area of Birmingham

CASUALTIES

The deaths of relatives, friends and neighbours hit home hard.

"I must say that I was brought back to earth and my eyes were opened when one day I went up to Kings' Heath Library with my mother because she wanted to check on somebody's name. I didn't know until then that outside the Public Library on the gate was the list of the fatalities. I'm not certain whether they were the list of the people who were hurt or a list of the people that were dead, but what did impress me at the time was how big the list was; it was several pages."

One lady's memories were of her boyfriend who was lost in the Allied attack in Holland, code- named Operation Market Garden:
"I had a sweetheart, who lived in Moorcroft Road, and he used to climb over a neighbour's fence to meet me. Unfortunately, he was killed in action. It was during the Invasion, 1944, Holland. He was 19 years of age. Apparently his unit was moving up to relieve an American unit. It was all so very sad."



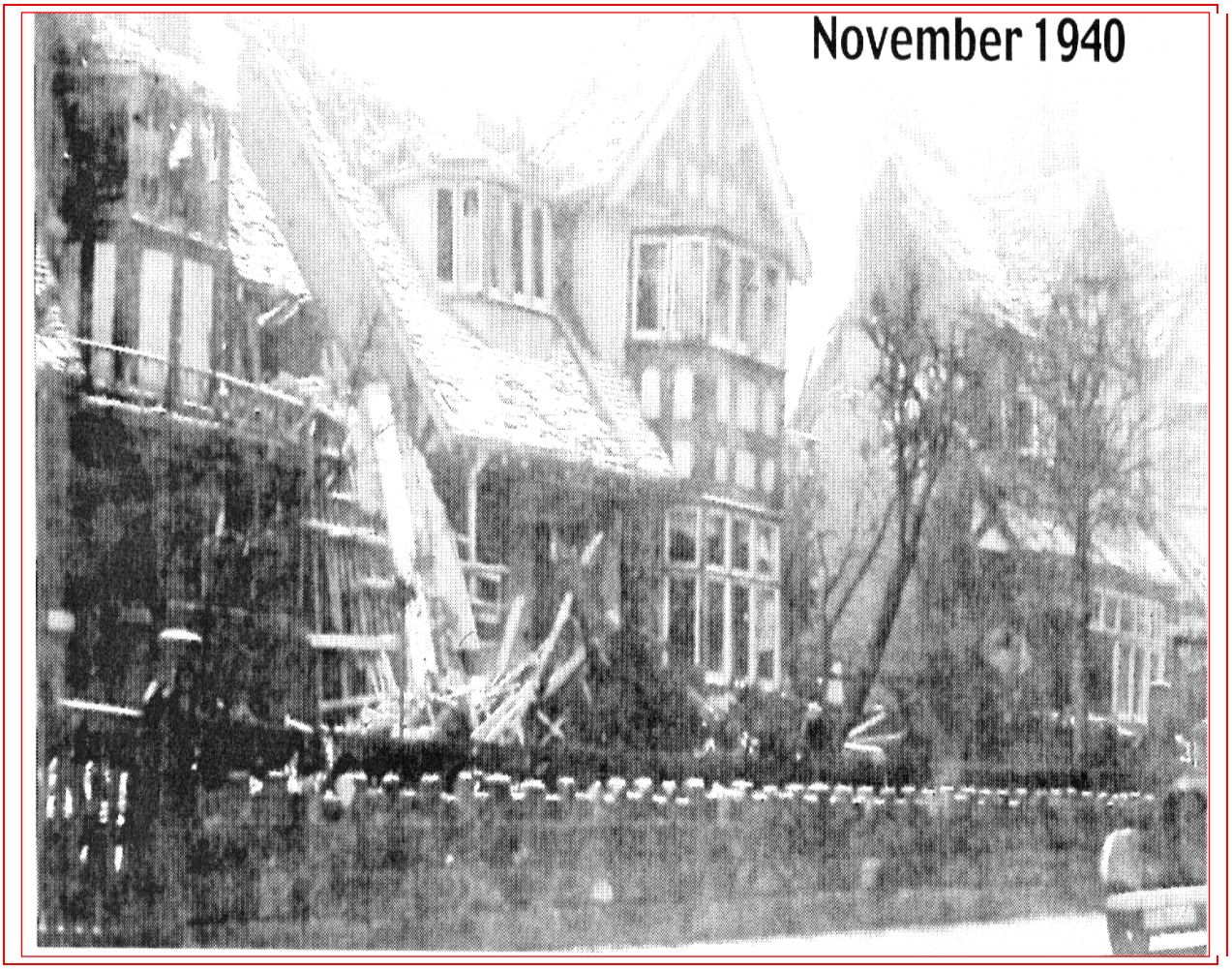
Royal Warwickshire Regiment leaving from Moor Street in 1940. (clipping from G. Reeves' file in 'The Collection')

Amongst the victims of the air raids in Moseley were some with foreign connections. Roberto and Ernesto Piccioni, originally from Italy, ran a Marble Merchants business in Hockley. Both married English women, Doris and Phyllis, and lived at 68 Oxford Road, Moseley.

War-time fears meant that people with foreign connections were often viewed with suspicion and concerns were expressed that one of the brothers might be a member of 'the Fascio', but we do not know what resulted from these complaints.

We do know that, on the night of 11th/12th December 1940, 68 Oxford Road suffered a direct hit. The two Piccioni wives were killed along with their daughters, Angela and Gina, both aged six, and Phyllis' other daughter, Phyllis Waldron. Many other houses were also hit that night with one person dying two doors away and eight elsewhere in the Parish.

The burial index record for little Angela reveals the family were buried at Warwick Cemetery.



Bomb damage in Oxford Road, November, 1940.
(From 'B13')

Following the war the houses in this area of the road were either repaired or rebuilt and Ernesto returned to live at 68, with his brother Roberto moving in alongside at number 70.

Little Suzanne Marburg, aged five, arrived in Moseley under different conditions. She had been sent away from Prague by her mother in the *Kinderlift* evacuations. These had been made at the behest of Sir Nicholas Winton, who persuaded the Home Office to issue visas to Jewish Czech children. In total eight trains left Prague from late 1938 to early 1939, carrying several hundred unaccompanied children.

Unfortunately, Suzanne died, along with all her foster family, the Lloyds, at 167 Swanshurst Lane. Suzanne was buried, with the Lloyds, at the Unitarian Church in Packhorse Lane, Wythall

Rear of 165 Swanshurst Lane, 3rd January, 1941

PEACE AT LAST

The end of the war in Europe brought scenes of national jubilation with VE Day street parties held across the country. Moseley was no exception and young Frank Jones attended one such party:

"Mr Swain at the top of Ascot Road was a big organiser, but so were all the others, in a party at the top of Ascot Road. They had a big sheet of steel and they put it in the road so the tarmac wasn't spoilt and a bit of a bonfire was built up and as kids we went round and hung around the bonfire and had a bit of a celebration in the evening when it started to get dark. When I say celebration, things were rather limited. There was a bit of singing and so on and everybody felt very pleased."

One of the attractions to commemorate the end of the war in Europe was the Victory Tram. Having spent years travelling with reduced or no lighting it was something special to see this brilliantly lit sight. Announcements were made detailing when and where the tram could be seen. Not everyone was impressed by it though.

"The illuminated tram duly came up from the town and went up through Moseley village and no doubt back home again after, but we didn't stop to see a second run. It was a bit of a disappointment to me. It wasn't very special and according to my old man and the pictures I'd seen of the pre-war illuminated tram, which was covered all over with lights and bulbs it was a bit of a nonentity, but still the thought was there."

The end of the war finally came with the surrender of the Japanese forces and this was marked by the VJ Day celebrations. Frank Jones remembered:

"We duly had VJ Night. That was also a big celebration, but I was away myself at camp with the Army Cadets then, but anyway everyone was very pleased. The war was over and people were starting to come home."

Another resident recalls:

"For both V.E. Day and V.J. Day there were bonfire celebrations in the road. (Greenend Road). My father woke me up and carried me into the front bedroom to see the fire – I didn't like the fire and was terrified (again!). Everyone lost their front gates (wooden) to go on the fire and they were never replaced."

Perhaps it is fitting to end with a childhood memory of celebrations at the end of the war, with its note of hope for the future:

….. To stand round a pile of blazing wood and see laughing faces brightly lit against the dark was the very essence of hope in the future. That fire seared the road with a black circle that remained for years before the Council could resurface it, but it seared the minds of us children far longer. Never again would a bright light after sunset produce reflex fear."

(D. Spilsbury, 'B13' March, 2000)

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The Moseley Society Local History Group:

collects and manages archival materials,
designs displays for local events,
researches and produces local history booklets,
holds monthly meetings with varied speakers.

If you would like to participate in any of these or to volunteer, please contact us on moseleyhistory@moseleyexchange.com

You can find us on
Facebook:www.facebook.com/MoseleySocietyLocalHistoryGroup
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Our website: www.moseleyhistory.co.uk

'The Collection' is available for consultation by appointment.

Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are taken from the Local History Group oral history project.
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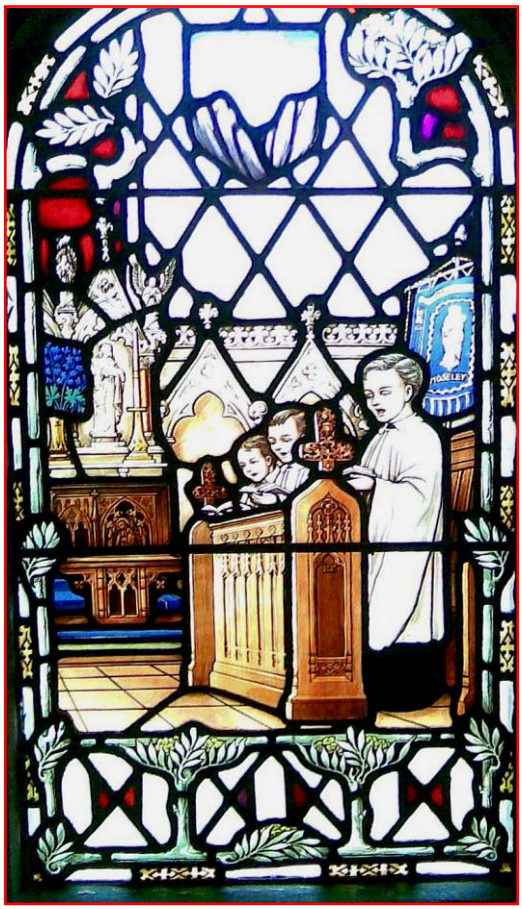
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