

The Exeter Blitz

Information for teachers



1 Firefighters in Exeter High Street, 4 May 1942. Source: Devon Heritage Centre

Contents

Introduction	4
Background	4
War is declared	4
Call-up to military service	5
Civil Defence	5
The Blackout	5
Gas Attack?	6
Gas Masks	6
Keeping Safe	7
Morrison Shelter	7
Anderson Shelter.....	8
The ARP Warden	9
Exeter is Blitzed.....	11
The Baedeker Raid on Exeter, 4 May 1942	11
Raiders in the Sky	12
Spotting the Raiders.....	13
The Damage	14
Lubeck.....	14
Exeter	14
Blitz Memories	14
The Aftermath.....	15
Civilian Casualties.....	16
Fire-watching	17
Stirrup Pump	17
The Home Guard.....	19
Evacuees	19
Rebuilding Exeter	21

List of Images

1 Firefighters in Exeter High Street, 4 May 1942. Source: Devon Heritage Centre	1
2 Buying provisions from a shop in wartime Exeter. Source: Devon Heritage Centre	4
3 Gas mask issued to Great Western Railway staff.....	6
4 Morrison shelter from Walter Lee Collection. Lincolnshire County Council.....	7
5 Police photograph of a Morrison shelter that saved a mother and two children. Source: Devon & Cornwall Constabulary Force Museum.	8
6 The Anderson shelter at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery	8
7 Senior Warden Walter Hawkins, Okehampton Street, Exeter, 1941.....	9
8 Exeter ARP wardens. Source: Devon and Cornwall Constabulary Force Museum.....	10
9 Devastation after the Exeter Blitz. Source: Devon Heritage Centre.	11
10 Luftwaffe pilot Major Bob Hans-Ekkehard Source: RIAT / Keith Saunders	13
11 Fire brigade hoses outside the Cathedral. Source: Devon Heritage Centre.	16
12 Stirrup pump in RAMM's handling collection	17
13 Firefighters rehearse at home with stirrup pump. Source: Imperial War Museum, London	18
14 Home Guard flag party 1943. Source: Express and Echo.	19
15 Children's faces reflect the reality of war. Source: Express and Echo	21

Introduction

This information includes first-hand quotes from Exeter residents who lived through the Blitz. Their memories were recorded for the Exeter Heritage Project in 1987. The contributors did not all wish to be identified by name, so some people have been identified by a code letter.

The main focus is on the Exeter (Baedeker) Blitz of 4 May 1942.

Background

War is declared

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared that Britain was at war with Germany in a famous message to the nation broadcast on 3 September 1939.

Many people were already expecting it, because they knew that Germany, under Adolf Hitler, had invaded and occupied countries across Europe. Even before the declaration of war against Germany, the British government had begun to put together its Civil Defence plans. This was the 'Home Front'.



2 Buying provisions from a shop in wartime Exeter. Source: Devon Heritage Centre

In one street in Exeter - just like every other street in Britain - people were coming to terms with the announcement.

Mrs F had just come back from church:

"Everybody came out of their houses in the Mint, 'cos we all knew each other. And I remember my aunt Elsie saying, "We'll starve, I know we'll starve"....and anyway,

everyone went out buying things - bags of sugar and things like that. We bought tins of food and stacked them in a box."

Call-up to military service

Mrs I remembers the 'call-up', when men were asked to join the armed services and go off to war:

"I was stood on the machine and the fellas had to go to the office, and there were about ten or eleven of them. One by one they came down and went up the steps to the office. One by one they went out. They got their uniforms on and they were gone. They were in the Territorials, so almost literally they dropped tools and went. Of course, all we girls were in tears to see them go... then we went to see them off, going down Queen Street in uniform."

Civil Defence

The Blackout

One of the first things that started once the war was declared was 'blackout time'. The idea was to make it totally dark at night so that German bomber planes would have no lights to guide them to their targets. Streetlights were turned off and didn't come on again. Blackout curtains and screens were installed in all windows.

Air Raid wardens patrolled the streets at night during the blackout to enforce the rules, often with large fines.

Mr L remembers the wardens shouting:

"If they saw a chink of light they would shout, 'Put that light out' at the top of their voice. In pubs and all public places, shops and railway stations they had a temporary sort of porch. You opened the door and there was just a blue light and you had to shut that door before you could open the inner door and go in."

People had to get used to the dark when they went outside. Moonless nights were very black, and winter nights very long. If you carried a torch, you had to cover it with brown paper. The lights on bicycles and motor vehicles had to be dimmed to a small slit, using a special mask.

Gas Attack?

Perhaps the greatest fear before and during the first few years of the war was that Hitler would use poison gas on Britain.

He didn't, but millions of gas masks were produced and issued, even before the war started. It was compulsory to carry a gas mask, and this was taken very seriously indeed. Children had to carry them everywhere, especially at school.

"Every classroom you went to, you had to take your gas mask. In the box you'd also have your pens and pencils and things, [like] sweets. In fact, in the end I think people left the gas masks out and carried the boxes around."

Gas Masks

"Horrible, vile, smelly slimy things"

Mrs T remembers what gas masks were like:



3 Gas mask issued to Great Western Railway staff.

"We didn't enjoy the gas masks.... People tried to pretend you could carry on a normal daily life wearing one. You had demonstrations and films of people making breakfast in gas masks. As if you'd be making breakfast in the middle of a gas attack.... You could blow the most sensational raspberries through them, which is what children did. They were horrible though - vile, smelly, slimy things. I hated them."

"Vans used to come round, like a sort of furniture van. And you had to go inside with your gas mask on and then they'd turn the gas on. You had to pull the rubber bit away, then your eyes would smart and you'd get put off the van as fast as you could. It was to prove it was necessary to wear them."

"[They] used to steam up inside so you couldn't see out very well. I remember that you should rub a bit of soap on the glass inside to try to prevent the steaming.... Hot, stuffy and very claustrophobic."

Keeping Safe

Even before the war officially began, the government started building large public shelters in cities such as London.

There were two types of small shelters for ordinary people. The larger was the Anderson and the smaller type was the Morrison. They were both named after politicians of the time. Sir John Anderson was the Home Secretary, and Herbert Morrison was leader of the Labour majority at County Hall in London.

Morrison Shelter

This looked like a cage and was generally placed under a large table or used as a replacement for one. It was about 2 metres long by 1.5 metres wide and only high enough for a small child to sit up in. They protected people from falling rubble, but not from blast waves from high explosive bombs.



4 Morrison shelter from Walter Lee Collection. Lincolnshire County Council



5 Police photograph of a Morrison shelter that saved a mother and two children.
Source: Devon & Cornwall Constabulary Force Museum.

Anderson Shelter

This was made from corrugated iron, sunk into the garden and covered with earth. It had bunks each side so a family could spend the night there. Some families kept them stocked with food and drink. They were damp and dark inside, cold in the winter and stuffy in the summer.



6 The Anderson shelter at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery

Sometimes families ran an electric extension lead from the house and kept a radio there for entertainment through the long hours. Without it, the only sounds would be night animals, street sounds and bombs falling.

By September 1940, some 2.3 million 000 Anderson shelters had been produced, enough to protect 12.5 million people. If you earned less than £250 a year, you got one free. Manual workers in danger areas were also given a free shelter.

The ARP Warden

The Civil Defence precautions set out by the government in 1935 included the new role of ARP (Air Raid Precaution) Warden. By the time war was declared in 1939, a network of newly recruited ARP wardens – men and women - were already in place in cities, towns and villages.

It was a dangerous job. They had to see that the streets were cleared when the air raid sirens sounded, and they helped in the aftermath of any damage after raids.



7 Senior Warden Walter Hawkins, Okehampton Street, Exeter, 1941.

Their main task was patrolling the streets every night to check the blackout, and anyone letting even a tiny chink of light out of their windows would be in deep trouble.

Children made up a playground rhyme about the ARP:

*Under the spreading chestnut tree,
Neville Chamberlain said to me:
"If you want to get your gas masks free,
Join the blinking A.R.P."*

(Neville Chamberlain was the Prime Minister at the time)

In fact, everyone received a free gas mask anyway, although the ARP wardens did get a special gas mask, tin helmet and uniform.

In Exeter, five ARP wardens were killed in 1942 bombing raids. The first was Henrietta Baxter, who died in Okehampton Street on 23 April. Then the 4 May raid killed John Mann (aged 66), Walter Passmore (aged 30), Albert Potter (aged 44) and Joseph Ryan (aged 31).



8 Exeter ARP wardens. Source: Devon and Cornwall Constabulary Force Museum

Exeter is Blitzed

Walking around the historic centre of Exeter today, you will notice a lot of post-war buildings mixed in with many truly beautiful, older architectural surprises. Some famous examples are the medieval, timber-framed 'House that moved', at the bottom of Stepcote Hill, and Barnfield Crescent, an elegant terrace of Georgian townhouses.

Before the Second World War, these sorts of houses were common in Exeter. The air raid at 1.30 AM on Monday 4 May 1942 was to change that forever.



9 Devastation after the Exeter Blitz. Source: Devon Heritage Centre.

The Express and Echo newspaper of 9 August 1940 reported that the first casualties of the German bombing raids on Exeter were a "canary which died from shock and a few chickens." Sadly, this toll increased dramatically during those early hours of 4 May.

The Baedeker Raid on Exeter, 4 May 1942

Exeter was blitzed in retaliation for the British Royal Air Force (RAF) bombing of Lubeck in northern Germany. The RAF commander of the time, Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, explained his thinking:

"The main object of the RAF attack on Lubeck was to learn to what extent a first wave of aircraft could guide a second wave to the aiming point by starting a conflagration. I ordered a half an hour interval between the two waves in order to allow the fires to get a good hold."

Lubeck was not a vital target, but it seemed to me better to destroy an industrial town of moderate importance than to toil to destroy a large industrial city.... I wanted my crews to be well 'blooded' as they say in fox hunting, to have a taste of success for a change."

Source: Second World War by Martin Gilbert.

The Lubeck raid made Hitler furious, and he ordered revenge raids immediately on Exeter, Bath, Canterbury, Norwich and York. These were called Baedeker Raids, after Baedeker German travel guidebooks of these cities.

Raiders in the Sky

In the warm, moonlit early hours of 4 May 1942, 40 Junkers 88A fighter-bombers flew up the River Exe and pounded the city with bombs.

The raid started at 1.35 AM and lasted nearly one and a half hours. It left 161 people dead, and 476 injured.

Many of Exeter's most historic streets - including beautiful medieval buildings, Georgian mansions, churches, banks, schools, libraries and shops - were totally destroyed or heavily damaged.

The skies above Exeter were lit up with massive orange and yellow pillars of flame and acrid black smoke, visible for 30 miles. The city had been hit with 75 tons of high explosive bombs, and 10,000 incendiary bombs.

The people who died came from all walks of life, and included mothers, babies, railway workers, and brave shop girls on fire watch Marks and Spencer's department store.

A short section of the Chief Constable's report for the raid describes that terrible night:

"The raid consisted of a violent attack on the city, with concentration on the shopping centre. The raid was a mixed one, incendiary bombs, high explosive of large calibre and machine-gunning being intermingled. A strong wind was blowing and this undoubtedly had a very considerable effect on the spread of the fires which broke out... The fact remains that a very considerable portion of the city of Exeter is now a mass of ruins."

Source: Devon & Cornwall Constabulary Force Museum

Ernst Von Kugel, one of the German pilots of the raid, said:

"It was a night of terror for the Exeter people. When I approached this town the bright reflections guided me.

Over the town I saw whole streets on fire, flames burst out of windows and doors, devouring roofs.

People were running everywhere and firemen were frantically trying to deal with the flames. It was a fantastic sight... No one who saw it will forget the greatness of this disaster.

We thought of the thousands of men, women and children, the victims of our deadly visit, but we thought of our Fuhrer and the command he gave, 'Revenge.' With cool calculation we carried out our orders."



10 Luftwaffe pilot Major Bob Hans-Ekkehard
Source: RIAT / Keith Saunders

We don't have a photo of any of the German pilots involved, but the above 1940 photograph of Luftwaffe pilot Major Bob Hans-Ekkehard shows the uniform of the time.

Spotting the Raiders

Civilian volunteers with the Exeter group of the Royal Observer Corps, formed in 1940, plotted the position of enemy aircraft.

On the night of the Blitz, the Exeter ROC emergency operations room above the Head Post Office in the High Street was completely destroyed.

Ken, who was in the Royal Signals during the war, gives a good account of how enemy planes were spotted and tracked on their deadly missions.

"At Sidmouth there was a 'three watch' system. Personnel at Sidmouth plotted the raiders in on RADAR and could see them at 120 miles if they were high up. They used receiver sets with massive transmitters and aerials of 300 – 360 feet (more than 100 metres). The

aerials had dipoles on them to conduct the signals underground. The radar equipment was huge with rows of power units. The engineers would replace one power pack with another already serviced. The ROC did all the plotting over land."

The Damage

Lubeck

Civilians killed	312
Buildings totally destroyed	2,000
Homes lost to residents	15,000
Percentage of medieval city destroyed	80%
British bombers shot down	12

Exeter

Civilians killed in 19 raids	265
Civilians lost in 4 May Blitz	164
Buildings totally destroyed	400
Homes lost to residents	1,809
Churches destroyed	9
Library books lost	1,000,000

Blitz Memories

A night of fear...

Not surprisingly, Exeter residents had vivid memories of this time:

"There was a tremendous noise. It wasn't just the bombs. They were dive-bombing and you'd have all the screaming of the planes coming down and going up, the bombs exploding and the machine gun fire."

"Every time there was a THUMP! ... you wondered how near the bomb was and where it had landed. They whined as they came down. They said if you heard it, it wasn't overhead. If it was overhead you didn't hear it."

"We lived on the outskirts of the city. We looked towards the city and the sky was red. The fires were terrific. Everything was burning."

"We went out in the garden, and as we got out the whole wall of the house caught fire. Flames burst in from next door."

"It's funny how your mind works when anything like that happens, it hinges on some silly little things to stop you thinking. All I was bothered about was that I hadn't got any hair pins with me."

"[All] the rabbits that night decided to have their litters. So we had rabbits hopping around the garden. We had forty.... they were hopping around the garden because all the hutches had fallen apart."

"We packed up some things in a suitcase and walked up Pennsylvania to some houses. I don't know who the people were, we didn't know them. But we went into their house and watched Exeter burn. What a sight. It stays with you."

The Aftermath

When day broke on the 4 May 1942, the full horror and destruction gradually became clear. One Exeter lady remembered:

"My sister and I went through the yard. There were a lot of people lying up against the walls and my sister said, "Oh those poor souls must be tired after the Blitz - they're sleeping there."

Then we realised with horror that it wasn't people asleep; it was bodies that had been brought in and they had to lie them down there until they could be taken in and seen to and registered."

These were shocking sights for Exeter, especially for children. St James Park Football Ground was used as a first aid post and one man who was a boy at the time remembered:

"I saw my first dead people, and that was the moment that brought it home to me, 'cos I had never seen people killed before. And there were stretchers of bodies on the road outside where they had been brought and found to be dead.... My father was all right except that he was absolutely worn out."

One man went out to look for his stepbrother early in the morning:

"I can remember the road covered in hose pipes. We got nearly as far as York Road, and that's as far as we could go because the whole of Sidwell Street was an inferno, with the flames meeting across the road. Then we spotted my brother bouncing over the top of these hosepipes on the motorbike."



11 Fire brigade hoses outside the Cathedral. Source: Devon Heritage Centre.

Another man remembers asking a fireman if he could help. He was told:

"Follow that hose back and tell 'em to turn it off'... I followed this hose for what seemed like half an hour in Sidwell Street, up and down it, and then it came back. It ended up as another nozzle in another fireman's hand!"

Civilian Casualties

The official casualty record shows us that when war involves civilians, it affects everybody. This is reflected in the following sample of fatalities:

- Three-year-old Christine Avery from Cranbrook Road
- One-week-old Christopher King of Chamberlain Road and his mother
- 89-year-old William Mock of Regent Square
- George Squire (17), John (12), James (8) and Sidney (3), of Blackboy Road, all killed in the same house
- Three generations of the Vanstone family were killed in the same house at 72 Blackboy Road on 4 May 1942. They were Grandmother Emily (80 years old); her son Charles (40), his wife Kate (35) and their daughter Margaret (16).

The names of the victims were put up outside what was Hele's School by the Buller statue on the corner of Hele Road and North Road, where the main site of Exeter College is today.

Fire-watching

Hundreds of Exeter's buildings were lost. Volunteer Fire Guards saved many others. These men and women - often up all night on tops of roofs, and positioned in the direct path of high explosive bombs - tried to put out fires or stop them spreading.

The Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) had a team of Fire Guards who bravely protected the building. Their makeshift shelter was discovered in a cleaning cupboard in the basement over 60 years later.

The volunteers were usually grouped in threes, taking it in turns for one person to keep watch and two to sleep for a while through the night. But after the Exeter Blitz on the 4 May 1942 they all had to stay awake and work together through the night and into the morning, dealing with the thousands of incendiary bombs that rained down on the city. Their equipment was sand and stirrup pumps.

Stirrup Pump

A stirrup pump was simply a bucket of water and a small pump connected to a hose. The pump section went in the bucket while one foot pressed down on the stirrup to hold it steady. You then lifted the pump handle up and down energetically and pumped the water from the bucket to the fire until the water in the bucket ran out.



12 Stirrup pump in RAMM's handling collection

- There were often large tanks of water in the streets.
- The moat at Rougemont Gardens contained tanks filled with thousands of gallons of water, until it received a direct hit from a high explosive bomb.

The National Fire Service (NFS) in Exeter pumped water from the River Exe up Fore Street to the High Street during the Blitz. They set up a series of hose runs with mobile pumps in between. This saved many lives and buildings.

The city's narrow streets, with their high percentage of wooden structures, meant the fires spread rapidly and often out of control. The NFS were stretched to the limit, and all Fire Guards had to help them extinguish fires was the stirrup pump.



*13 Firefighters rehearse at home with stirrup pump.
Source: Imperial War Museum, London*

The official roll of casualties includes:

- At least 40 Fire Guards who died in bombing raids on Exeter, most of them on the 4 May 1942.
- William Hawkins – a 15-year-old firewatcher -was killed at Kings Alley on the 4 May.
- Fredrick Pratt – a 73-year-old firewatcher - was killed on the 4 May at Union Road.
- A father and son team – Hedley and Kenneth Lendon – were killed together on 23 May 1942 when Kenneth was just 17 years old.

The Home Guard

The 'Home Guard', now known as, 'Dad's Army' from the TV series, guarded strategic targets on the Home Front. The so-called army was made up of men were unfit, too young (under 17) or too old (over 39) for active service. Its main purpose was to guard key installations such as railway stations, police stations and communications centres to help defend Britain against enemy invasions. Sometimes the Home Guard had to deal with German pilots who had bailed out of their planes during raids over Britain.

Mr L remembers being in the Home Guard in Exeter:

"I got called up into the Home Guard. I done my training at Higher Barracks. The Home Guard involved being on guard duty one night a week. Sometimes it was down near Willeys factory in St Thomas and another night it was up Longbrook St. On Sunday we'd fall in at 8 o'clock in the morning, march up to Central Station, go to Honiton by train and be on the firing range all day. You used to get 3 shillings allowance money for that."



14 Home Guard flag party 1943. Source: Express and Echo.

At least three members of the Home Guard were killed in bombing raids on Exeter including; Henry Brock, Sidney Burgess and Harold Keith, who was also a Fire Guard.

Evacuees

During the war, when bombing was imminent, Britain's government decided to send children away from big cities such as London and Liverpool.

"I was sorry for them, poor little kids. They had their name and address hung around their necks, were put on a train seldom seeing their parents from one year to the next."

Children often left their parents with just a change of clothes, gas mask, teddy and a few pennies. They travelled to the far corners of Britain, sometimes accompanied by their teachers. Evacuation was voluntary, but having children ‘billeted’ or made to stay with you in your home was compulsory. At the end of their long journeys they did not know who they would be living with, and siblings were frequently separated. Children often they had to stand in rows in village halls or on cold railway platforms while the locals picked out those they liked the look of.

‘A Jewish mother in Clapton, East London remembers the, ‘terrible task’ of waking her two small daughters at 5.30 in the morning and the tears of her eight year old. Her older sister took it well. An hour or two later as the children marched off with their school their parents watched, stunned, wondering if they would ever see them again.’

Source: *How We Lived Then*, by Norman Longmate. Reprinted by permission of The Random House group Ltd

Exeter was supposed to be a ‘safe’ city, which was not expected to be bombed. The population figures from the time clearly show the rise and rapid fall of the civilian population in Exeter. As you see, by 1943 most of the evacuees had returned to their homes

► 1939	-	70,540
► 1941	-	81,930
► 1943	-	68,000

Often children became very homesick and even tried to escape to get home. Mrs P recalls one incident:

“They (brother and sister) took the coal-money. They sneaked out with it when I was in the garden. I’d put it on the mantelpiece like I always did on Monday, and I was doing my washing when the coalman came. I went in to give him the money – and it was gone! The policeman found them down on the railway. They were walking towards Broadclyst. Going home, I suppose.”

By the end of the war, in May 1945, most of the evacuees in the UK had returned home again. But even in August 1945 there were still 76,000 evacuees waiting to be claimed. They either had no homes to go to or they had been abandoned. In the following months 38,000 children had to be taken into care by local authorities, as they still had not been claimed. War had destroyed their families forever.

Rebuilding Exeter

The rebuilding of Exeter's city centre started after the war. The ruins stood as a stark reminder of the explosions and fires that raged through the city centre.

The story goes that for years afterwards there was one particular woman who brought wheelbarrow to dig in the rubble every day.

.. 'She was doing her part toward clearing up Exeter. Of course she only sort of moved a few bricks from here to there, but she was a familiar figure for several years after the war....It was rather pathetic.'



*15 Children's faces reflect the reality of war.
Source: Express and Echo*