

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF GRANGETOWN IN WARTIME.

One of a series of articles by Colin Clifford

Once again on my daily visit to Sunderland Cemetery (which is not my sole interest nor a desire to join the residents) I perchance to read the dedication to those fifty seven civilians buried in the cemetery who had died as a result of enemy bombing during the Second World War. Many of the graves are clear to see some with a number of members of the same family interred in them.

The arrow shows the position of the memorial plaque on the Chapel wall



This got me thinking about my own memories of Grangetown as a young boy. My first memories were of the “Moaning Minnies” as the air raid sirens were called. One was sited at the tram terminus beside the police box in Grangetown. Older readers will remember where the tram stopped and the conductor turned the pantograph on the top of the tram with a long pole ready for the return journey, the other was beside the Council Yard, which was at the bottom of Westheath Avenue.

When these sounded it meant a dash to the air raid shelter in our back garden this had been erected by my dad and a family friend in 1939. It was always damp and the bunks were most uncomfortable being simple wooden frames with metal bands stretched over them.

Living then in Rhoda Terrace we were in close proximity to the anti aircraft battery which was situated in a large camp at the back of Clarke’s farm. This site had four large guns and when they were fired the house used to shake. As we got older the camp became a magnet for us youngsters but only occasionally did we gain entry. Sometimes it was via the main gate when the sentry wasn’t looking but usually it was under the wire fence and it was wonderful to be able to swing on the “Tarzan” ropes on the assault course until the guards chased us. A favorite attraction when we could get there was the cookhouse and the ATS cooks handed us small cakes out of the window. It was in this area that one night a fire started and two of the girls perished at least one of which I believe is buried in a military grave in the cemetery

My dad was in the Auxiliary Fire Service (as well as working at Doxfords) and there was a fire station in the garage of no 1 Rhoda Terrace and they also had a fire engine in Mr Curries, who was the leading fireman, at the top of Irene Avenue. The local control room was in the flat above Chalk’s fruit shop.

After a very heavy raid on the town center my dad took me to see Fawcett Street which still had fire hoses along the gutter and both Binns shops were just shells

For those of a younger generation Binns store stood where the Sir William Jameson's bar now stands and another store where Wilkinsons now stands. At that time a tunnel connected the two stores and the fire travelled from one store to the other under the road, this strangely left the adjoining old Gas Office standing relatively undamaged. When the stores were rebuilt after the war the tunnel was rebuilt connecting the two stores but was later sealed off.

My dad also took me into Union Street and I can clearly remember seeing a set of train wheels in Josephs sports shop window, the South End of the station was badly damaged and in later life I can never remember the clock going again. There was also a badly damaged building next to the town Hall.

At the end Bridge Street following an attempt to bomb Wearmouth Bridge a number of shops were destroyed and I can still recall there was a number of gents hats blowing along the road, however I cannot be sure if this was the same raid.

I still remember being taken to Doxfords shipyard to see them building the ships and being in awe as large metal plates were slung into place and the noise as riveters hammered there metal fixings into place. They all seemed to have badly burned caps, which I later learned was from catching the red-hot rivets. However the highlight was being given a small tin of sweets from a Royal Navy sailor who was to crew a ship nearing completion.

On a lighter note my dad "rescued" some white paint, which was impossible to buy, from the shipyard, which he brought out in an old tea can. On the tram home he dropped the can and the paint ran all over the floor and out of the drain holes on the trams upper floor. He made a hurried departure and had to walk the rest of the way home.

The white streaked tram ran around Sunderland for a considerable period of time so I'm told. Sorry Sunderland Tramways on behalf of my dad now long gone.

In 1941 there was a very heavy raid on parts of Hendon and it was then that Valley Road School was destroyed and the pupils moved to Commercial Road School as I have mentioned in previous memories. I can still clearly recall seeing the red glow in the night sky from an air raid on the docks, which set the oil tanks on fire. My Uncle Oswald who in addition to being a trimmer at the docks, was a leading fireman in the AFS was at that blaze in which I believe a fireman was killed.

When I was about 5 it must have been about 1942 we had a very severe snowstorm (nothing to do with global warming then) and all the roads were blocked, the snow was so deep I couldn't see over the top of it.

Eventually an army lorry from the camp forced a single path through to Ryhope village. Food was in very short supply and in the shops the shelves were bare. I went with our neighbour Mrs. Nichols and we pulled a sledge to Smiths Farm in Ryhope Village for a small bag of "pig potatoes" these were very small about the size of walnuts and then pulled the sledge home again. We had dinner that night along with turnip scrounged from Seymours market garden.

On one occasion my uncle Jack Collins who was in the Merchant Navy took me to visit his ship the SS Capitol a collier, which was docked at Seaham. I still can still taste the thick hot cocoa made with condensed milk, a rare treat indeed but my most amazing discovery was that the ship could make its own electricity. I couldn't get home quickly enough to tell my dad about this wonder and that it didn't need a wire and a plug.

This was the usual method but older readers will remember plugging the electric iron (if you were fortunate enough to have one) into the light fitting. So much for health and safety in those days.



During one particular raid my dad brought my brother and I out of the shelter to see a German airplane coned in the searchlights from the camp and the gun bursts around it. I believe it later crashed in Tatham Street with a loss of life.

During one raid I saw flares and incendiary bombs being dropped, which to me looked like long fire streamers some of which landed in the fields opposite Rhoda Terrace and some in the

house gardens behind. My mams cousin Mary Sheriden tackled the ones in the garden putting them out with sand and a stirrup pump.

On another occasion in an attempt to silence the camps guns a bomber dropped bombs in Clarke's field adjacent to the cemetery, some of which failed to explode. One however did explode causing a big crater and blowing the roof off the Ryhope Grange pub (no longer there).

Ryhope Grange Hotel

We were ecstatic, as we couldn't go to school until the army defused the bombs as the road was closed.

On many occasions we played in the air raid shelters, which were under where Machine Mart now stands but woe betide us if the Warden caught us.

However the most memorable night was in May 1945 when my dad awoke my brother and I to tell us the war was over. We were quickly dressed and taken out to see the celebrations. People had their house lights on without blackout curtains in place. This had for the last five years had been a criminal offence and any breach had been met with a "Put that light out" cry from the air raid warden. Then there were bonfires everywhere the biggest of which I can remember being on the site of the Grangetown air raid shelters. I still wonder where people got all of the materials for them at such short notice.

St Aidens Church bells were also ringing, this had also been forbidden since 1940 as there ringing signified an invasion was imminent.

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To some Grangetown families the war brought a great deal of personal sadness at the loss of those nearest and dearest some in far off lands. There did however exist a sense of togetherness where every one shared what scant resources they had whether it be a cup of sugar or tea or a much needed shoulder to cry on. Those days now sadly appear to be gone.