

## Growing Up in Wartime Battersea

### I. Introduction

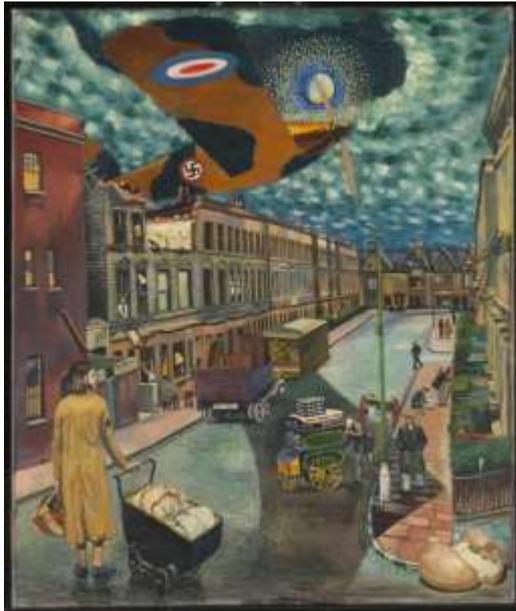
In 2017, Sue Demont, Geraldine Kelly, Carol Rahn and Jenny Sheridan launched a project called “War Comes Home.” Their aim was to honour and learn more about the more than 500 civilian casualties of World War II in Battersea and to improve the fortunes of the little known, little loved but Grade II listed memorial to those casualties in Christchurch Gardens. With help from the Wandsworth Heritage Service, they studied the useful but incomplete and sometimes contradictory resources in the archives, most notably a book entitled “The Angel of Death Has Been Abroad,” listing incidents and victims in the then-borough of Battersea; London County Council (LCC) Bomb Damage maps; Wandsworth Borough Council map of bomb damage and Air Raid Warden reports.



Memorial to Battersea's civilian casualties, Christchurch Gardens

Realising that there was a fleeting opportunity to capture eyewitness accounts of the wartime era, the group decided to carry out an oral history. With the help of a number of community organisations, interested individuals were identified and interviewed. Katherine Low Settlement was particularly helpful in this effort, and also made their facilities available for the interviews. In all, the oral history is based on the testimony of 16 people who were living in or had close ties to Battersea at the time. Two were young people, already working when war was declared, but most were children. Their testimony, while very individual and specific to a single area of southwest London at the same time reflects remarkably well the range of wartime experience across London as a whole.

To watch a concise summary of the War Comes Home project, see the video at <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>.



©Clive Branson. Blitz Plane Flying. 1940. Clive Branson lived and worked in Battersea. This street is almost certainly a Battersea street.

## II. Bombing Battersea Civilians

Children are natural optimists. It is their nature to accept the world as they find it. Yet the experience of being bombed was so singular, even traumatic, that it created indelible memories, even in very young children.

**Transcript of Bombing at Home video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>

Christopher Cooke  
Born 1942

*My very first memory, and it has always stuck in my mind, I can see it clearly now -- is being woken in the middle of the night, with some kind of strange lights flashing outside the window. I was very frightened. And I remember getting up and bashing my head against something. And that's all I remember. I must have been at least one or two years old to get out of bed and try to find someone. I can see it vividly even now.*



Irene Allardyce  
1 year old in 1939

*Oh, it was dead frightening. It would go in the air, and then something would come down, and BANG! Oh, I would go to my Momma; I was dead scared. She said, "That's all right." I said, "It ain't all right."*



Maureen Larkin  
6 years old in 1939

*They (the bombs) were frightening. Once they got to the stage of the rockets and that, that was even more frightening, because you didn't know – there was just a huge explosion. There was no warning. I mean at least when you had the air raids, you could hear the aircraft coming. It was terrifying, the bombs whistling down. And then the flying bombs, as well. You used to say, "Oh, that's all right; that's stopped overhead. We're okay." Because once the engine stopped, then it started coming down, and you*

### ***Transcript of Bombing at Home video, continued***

*would know that it was going further on. It was all terrifying. I hate balloons. I can't stand being near balloons, because of the sudden bang from them, and I'm sure that all stems from the war.*



Jean Saint

5 years old in 1939

*When times were bad, you didn't undress and go to bed. You sort of took off your main clothes and went to sleep in your underwear, if you were lucky. Because you were going to be disturbed once or twice during the night and might have to run outside. So you knew where your coat – and you always knew, well, not I, but my mother, knew where the handbag was and all the papers and all this sort of thing,*

*ready to grab and run.*



Stan Maslin

4 years old in 1939

*We were living in Ballantyne Street, and my friend's mother took us to the cinema in the afternoon and we heard the massive explosion. Somebody came in the side door of the cinema and said, "It's happening in John Street." This (street) used to be called John Street. And I was terrified because I knew my grandmother lived here. The outcome was that, she'd been lame for years, and they moved her that*

*day because, I don't know what it was, because it was drafty or something. If she'd stayed where she was, she would have been buried. My grandmother survived. There was a lady called Mrs. Rolt, she had two sons. She was a neighbour, and she said, "I'll go in to see if Mrs. Simmons is all right." And she went in and saw that she was. And when she came out, part of the roof fell on her and killed her.*

Maureen Larkin

*One day I'd been out with my mother shopping. There was an air raid warning and we were in the butcher's. He took us round the back of the shop and we waited there. And then the "All Clear" went and we walked home. And we were walking down this street, and a bomber was on its way home, obviously, and it came down and it was machine-gunning us. The neighbour pulled us into her house and out of the way. That wasn't an isolated incident; that happened to lots of people.*



Jenny Glen

4 years old in 1939

*All I remember is blackness, because we were in bed. My father was worried this particular evening and they brought a bed into the living room, put us in it, and put the covers up high over us. We were bombed, and all I remember is--I must have been asleep--everything was black, and very dark, and hearing voices. And then, when I really came around, I was sitting on my grandmother's knee in the*

*ambulance.*

*A couple of years ago, we went to the Imperial War Museum and they had an exhibition there. You went into an air raid shelter, and it got dark, and you could hear the noise of the planes coming over. Then the bombs started to fall. And I found I was shaking.*



Christ Church After V2 Rocket Hit, November 1944

Many of the people whom we interviewed were touched directly by the bombing. The destruction of Christ Church by a V2 rocket was particularly salient. This happened in 1944 and was a defining incident in Battersea. The church and the fire station across the street, both of which figured large in local life, were destroyed. Five people were killed, including the vicar's mother and a schoolteacher who happened to be cycling past the wrong place at the wrong time.

Molly Fulcher's father was an engine driver. When the rocket hit, the train he was driving had just gone across the bridge by the church and he was near Abercrombie Street, where his family lived. So he stopped the train at the top of their garden, clambered down to make sure they were all right, and then carried on with his journey.

Dorothy Biss, like Maureen Larkin, found herself the target of a German gunner firing from the air as his homeward-bound bomber swooped down. It was, she said, the most frightening day of her life. Yet she soon felt safe enough to go hunting for booty. "We came out; we just went and picked up all the little bullets from off the ground". Nigel Cox told us that one day his mother had been on her way to work and was waiting at the bus stop which was then at Queen's Circus by Battersea Park and Queenstown Road. "She decided that the queue was too long and it was going to take too long, so she started walking and then a V1 or a V2 came and landed there on that corner...If she had stayed there, she would have been killed by the bomb."

George Colliety's grandmother was blasted out of her house on Orville Road, and he remembers the bombing of a nearby school in which nearly all the children were killed, except the one, so the story goes, who'd been sent out on an errand by the headmaster.

Joan Hayward and her friend Sylvia liked to go to the club near Putney Bridge. The one night Joan stayed home, a bomb destroyed the club and the cinema and scarred her friend's face for life.

Nine of Lis Swain's relatives were killed in a single incident one night.

In Victoria Dwellings, the massive block of flats where Edna Loughran lived, the “luxury” flats got hit one night. The luxury flats were the ones built for “artisans.” They had inside toilets; the flats meant for “labourers” had outdoor toilets. (But none of them, not even the so-called luxury flats, had bathrooms.) Edna knew about the bombing; she knew that a few adults stayed behind in the shelter to look after the children while the others went to deal with the damage and any casualties. But whatever grim business those adults may have faced, Edna never knew. This was not something talked about with children, then or later.

Jean Cordwell’s aunt and grandmother, her father’s sister and mother, were killed by a direct hit of a flying bomb. Her grandfather, an air raid warden, happened to be coming down their street when the bomb hit. Out of the debris, the only thing they ever recovered was her aunt’s fur coat, with her name embroidered on the inside pocket. Jean recalled, “I do remember my father being really, really cut up about that. First time I’d seen him really devastated.”



Those who were older understood more clearly what the risks were, but they were already well schooled in keeping a cool head.

**Transcript of Bombing at Work video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>



George Colliety  
15 years old in 1939

*The air raid warning sounded. Now, if you were working in a factory and a warning was sounded, you were told not to stop work. You continued to work, because there should be, on the roof, a firewatcher and he will be listening for approaching aircraft. Now, I don't know what happened to him, but he certainly wasn't there... The flour mill was totally destroyed; the paper factory was badly damaged, but what happened to us was – the windows in the workshop were all boarded up, and they all came down. All the lights went out. Sounds silly, but we weren't then afraid because it already happened and we then had to go down a completely dark workshop to get to the basement. There's an amusing thing really here in that, Freddie, who as I said was older than myself, got halfway down the workshop, said "I've forgotten something," and he turned round, you could still hear the aircraft, turned round and walked back down to where we were working and I went down to the basement. He arrived, and he was limping. He was the only casualty. He'd trodden on a nail sticking up out of a piece of wood. And of course, when it was safe to go, we went home. And then we had to be back at work the next evening.*



Edna Hudson  
14 years old in 1939

*It wasn't the actual Prices' that was bombed. They bombed along the Thames. We weren't far from the Thames, about as far as from here, I suppose, across the road, where the water was, because they used to have the barges and everything bringing in... When the sirens went, we had to go down the basement, which was bloody horrible. It was where they used to keep all the old files, because Price's was very old, and it was very old building. So we went down the basement and there were rats and everything and there had been, running around. Because people, before the war, they used to be frightened to go down there. But anyway, we had all beds and everything so we used to even fire watch. We used to stay there overnight. The day they were bombed, the ceiling came down. So everybody had to go home. And we were smothered in dust and God knows what. We weren't frightened or anything. I can't tell you -- it was just something that happened and you just had to cope with it. And I think when you're in a situation like that, you do cope.*

Edna and George both mention fire watching – the job of being on the roof at night to sound the alarm if a bomb hit and to make sure any fires were put out early. The first Fire Watchers Order, September 1940, made vigils compulsory only for large factories, warehouses and yards. Even so, as George's experience testifies, no system is fool-proof. More broadly, voluntary fire watching evolved into nominally compulsory service for men (with a maximum of 48 hours per month) but the size of the fire service in London, and the equipment available to them, were woefully inadequate all through the Blitz.

Of course bombing was frightening. And yet, there was a certain spectacle about it that could be irresistible. Nigel Cox's mother was one of those who didn't want to miss out on the show. Did she head for the shelters when the air raid siren went off? Oh, no – she told her son that she used to go up on to the roof to get a better view. She said it was like watching fireworks.

Edna Hudson described that lure of an aerial spectacle in one of her recollections. She also recounted a close call: "We were playing tennis because things had been nice and easy, and I was at Price's, they had a big athletics grounds in Earlsfield. So I was up there playing tennis... All of a sudden the bloody doodlebug came across from the corner. And everyone ran." Everyone else ran back into the hut, but for whatever reason, Edna kept running across the sports field.

**Transcript of Frightening and Fascinating video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>



Edna Hudson

14 years old in 1939

*Every time I looked up, this bloody thing was coming the same way. And then it cut out, and you knew that it was going to drop. I could hear everyone shouting, "Get down, Edna. Get down." So I threw myself on the floor (sic). I looked – I could see these coaches and this car. As it hit, they all left the ground about a foot, you know, and come back down again. I got up and I was hit on the head with bricks and who knows what that had come off of these things. And I got up, and the houses that I had been running towards were gone. Completely gone.*

*I was with my mother, and we were going down to Clapham Junction to shop or something, I don't know. And the siren went off. We all stopped to look, and there was this dogfight going on above us. So everybody in the street was standing and looking. There could have been bullets and God knows what flying around. We're all, "Oh – look at that!"*

Without minimizing the horrors of bombing, people do also find the funny side. Picture Edna Hudson on her way home from work one day: "I was coming down my road then, which was leading from Lavender Hill, so it was quite a drop, and all of a sudden all the guns at Clapham Common started firing and we got shrapnel dropping all round. So I put me umbrella up and started running. I had high heeled shoes on and everything. I was running like hell down the road..."

When an incident could have been a tragedy, but nobody gets hurt, it turns into a favourite family story, like Nigel's story about his mother going up on the roof to get a better view of the air raids. Or when a landmine landed near Jean Cordwell's family flat but the only damage was a flying doorknob that careened off her grandmother's forehead; or when June Hill's brother fell out of the top bunk in the Anderson shelter; or Molly Fulcher and her Mum at Regent's Park one day who found it hilarious when the air raid siren sounded and the big, strong American airmen went diving under little park benches for safety.

### III. Bomb Shelters

Quite apart from the dubious protection offered by a small wooden bench, shelters came in many guises; most of them were experienced in one way or another by the people with whom we spoke. The most famous shelter, of course, was the Underground but fewer than 5% of Londoners actually used them. In any case, most of the people with whom we talked lived too far from a Tube station. Some big blocks of flats had brick shelters running the whole length of the building. This is what Edna Loughran describes at Victoria Dwellings. In

other blocks of flats in Battersea, a few specific flats were reinforced and everyone was expected to congregate in these.

Anderson Shelter



©IMWHU 63827A

Like the butchers that protected Maureen and her Mum, most shops had at least space in the back that could be used as a shelter; in larger shops, the basement often served this purpose. Jenny Glen's family were meant to go to their local baker's. They went once. Her grandmother refused to go back: "Too noisy--the sound of the rats trying to get at the flour all night long."

Some houses had small brick shelters outdoors, but for most it was Anderson or Morrison shelters. But of course these shelters weren't immediately available to

everyone, and not everyone chose to take one. We heard many tales of shelter being the kids sleeping on a mattress under the stairs while Mum slept with her head under the kitchen table.

Brick Shelter for Block of Flats



©IMWHU HU 94177

You can imagine that most shelters would range from not very pleasant to pretty awful. Joan Hayward's family had a lodger who preferred to sit on his bed and play his violin when the air raid siren sounded. He was certainly not the only one who preferred to take his chances.

Morrison Shelter



©IWM D0255

**Transcript of Taking Shelter or Taking Chances video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>



Maureen Larkin  
6 years old in 1939

*A Morrison shelter was like a table, but it was made out of iron and it had a sort of wire mesh down the sides, so people crawled into that and spent the night in that. The Anderson shelter was made out of metal structures which were straight up and bent over, like that. And they dug a great big hole in the garden, and they took all the earth out, obviously, and they fitted these structures together in the hole and covered it in earth and then you had to have some steps to go down into it. There were four bunks in it. Of course my Dad, he painted it all and decorated it inside and we had nice bedding and everything in there, and a heater. It wouldn't have been any good for a direct hit, but it certainly saved you from blast.*



George Colliety  
15 years old in 1939

*As far as the bomb shelter was concerned, I was probably 17, the thought of staying in that bomb shelter, with all those people there – I just got fed up with it. I had a choice of beds in the flat, of course, which I'd never had in my life.*



Molly Fulcher  
6 years old in 1939

*In fact, my teacher was killed during the war. She was in what they call a Morrison shelter. It was like a concrete table and you slept underneath. I think she was killed in one of those.*



Joan Hayward  
12 years old in 1939

*You never knew, when you went to bed, if you were going to get up again. We had an Anderson shelter – you had to go out in the garden to sleep. Then I went down in the Underground. One night. Never again – it stunk! I had an Air Force boyfriend and I said, "Let's go down see what the Underground's like." Oh, we came out of there. Horrible. We didn't stay the night. We just came out.*



Edna Loughran  
Born 1943

*They (Victoria Dwellings, the block of flats where she lived) had their own air raid shelter, which was at the end of the block. And, they used to be in there and have a sing-song and that. The people who lived near it, their flats would be sort of out that way, they'd go over and make tea and bring it over.*

Maureen Larkin

*My grandmother wouldn't go down there. "I'm staying in my bed, and that's it." She'd go to bed and we'd troop out to the garden.*

**Transcript of Taking Shelter or Taking Chances video, continued**



Jean Saint

5 years old in 1939

*Being earth all the way around it (the Anderson shelter) and at the end of the garden, you got eight-legged things coming in. And I couldn't stand it. I used to say, "Are there any spiders down there?" "No; no spiders." And you'd just get to the door, look round, and you'd see a spider's web in both corners. "I'm not going down there!" And in the end, no. I think everybody was grateful that if you wanted to, the council took them back. So they took ours back.*



Lis Swain

6 years old in 1939

*My Dad used to put all flowers on there (the Anderson shelter) and my Mum used to say, "Well, when we go, we already have the flowers."*



Edna Hudson

14 years old in 1939

*My grandma had an Anderson shelter up the garden, so we all traipsed into there. And we were all told to put a gas mask on. So we all sat there with a gas mask on. And then the front doorbell rang. It was my aunt from up the road. So I was sent out to open the door. And I opened the door and put me gas mask round the edge, and she fainted.*

Images of London during the Blitz are very familiar. If we can't really feel what it would be like to live with that threat from the skies, we can certainly picture the rubble and ruin. Of course we are aware that communication was much different then. Thinking about that helps us appreciate the enormity of the task faced by what we now call "first responders." We can imagine the daunting logistics of re-housing hundreds, even thousands of people whose homes were damaged or destroyed and realise it is not surprising that fire-watching was not well organised from day one, nor shelters immediately available.

Less likely to come to mind, but worth reflecting on, is the level of uncertainty and anxiety with which people lived every day. The day that Price's was bombed, Edna Hudson's parents were watching and waiting for her on the step when she came home, as they were that day she came running home with only her umbrella to shield her from the shrapnel. Jenny Glen spoke of how, every time her mother went out, her grandmother would hover nervously by the door until she came back.

Obviously there were no mobile phones, but it became clear in these interviews that none of these people had a telephone of any kind, nor did most of them even know anyone who did have a phone. They certainly didn't have a car. If someone you cared about wasn't within sight, you really had no way to contact them. You could only wait until someone sent word, or they came home. Although this was taken for granted at the time, surely it caused considerable stress.

#### IV. Evacuation

As is well known, the government urged evacuation of the vulnerable and many children were evacuated from London to escape the bombing. What we learned from the people with whom we talked is that some were evacuated more than once and many didn't stay away for long. Some wouldn't even have thought to mention being evacuated if we hadn't specifically asked about that.



About half of London's children were evacuated in the immediate rush after war was declared. The mass exodus proceeded quietly enough but with very little order in who went where and haphazard, inadequate preparation of the communities receiving evacuees. Many of the evacuees were from the poorest, most over-crowded neighbourhoods; their hygiene, habits and clothing were often quite shocking to host families in smaller cities and country villages. Equally, evacuees could be frightened by completely alien environments or daunted by how hard life could be in a farming family.

Host families were often disappointed by the small subsidies provided by the government; evacuee families were equally unhappy when asked to contribute toward their keep. This, and the long quiet after the declaration of war, made many families decide evacuation was unnecessary. So it wasn't long before many children came home. Some would leave again during the Blitz or later periods of heavy attack.



St. George's C.of E. Primary, Battersea, evacuated to Wales

For two Battersea children, evacuation was a nightmare that blighted their entire lives.

**Transcript of A Traumatic Experience video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>



Molly Eichenberger  
11 years old in 1939

*As soon as my mother had gone, and she used to send pocket money for us once a month. We never got it. Everything they sent, we knew they'd come from home because my Dad being a pastry chef, we knew his things. They used to send boxes, you know, and we just didn't get any of it. And as soon as my mother had gone back to London, Mrs. Edwards moved us out of that bedroom and we had to sleep on a mattress on the floor in Mr. and Mrs.' bedroom.*

*As I said, I was desperately shy. We never said anything to anyone. We used to cry ourselves to sleep, my brother and I. We just had a horrible time. And then, my brother, when he got a year older he went to this really lovely boys' school and he had a class photograph taken and they didn't send it to Mrs. Edwards, they sent it to London, to my parents. And my Dad said to Mummy, "Something's wrong with those children."*

*Where I went they said, "You don't want to sit next to that girl. She's a London kid; she's probably got fleas." And I was so miserable. There was a 16 year old living at Mrs. Edwards' house and he kept coming down to me and saying, "One of these days I'm going to get inside your knickers."*

*It all sounds like a horrendous horror story but it was; it was just that. My brother's never got better from the stammer; he still stammers now. If I tell you when we went on a Sunday School outing, he tried to drown himself. The whole thing was really one ghastly thing after another.*

Fortunately, most evacuation experiences were happier. And for some, it was a taste of paradise. Maureen Larkin was evacuated right at the beginning of the war to Eastbourne, of all places. But her father thought her accommodation was so poor that after about six weeks he brought her home and she then stayed in Battersea through the war.

Irene Allardyce and her mother went to Blackpool, but they didn't stay, either. "We didn't stay because... it was the flat upstairs. My Mum had to do the work downstairs. My Mum



said, 'I don't want to come here to work.' And we had to up and come back. She said, 'I'm not having that.' " It was little Lis Swain and her sister who made the decision in her family. She told us, "Even though we were children, I said 'No.' Mum said, 'It's very dangerous around here.' And I can remember saying, 'Well, if anything happens, we'll all go together.' A lot of poor people lost their parents while they were evacuated." That last sentence is quite remarkable. The

history books always discuss evacuation in terms of protecting the vulnerable, but Lis, all these years later and now a mother and grandmother herself, talks about evacuation from the perspective of the child, worried about losing her parents.

Many aspects of the evacuation experience are reflected in the stories collected in the "Evacuation Experiences" video: the back and forth nature of evacuation; the casual matching of children with hosts; the sometimes hostile reaction to Londoners; the sometimes surprising choice of destinations and the evacuation of children on their own, of children with their mothers, or even of whole schools.

**Transcript of Evacuation Experiences video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>



June Hill

8 years old in 1939

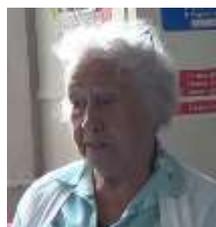
*But one day, my parents said, "How would you like to live in the country?" I only had one brother then. We didn't know anything about the war, and we said, "Oh, yes; that would be nice." And one day we had to go to Battersea Town Hall and we collected our gas masks. But we didn't really know – as a child, my brother was two and a half years younger than me, and I was eight – you didn't really think about it, you did what your parents said. And then one day, just before war was declared, the whole school, teachers, everybody, went to Queenstown station in a fleet of buses. We went to Brighton and there we went on to Portslade. The worst possible place, you see... It was lovely. At first, they couldn't find anywhere for us to stay, because everyone wanted little girls; they didn't want a little boy as well. But in the end, we were taken in, round about 4 o'clock. Everyone had been taken away before then. And we were very, very happy there. And my parents found it easy, being by Clapham Junction, to come down whenever possible to see us.*



Joan Hayward

12 years old in 1939

*Country boys -- they didn't like us, the London (kids). They said, "London kids, we don't want that." It wasn't our fault – we had to go. They said, "If you don't have a cigarette..." Bang – smash you in the face. We just went off and left Mum; just with our gas masks. Didn't have a suitcase. Carrier bag to put our clothes in. And I went to Woking, the first time. And the lady there, she couldn't cope. So we were moved to Weybridge – right where they made the Spitfires. And I said to my Mum, "I might as well come home. They're making planes here. I might just as well come to London; I'm just as safe." So I saved up my fare and went home.*



Molly Fulcher

6 years old in 1939

*I don't remember going on the train, but I can remember trudging up this small country lane to this house, a thatched house, and being taken into a bedroom with a candle and abandoned. I didn't miss my mother. Very strange. I did not miss my mother at all, although we were close. And I went to school from there. We had to walk about a mile and a half into the school. And I was there for about – I wasn't there very long -- that was in September, war was declared on the 9<sup>th</sup> or the 12<sup>th</sup>, I think, and I stayed there until just after the Christmas. Mum brought me home because she was frightened of me walking home in the dark.*

### **Transcript of Evacuation Experiences video, continued**



Jenny Glen

4 years old in 1939

*There was a coach in the playground. We all got in with our labels on our coats and our little suitcases and off we went. And we went to this great big station which was very noisy because it was all steam trains – big black things, puffing away. And we went, we seemed to go for days, but it was all day, it was hours. And we finished up at Lancaster.*

*There was another coach waiting for us. They put us all on and then they drove to what I later realised was a little council estate. After London, they seemed very small houses. They were probably the same as these you know, just one floor. And they went round knocking on doors. “Have you got any children?” And if the person said “Yes,” they’d say, “How old?” “Oh, a boy of 5; okay you can have an evacuee then. Is your child well?” “Yes.” So they’d drag a boy off the coach, “This is yours.”*

*I got taken in by a very nice lady who had a little girl of 4. I think I was about 7 at the time. She said, “Yes, we’d like a little girl.” Any I stayed there for about a year. And I was very happy there, because you could wander out on your own. I used to go into Lancaster with the little boy next door, and we’d wander around all day. Nobody bothered, you know. And come back in the afternoon in time for dinner. It was a very nice life; very free. No bombs. No sirens.*

*The teacher at the school said to me one day, “Do you know, we’re the only evacuees we’ve got left,” she said. “They’ve all gone home.” So I thought perhaps I ought to ask to go; I didn’t really want to go. So I asked to go back home. So back I came. And I had a Lancashire accent. No one could understand me.*

## V. Play and Childhood Independence

How did it feel to be where the bombs are dropping? Some of it was frightening, as we have heard. But these were children, for the most part with their family, being looked after and still secure in their own immortality. As we often heard them say, for them it was all mostly an adventure. As kids they commandeered the detritus of war and turned it into games and toys. Many a play was staged on a Morrison shelter. “Cowboys and Indians” turned into “English and Germans.” That’s how Stan Maslin broke his leg and had to be pushed in a pram to visit the most recent bomb site--bomb sites being the new playground, and shrapnel being the new trading cards.

**Transcript of Early Independence video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>



June Hill

8 years old in 1939

*My father was able to rent a house, which would be all our own, on the Shaftsbury Estate, which Lord Shaftsbury had built specially for working people. We moved there and we were very happy there. Life was so innocent then. Children just played in the road. We played hopscotch, skipping; anyone who had a blank wall had balls thrown up at it, you know. The school, Holmes Street School, was just around the corner and we were very happy there.*



Jean Cordwell

4 years old in 1939

*The houses across the road, they were more or less demolished, because I can remember after the war, seeing all the debris and that. No one was doing anything. We children used to go and play, "This is a good place to play."*



Edna Hudson

14 years old in 1939

*Clapham Common, which wasn't far from where we lived, was full up with guns and soldiers. It was an armed place, really. So we used to get loads of shrapnel dropping all over the place. And the kids used to go out and pick it up.*



Molly Fulcher

6 years old in 1939

*We used to go out and collect the shrapnel. And if you got a nose cone, well, you were the bee's knees.*



George Colliety

15 years old in 1939

*It was a different time. I know that when I was eight or nine, with the boy living in the family in the middle, we went for a long walk. We walked from Battersea and we went first of all to Wandsworth, to the river. Then we went on to Putney. When we got to Putney, I said "I know the way to Kew". And we actually walked to Kew. I had an uncle, two uncles there. One was a policeman; one was a professional footballer. We went to their house and then they gave us our fare. Now again, these are small boys getting on a train at Kew Bridge station to go to Clapham Junction and go home.*

Chris Cooke

Born 1942

*I went to Honeywell Road, but for some reason I didn't get on with the school there. My parents offered to send me to private school, Highfield, on Trinity Road. In both cases, Honeywell and Highfield, I had to walk there and back. It was a good half mile round journey, to both of them, in all weathers. Completely alone. I mean no parents going with you – good heavens! Yes, I remember going across Wandsworth Common, in the winter, dawdling by the railway and watching the steam engines going past. That's what one did. I'll tell you something though—it has made me so independent.*

As an aside, in his story of the expedition to Kew, George Colliety mentions going with “the boy living with the family in the middle.” There were three families living in the house. George’s family were on the ground floor; his friend’s family were on the first floor and a third family were above them. They all had to go through the kitchen on the ground floor to reach the shared toilet in the back. This sort of arrangement was very common at the time in Battersea.

In this photograph, Lis Swain, her brother and cousin are absolutely delighted with their Jemima Puddleduck, crafted from newspapers and old clothes, a reflection of the innocence commented on by June Hill. Children of this age today would surely demand something considerably more sophisticated – and expensive.



Parents did their best to shield children from the war. They didn’t talk about the war. The children might know when a home nearby was destroyed, but they wouldn’t know about any casualties. Jean Saint told us that when she wanted to know what was going on, “I used to go under the table and pretend to play with something, which is what we all did, and keep me ears flapping.” Jean Cordwell poured through the newspapers for the scraps of information there. June Hill was also an avid reader – that’s why her parents used to hide the newspapers from her.

Yet even though the war brought death and destruction to the doorstep, in many respects the world seemed, and in fact was, safe enough for parents to let their children explore with a degree of independence that would simply not be possible or acceptable today. Again and again we heard stories of going off to the park with a friend or hopping the bus or the tram on their own to go to somewhere like the Science Museum. A freedom to explore that was completely taken for granted is a theme that runs through their recollections of childhood.

If anyone was watching over, it was likely to be an older sibling, not an adult. As Stan Maslin described it, he and his friends liked to “rake the streets” – go out and play until it was time to come home for dinner. Jenny Glen described much the same thing in Lancaster, although her parents would not have allowed her that freedom in London. These children walked and walking, too, gave them freedom to roam. They didn’t depend on a parent to drive them from place to place. Of course the fact that there were hardly any cars about is one reason it was much safer.

We must remember as well that if children were more independent, childhood was also shorter. For most of these children, schooling ended at age 14 or 16 and then it was time to go to work. Molly Eichenberger told us, “I know I left school when I was 14... and they said, ‘Now you will have to find yourself a job’...I started work on my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday.”

## VI. Schooling in Wartime

Nearly everyone who contributed their memories to this oral history spoke of interruptions to their education. As described by June Hill, entire schools – students and teachers – were sometimes evacuated together. More often, schooling was local but haphazard. Children might come and go as they were evacuated or brought back home. Many of the teachers were called up, to be replaced by new teachers who were in fact rather old teachers. In the eyes of the children, quite ancient and in some cases very odd indeed.

**Transcript of Disrupted Education video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>



Lis Swain

6 years old in 1939

*We hardly ever went to school because of the shelters and the raids. That's why our age group's not so clever.*



Molly Fulcher

6 years old in 1939

*I went to the local school, the Latchmere school, which is now closed. We used to go in the afternoon because we were too tired to go in the morning. We used to go in the shelter about 7 o'clock and emerge about 8 o'clock the next morning. Be too tired to go to school. In fact, one day I went to school and I was the only one in the class. Nobody else... If there was a raid, you just stood up. I was in the top of the school, we just stood up quietly, lined up at the door, came downstairs and sing, knit, or whatever. Might be in there for three, four hours. I don't think the children today would cope.*



Jenny Glen

4 years old in 1939

*All the schools around in the area – I think I went to every one of them because you'd just start at one and the planes would come over and the bombs would fall and all the windows would go – and that's it. You'd go to go to school in the morning, get sent home again, until a few weeks later you heard, "Well, the next school is ready now, everybody go there." But somehow we all managed to read and write because when I went to the school in Lancaster, I was way ahead of them all. So we must have learned something in the little time we had.*

Nearly everyone who contributed their memories to this oral history spoke of interruptions to their education. As described by June Hill, sometimes entire schools – students and teachers – were evacuated together. More often, schooling was local but haphazard. Children might come and go as they were evacuated or brought back home. Many of the teachers were called up, to be replaced by new teachers who were in fact rather old teachers. In the eyes of the children, quite ancient and in some cases very odd indeed.

Air raids and bombings made school openings unpredictable. Jean Cordwell remembers air raid drills at school – diving under their desks – and many times when there was no school, "because either the school wasn't open or something happened the minute you got

there...So you weren't really learning an awful lot." She thanks her father, of whom she said, "He was quite clever in a way. He never got the chances he should have, but he always made sure that I was reading things and that sort of thing. So I was quite well up with education before I even went to school. So the interruptions I don't think made an awful lot of difference."

Edna Hudson was out of school for a year because of air raids and bombings, but she couldn't work without a school leaving certificate. In the end, her father got fed up and demanded one from the Town Hall.

George Colliety had been enrolled Wandsworth Technical Institute when war came, but he was not evacuated to Guildford with the school. Instead, he went to work in a reserved occupation at Morgan's Crucible. In 1942, he was allowed to leave his job there to join the Air Force and it was thanks to his training in the Air Force that he eventually became a teacher, qualified in maths and physics. But Joan Hayward always felt she lost her education because of the war. She had been at Mayfield School on a scholarship and planned to become a teacher, but when the school was evacuated, she found the accommodation so poor that she gave up and came home. Her working life was spent in clerical jobs.

## VII. Health and Healthcare

We're not surprised if someone tells us that life expectancy is greater today than it was in the 1930's or 40's. More specifically, for the UK overall, in 1931 life expectancy was just under 59 years for men and just under 63 years for women. By 2011, life expectancy had increased by more than 10 years for men and by nearly that much for women. Much of the increase has come from dramatically lower infant mortality, but diseases such as TB, influenza, even heart disease, stroke and cancer are simply not the killers that they once were.

The connection between statistics and the experiences of real people is easily found in this oral history. Quite apart from the war, nearly three-quarters of the people we interviewed experienced death, disability or serious illness in their family as children, and sometimes this happened to more than one member of the family.

**Transcript of Poor Health video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>

Dorothy Biss

10 years old in 1939

I had a sister, she was six years old. We used to have the sweet coupons. But that Christmas, my Mum said, "Oh, you can go buy some chocolates; I'll give you the coupons." Well, in them days you had what they called a Smog; thick smog. You know what that were? When the buses had to be led with a torch. She crossed the road, a coal lorry hit her and killed her. My father went, "That's it." Full stop. He never worked. That was it. So of course there was no money about. My mother did work. Cut a long short of it, we were just thrown out on the street. All the furniture was out. You had no money. In those days, you didn't have family allowance or anything. Nothing. Nobody to help you.



Molly Fulcher

6 years old in 1939

I had a sister. She was in hospital for the early part of the war; she didn't come home until about 1943, I suppose. She had a TB hip, so she was in hospital for about 5 years. We weren't allowed to go to visit, only on her birthday and you had to get permission from the superintendent. Under 14. And those children never went inside. They went inside Christmas day and was out Christmas night.

I think she felt cheated because she lost all her young years. But that's how it was in those days. If she had a TB hip now, she'd be out in a month. But it wasn't like that. And she was on her back for three years; feet never touched the floor for three years. So she had to learn to walk again.



Jean Cordwell

4 years old in 1939

I was ill, I think with scarlet fever, and I think the war had just started then. And of course you had to go into hospital then. I was in there, I think, three months because when you're in there you catch everything, you know – chicken pox and measles – and it just went on and on.

Chris Cook

Born in 1942

Unfortunately, my mother had really quite bad health most of her life. I think money-wise, financially, I think we were okay. But there were difficulties with my mother's health. She went into serious post-natal depression after I was born, for which she was given electric shock therapy, which in 1942, '43, would not have been very subtle.

Maureen Larkin's mother had lost her first husband in the Great War. Her mother's second husband, Maureen's father, wasn't able to serve in World War II because he had a weak heart. As it was, at the age of 53, "He just went to work one morning and didn't come back. Had a heart attack and that was that." Maureen was 15. Joan Hayward's brother had a heart attack and died when he was only 39.

Irene Allardyce's mother (like many of the mothers of people we interviewed) worked as a cleaner in the City. She also probably suffered from depression. Irene only knows that her mother became unwell and died relatively young. Molly Eichenberger's older brother was sent to a sanatorium during the war; her mother took ill and died not long after the war.

Jean Cordwell told us that her father had chronic poor health, particularly respiratory problems. He suffered terribly just after the war because the winter of 1947 was exceptionally cold. There was a fuel shortage and no one told them that because of his medical condition they were eligible for additional fuel.

In addition to his mother's struggles that Chris Cooke described in the video, his father was not able to serve in the armed forces due to chronic ill health. Lis Swain's brother was killed in an industrial accident at Garton's in 1938, two weeks before his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Molly Fulcher described the grandfather who lived with them as having some mental health issues. Her grandmother died in 1941, in her 50's, when Molly was eight. Molly had also had a brother who died before she was born.

Edna Loughran told us that the uncle who was her surrogate father could not serve in the armed forces because of ill health. Her grandfather used to say to her uncle, "Slow down; you don't need to work so hard. One of these days you'll come home on all fours and you won't work again. It's enough. Slow down." "But my uncle didn't listen," Edna told us, "and at 52 he was taken so ill that he never worked again."

These recollections are a chronicle of infant mortality, chronic ill health, industrial accidents, early death, and mental health issues, often unrecognized and untreated. They also remind us of the risks of being hospitalised. When Jenny Glen went to the hospital after her home was bombed, they discovered she had whooping cough and kept her in the hospital. Echoing the experience of Jean Cordwell, she was there for about five months because she kept catching one thing after another until her mother finally just brought her home.

Even without the war, more people then were closely acquainted with early death, with sickness and with disability, and quite frankly with a much lower standard of care than most of us experience today.

## VIII. Family Composition

There is a familiar, nostalgic stereotype of a past where nearly everyone lived in a nuclear family--Mum, Dad and 2.5 children--within the loving circle of an extended family. Our interviews reflected both the element of truth behind the cliché and the demographic realities.

Many of these people spent at least part of their childhood either living with grandparents or having grandparents live with them. And stories were peppered with references to "aunties," sometimes figurative rather than literal, but these do speak to the reality of extended families. For an extreme example, look no further than Edna Loughran, living in the Victoria Dwellings mansion block. At one point there were as many as 30 other families living there to whom she was related.

An extended family is not necessarily a happy family. Joan Hayward told us, "And we had Nanny and Grand-dad (living with us). They'd been together years. She had 17 children by him. But they didn't talk to each other, so they had to have separate rooms. My Mum used to say, 'I can't see them out in the street. They've got to come here.' But they had to have

separate rooms. After all those years!” Now Nan was once sentenced to three months in Holloway for throwing a leg of lamb at a judge who annoyed her, so she may not have been the easiest to live with.

Those who have studied population change know that although today it is divorce that disrupts families, marriages in the past were not necessarily longer or more stable. Rather, they were curtailed by death or desertion and we saw several examples of that in talking about health and healthcare. For so many of the people we interviewed, broken families and unconventional families were part of their childhood.

Molly Eichenberger’s parents took in a boy who had been turfed out of his own family at age 15. The boy’s mother died and his father told him “You’re old enough to look after yourself.” He was not formally adopted by Molly’s parents, but he lived with them as their son.

Edna Loughran needed that extended family in Victoria Dwellings. Her father, she said, did not want her. For all intents and purposes, she was raised by her maternal aunt and uncle who lived in the same building.

Nigel Cox knows nothing about his mother’s family because after the war his grandfather had left his grandmother and nothing more was ever said of him.

Molly Fulcher’s maternal grandmother left her grandfather when her father was about 11. Her father was in lodgings on his own at 12. She does not even know her grandmother’s name and told us, “My aunt was in St. George’s hospital during the war and my Dad said, ‘My father lives down this road,’ in Fountain Road; ‘He lodges at number 11’. He said, ‘I’ll knock and see if he’s still there and my grandfather was still there. That was the only time I saw him.”

Lis Swain discovered that her father-in-law was the illegitimate child of a maid who was born and raised in what was then a workhouse on Garratt Lane.

These recollections are a useful reminder that families then were often as complicated as they are now.



## IX. Wartime Food and Rationing

Food rationing began in January 1940 with bacon, butter and sugar and was extended periodically until 1942, by which time most foodstuffs were rationed. Each family had to register with local retailers who received supplies based on the number of customers registered with them and who marked off the ration coupons when purchases were made. Rationing was relatively popular because it was seen to be more fair.

Bread was never rationed, but it was scarce and the “national wheatmeal loaf” hugely unpopular. Edna Hudson remembers that, “If they were selling bread, along Wandsworth, you’d see the whole of Wandsworth High Street, all queuing for bread. You were only allowed one loaf. So that if there was bread, word used to go round, we all used to run, to buy a loaf.” Beer and tobacco escaped rationing, but beer was significantly diluted and alcohol very expensive so in fact consumption of alcohol dropped during the war. Potatoes remained widely available and formed a large part of a very tedious diet.

The diet available in early 1941 was probably the poorest of the war, and for those in the very physically demanding occupations the calories and protein were simply not sufficient. On other hand, the government’s decision in the summer of 1940 to give free or cheap milk to mothers and small children significantly improved infant and maternal health. By 1943, consumption of milk had increased by 30%, potatoes over 40%, other vegetables by 30% over pre-war levels. Consumption of meat was down by 20%, poultry and fish by 40%, syrups and sugar 30%, tomatoes and citrus fruits 50%. Overall, although the wartime diet was dreary, today it is reckoned to be better nutritionally than at any time either before or since.

Molly Fulcher still has her father’s ration book and everyone who shared their wartime experiences with us remembers rationing and long queues at the shops. Edna Hudson told us, “There was always a queue of people and sometimes you could get halfway down and the shops would run out of what you were queuing for. And you queued for meat and you queued for butter and all that sort of stuff. And my mother used to have to queue for ages sometimes. We didn’t think anything of it because we were at work and Billy was at school. It was just her that used to. Whether it was raining, snowing, or what it was, you got in the queue and you stood there because that’s the only way you could get it.”

As children, they had only the vaguest awareness of the black market and paid little attention to the widespread scarcity of everything from petrol to furniture, goods that were either rationed or not being manufactured.

They didn’t remember being hungry and they feel deprived--except when it came to sweets. Even children who’d never known anything but rationing remembered that they couldn’t get enough of sweets. Broken biscuits were a luxury; people queued to get broken biscuits. Clapham Junction was a good place to be when the American soldiers came through, handing out sweets. Of course, this generation is probably all the better for having had fewer sweets as children.

Mostly it was mothers who had to pull off the everyday miracle of meals under rationing. If the family had a garden, a welcome source of vegetables, it was typically the father who was described as the gardener. It was also usually the father who was named as the one who kept chickens, for the lucky few who had them in the back garden. A group of Edna Loughran’s neighbours even had a pig club – feeding the pig from their scraps and then sharing the bounty.

Most do remember some of the weird and wonderful food of the war years: snoek (whale), cow-heel, horsemeat, powdered eggs, potato suet paste and sausages that were mostly

breadcrumbs. Once George Colliety had a real egg in a café and the memory is still vivid. Thanks to the wartime experience, Irene Allardyce can't stand semolina but Dorothy Biss still loves her Spam. And Jean Cordwell remembers the blissful experience of her first choc ice, even though it was a bit soggy by the time her father got it home.

**Transcript of Wartime Food and Rationing video** <https://vimeo.com/channels/warcomeshome>

Chris Cook  
Born 1942

You could get hold of whiting. Fish. Which we used to call cat food. I can't eat fish now – the smell of it boiling. We had pigeon; we had whale meat. I just ate it. What else did we have? Rabbit. I can't eat rabbit. The thought of rabbit – just the smell of these things cooking. We didn't have any herbs or spices to make it interesting. But we had eggs and fried bread and bacon and mushrooms and tomatoes. Our big treat was a slice of bread with butter and sugar sprinkled on top.



Jenny Glen  
4 years old in 1939

One of the little girls was going to have a birthday party. I think it was her 7<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her mother had several sisters and they saved up all these food coupons and everything and they got flour and fats. And they made cakes; they made everything for a party. We went to this party and we couldn't believe our eyes when we went in – we'd never seen so much food. And the table was laid, and everything was all over it, all these lovely cakes. We were just about to sit down and the siren went. So of course we couldn't stay in the room; we had to go downstairs. I think they had a basement. They dropped the bomb near the Granada at Clapham Junction and that was a big one. I think all the flats round there, houses, everything, went down. When we went back upstairs again all these aunties were standing around crying their eyes out. They'd gone into the room and the whole table was covered in glass. So nothing could be saved of the party that they'd saved and worked so hard for. I don't think we were as upset as they were. We'd never had it, so we didn't know.

## X. End of the War

And finally we come to the end of the war. Everyone remembers the end of the war, or more specifically VE day. Some went into Trafalgar Square and heard Vera Lynn singing. There were lots of street parties. In Maureen Larkin's street, the festivities were buoyed by the piano someone had dragged out into the street. In Molly Eichenberger's neighbourhood everyone wanted to get something her father had made because he was a pastry chef at the Piccadilly Hotel and knew how to conjure delicious pastries out of the nothing of rationing. The end



Lis Reynolds Swain (5<sup>th</sup> from left in front row) at VE party in Knox Road

of the war was a tremendous relief to everyone, even children who had only ever known Battersea in wartime.

Jean Cordwell remembers being at St. Thomas's for physio, or "exercises" as they called it in those days. She recalls, "My mother had come to collect me and she said, 'I think the war's over.' We were all stunned. 'What are you talking about?' And we went out and over Westminster Bridge and people were gathering together, you know, and saying, 'The war's over.' And that was really quite emotional."

But even for such a momentous event, there's always room for British understatement. Jenny Glen recounts, "I was just walking down St. John's Hill to Clapham Junction with my mother and suddenly there was a church bell. And I said to my mother, 'What's that noise?' I'd never heard one; couldn't remember hearing one before. 'Oh, that's a church bell,' she said. 'It's the end of the war.' And that's all that was said about it."

2019 marks 80 years since the beginning of World War II. There are now three or four generations of us with no direct experience of the war. It's easy for that part of our history to seem very, very distant. But we must not forget or take for granted how lucky we are that war has not revisited these shores. And as we see, as we see far too often, civilians killed and their homes destroyed in some far-off city, it is for us to be compassionate toward those victims; to treasure these stories of growing up in wartime Battersea and to share them with today's children.

### War Comes Home

A multi-faceted programme supported by Enable Leisure & Culture, the Battersea Society, Spectacle Productions, Katherine Low Settlement, Christ Church & St. Stephen, Wandsworth Heritage Service, Omnibus Theatre and by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund.

