

Anderson Shelters



This is the story of Patricia McGowan who was a teenager in Birmingham during the Second World War.

During late 1939 and the early 1940s, we in Birmingham were to suffer from quite a few air raids. It is somewhat difficult to set down here all the experiences we encountered at this particular time. We became accustomed to spending many long hours in the Anderson shelter at the bottom of the garden. This was a wooden construction with a corrugated iron cover, most of the structure being deep in the ground with about a fifth above the ground. It had a wooden door, which we bolted by means of a wooden bar fixed into two grooves either side of it. Inside there were two long benches at either side and in

between these we had room for a small table on which we stood a small oil lamp. The benches were wide enough to sit upon and also had some space underneath for various provisions.

The entire area of the shelter smelled dank and very earthy and at first it was unpleasant but gradually our nostrils became used to the odour and we even associated this smell with safety, as this was the place where we could have some hope of escaping death or injury. Of course, a direct hit was a disaster we did not care to contemplate.

We lived quite near to a park where anti aircraft guns were mounted. The noise from these guns was so deafening that at first, being new to the situation of air raids, we thought they were bombs being dropped and often heard neighbours screaming. We realised after a while that the sound of these guns was really music to our ears as they were our protection to some extent.

Referring to some of my old diaries I note that the air raids usually started about 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening and continued until the early hours of the morning. As soon as the siren sounded, Daddy would prepare to leave the house taking with him some cushions and the little lamp, plus a few odds and ends. Mother would then make a flask of tea or coffee and sometimes soup, some sandwiches and a biscuit tin full of cookies. Without fail, she always had, under her arm, the attaché case in which our life insurance policies were housed and also documents such as Birth Certificates and Death Certificates, old photographs and personal letters, in fact anything that qualified as being important and precious. Once settled inside the shelter, Daddy would make a ceremony of almost ramming the wooden plank across the doorway and

driving it securely home. Depending upon the intensity of the raid and where it was concentrated, either we sat quietly drinking from our flask and waiting and listening, or, if the raid was aimed at our particular area, we would be fearful and cringing on our little hard wooden seats and praying for dear life.

Patricia went out to a dance one evening, and then an air raid started. She was offered the opportunity to take shelter with some strangers, but she decided to go home as her parents would be very worried about her ...

I shall never forget the sight of my mother standing at the gate looking anxiously up and down the road for a sight of me. There was such relief on her face when she spotted me with the Warden coming towards her. She cried and I cried, and the Warden stood by and said, 'Right you are home with Mom at last. Glad to have been of help to you both.' And he left us.

The raid was still on so I went with Mother straight away to the air raid shelter, and Daddy was so pleased to see me 'all in one piece' and unscathed. There followed a nice cup of tea and a bite to eat and a little lecture [well meant I'm sure] about the awful risk I took by going off to dances with air raids happening like tonight! I had learned my lesson, but even so, the fact that I had enjoyed the evening was some sort of compensation for the horror I had been through. The raid that night lasted for a long time and we emerged from the shelter when the 'All Clear' sounded at about 5:30am. We felt very ragged indeed and aching in every part of our bodies.

Morning — and there was so much stress about that not everybody returned to work. In our road itself there were houses down to a heap of rubble, people crying in the street and talking about folk they knew who had been hurt during the night; some killed also. My friend Pat and I went for a walk to see the extent of the damage and to see if we could do anything to help those in trouble. As always, after a raid most people would go looking for and enquiring about loved ones, relatives and friends.

I told Pat about the awful experience I'd had during the late evening and we retraced the steps I had taken along the road. Many houses were just heaps of bricks and rubble, some only slightly damaged, most of them with windows broken and the roofs caved in. As I neared the house where I had sheltered in the entry with Mollie, I saw that the entry was no more! There was no house at all, no sign of a shelter either — the whole place was a devastation of bricks, rubble and destroyed belongings. I felt terrible and began to weep for the poor people who had died there and for the lady who had tried to help us.

Mollie and I had a lucky escape. Pat and I made enquiries and we were told that the family of that house had all perished and it was a direct hit on their shelter. It made me think how one's decisions can change things round. Mollie and I had made the right decision not to stay with the lady and her family and it is daunting to realise that if we had stayed, I would not have lived to write this story.

