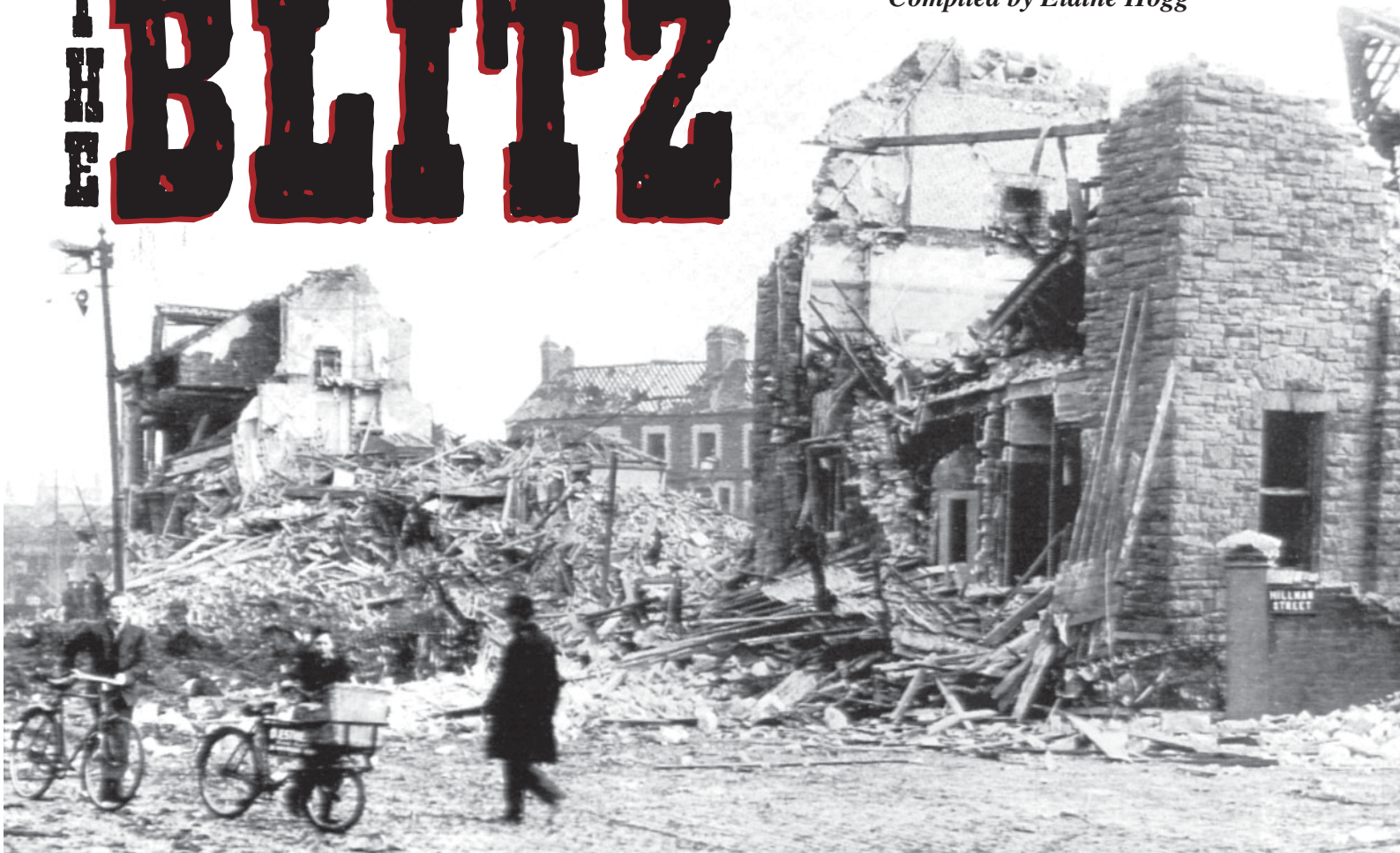


The Darker Side of Belfast's History

THE BLITZ

Compiled by Elaine Hogg



During the months of April and May 1941 the people and landscape of Belfast changed forever. In less than one month 955 men, women and children had been killed, 2436 injured and almost 57,000 houses were destroyed or damaged during just 4 air raids by the Luftwaffe. The Second World War had come to Belfast in a brutal and devastating manner. Edmond Warnock, parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of Home Affairs, said to the Northern Ireland cabinet on 19th June 1939;

"An attack on Northern Ireland would involve a flight of over 1,000 miles. For aeroplanes of the bombing type, loaded, this is a very big undertaking...the enemy aeroplanes must twice pass through the active gun, searchlight and aeroplane defences of Great Britain...it is possible that we might escape attack."

Before the War

During the inter war years from 1918-1939 a collective poverty brought a sense of community to areas of Belfast such as the Shankill, Falls, Lower Antrim Road, Short Strand, Ballymacarret, York Street and the Docks. These areas had seen a great deal of rioting and sectarian violence sustained from the mid-nineteenth century.

The areas were mainly working class with deprivation and poverty rife. However between 1923 and 1935 Belfast was a relatively peaceful city with an average murder rate of between two to three. Wales with a population thirty times that of Belfast had an annual murder rate of 150.

The depression after the First World War united the city residents as they struggled to survive with rising unemployment and atrocious living conditions. Anna Boyle recollected:

There was so much infant mortality that it seemed as if every week blue baby-coffins were coming out of every street. I had three brothers and a sister dead before they were two years old, out of eleven of us.

In 1932 sectarian tension was swept aside when the two communities came together to protest over relief payments. Once again poverty had brought the people together. In 1935 the relative peace was broken during a short period of rioting in the York Street, and Docks area when 11 people were murdered. This was partially caused by celebrations for George V jubilee. This was a fairly isolated incident and was the worst rioting since 1922.

By 1939 there was a more moderate mood in Belfast. People started going out more in the city although most social activity took place close to home sustaining some

sectarian feeling. People from North Belfast rarely would travel to East Belfast – similar to the social habits of people today. Without the Odyssey and the Laganside Developments few people from the North or West of the city would cross the bridge to the East of the city. Residents of South Belfast rarely travel to the North of the city. And so it was at the outbreak of war, the people of Belfast were enjoying a period of calm and confidence even if they remained in their own areas.

In the 1930s football and greyhound racing were popular but by the end of the decade going to the cinema was the most popular form of entertainment

– 35 cinemas in Belfast, one seat for every 15 people. This trend for cinema going was reflected in UK and USA also and the glamour of Hollywood movie stars and their lifestyles and fashions became popular. For the first time people had a small disposable income for entertainment and shopping.

In the short term the coming of war brought ease to sectarian tensions and the introduction of rationing gave the poorest hope that they would for once receive a regular supply of food. Despite a rising number of middle classes the vast majority in Belfast were working class and there was still a very high rate of unemployment. There were no social services to look after the poor but rationing guaranteed a daily allowance of food. Compared to the rest of the UK cities the residents of Belfast were well fed during the war years due to its proximity to the country and the huge agricultural base in Northern Ireland. General health improved during the war and the birth rate in Northern Ireland actually increased during the war years.

Housing conditions in Belfast were amongst the worst in Europe during the inter war years which contributed to the poor health of many in the city and the high mortality rate of children and the under 25s. Most people died from infectious diseases, which were sustained by the poor housing and cramped conditions, which many residents of the city had to live in.

Damp, mouldering walls, many of them bulging, rickety stairs, broken floors, crumbling ceilings were common defects. Some of the 'houses' were mere hovels, with people living in indescribable filth and squalor...In a

group of three of the worst houses, each sublet to three tenants...rents were 1/9d a week for a small attic which it was an adventure to approach.

The Jewish community in Belfast had always contributed greatly to the social and cultural life of the city as well as its disproportionate contribution to the economic success of the city. Because of this, and in spite of this, Belfast did not respond to a cry for help from almost 300 Austrian businesses in the build up to the war. The Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce received letters from these Jewish business people who wished to immigrate to Northern Ireland to escape the tragedy unfolding in central Europe. 244 of these letters were rejected often after only a brief consideration with comments such as

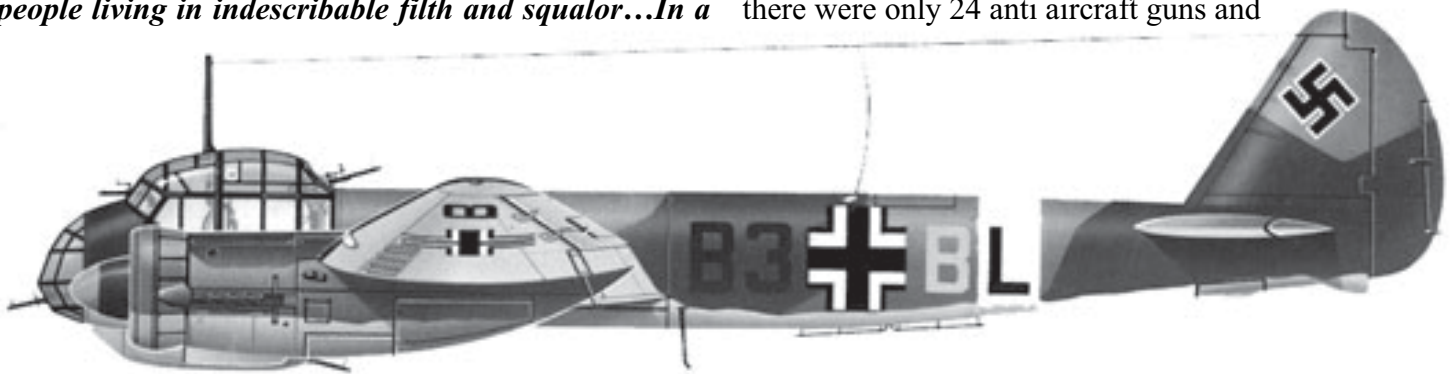
– no comment – no opportunity – no opening – not written to. It is thought around 20 of these refugees made it to Belfast and many thought that this may have made Belfast a target for the Luftwaffe though this is unlikely.

The 1941 Blitz

The citizens of Belfast were not prepared for the attacks by the Luftwaffe. Due to the lack of leadership from the Northern Ireland government, under the direction of the Prime Minister Sir James Craig who died in 1940 and then under John Andrews, the people of Belfast believed that they were geographically too far from the main action of the war. They were also in the main unaware of the significance of the shipyards such as Harland and Wolff, aircraft factories like Shorts and the many engineering works located in Belfast, and that these industries would make the city of Belfast a target for air attack.

"Ulster is ready when we get the word and always will be"
Prime Minister, Lord Craigavon in 1938

Despite these words, when the rest of Britain was preparing for air raids, the government in Northern Ireland were preoccupied with the 'serious danger of IRA outrages' and Belfast was ill prepared for any attack. The assumption from the local government that the responsibility for security lay with the government at Westminster and so they made very little money available to make plans to protect people and property. In 1939 there were only 24 anti aircraft guns and



14 light anti aircraft guns. All other anti aircraft guns had been transferred to Cardiff. Belfast Corporation (now City Council) did little to prepare the people of Belfast apart from appointing a full time air raid precautions officer and digging trenches in public parks and at the harbour estate. Sandbags were distributed to protect public buildings and gas masks were provided to the residents of Belfast.

Attempts to evacuate children from the city to the country were not taken seriously and few children were moved from the city before the first attacks. It is thought that only 7000 children were evacuated out of the required 70,000 under government advises. No one took the threat of attack seriously and on many occasions the air raid protection officers were made fun of and ridiculed as scaremongers. In comparison to the rest of the UK the people of Belfast made little effort to change their lives. The people were more concerned with the social and economic effects of the war and felt that the remoteness that Northern Ireland had felt throughout the 1930s would continue during the war. People in Belfast felt that Hitler had no argument with them, and that his war was with mainland UK.

Throughout the UK cinemas and dance halls were closed from the outbreak of the war but in Belfast they all remained open. Many photographs taken during the war years show the people of Belfast enjoying the fine weather sitting around the City Hall and continuing their daily lives as normal. The harsh realities of war, such as blackouts, air-raid drills and sugar rationing were not as prominent as they should have been. The people cared more about the difficulties that they had just surviving in Belfast on a day to day basis.

Moya Woodside, a surgeon's wife from the Malone Road noted in her diary:

that she was probably living in the pleasantest place in Europe

and that the sources of most irritation to her were:
the scarcity and cost of domestic servants, the slowness of the mail service, the growing censorship of letters, of telephone calls and of the press and the narrowing and impoverishment of cultural life.

By June 1940 France had fallen to the German army and the city of Belfast was no longer so far away for the Luftwaffe. In fact Belfast was a sitting target in many ways in that Belfast was easy to spot from the air as the city sat at the edge of the Lough and the vast expanse of water leading up to the city could not be blacked out. As the population were not really in war mode there were often breaches of the black out and the lighthouses continued to function along the coast even when an air raid warning had been given. There was a growing resentment of the number of British troops, which overwhelmed many towns and ruined the roads with their heavy vehicles, and of the thousands of evacuees arrived from Britain, which stretched the food supplies to the limit. There were also indications that not all of the people of Belfast were united in a defence of the city. The blackout order was defied often when the lights in West Belfast remained lit and bonfires were set. Gas masks were burned and there were incidents of civil unrest.

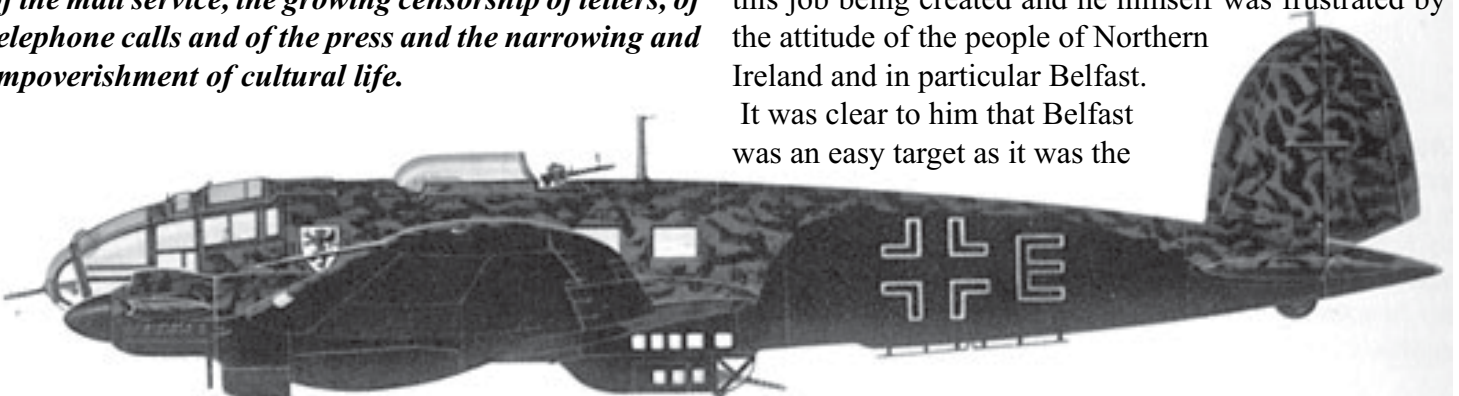
However there was no conscription and in general there was plenty to eat, especially if you were poor and lived in the city where you were guaranteed regular food. The farmers were urged to plough up their fields and grow food to supply the rest of the UK and there was a 40% increase on prewar levels of ploughed acreage. By January 1941 over seventeen thousand gallons of milk were shipped across the Irish Sea every day and the number of tractors in Northern Ireland increased four and half times.

One wartime investigator who travelled throughout the UK noted public attitude and behaviour reported after a visit to Belfast:

people thought nothing of asking one to lunch and talking the whole afternoon. Being half an hour late for an appointment did not matter in the slightest and perhaps the most curious shock of all is seeing men lying about in the morning on the grass outside the City Hall or sleeping with their feet up in the backs of cars.

John MacDermott was appointed minister of public security in June 1940 which was rather late in the day for this job being created and he himself was frustrated by the attitude of the people of Northern Ireland and in particular Belfast.

It was clear to him that Belfast was an easy target as it was the



FACING PAGE The Junkers Ju88 and ABOVE The Heinkel He111 both of which were used in the Luftwaffe Blitz on Belfast.

most unprotected city in the United Kingdom. No town outside of Belfast had any defence at all and Belfast was poorly prepared. He stated in March 1941:

“up to now we have escaped attack. So had Clydeside until recently. Clydeside got its blitz during the period of the last moon.

There are certain technical reasons for thinking that at present the enemy could not easily reach Belfast in force except during a period of moonlight. The period of the next moon from, say, the 7th to the 16th April, may well bring our turn”.

Sadly Mr McDermott's fears were to come true.

Dockside Raid

Suddenly I heard a long roaring whine and next moment a hell of a thud.... standing on a box, I opened the skylight. Something in my stomach seemed to drop, for the whole length of the shipyard was ablaze with stark white light.... The guns all over the city began to roar. I knew it was our first raid.

William McCready, Keadyville Avenue, Shore Road, Belfast, 7th April 1941.

On the 7th April 1941 the people of Belfast were shocked when this first small, surprise attack occurred. The attack devastated the shipyard of Harland and Wolff and many industrial, commercial and residential buildings in that area.

BELOW - Junction of Bridge Street and High Street



Belfast was not the main or only target that night as many other cities in the UK were attacked. German records indicate that 517 aircraft were involved in this attack on Glasgow, Liverpool, Bristol, Great Yarmouth and Belfast.

The attack occurred shortly after midnight and lasted just over three hours with 8 German aircraft involved at any one time. One specific aircraft the Heinkel He111 was used as it delivered its bombs by sight and Belfast was easy to spot, was illuminated by flares and on this night the weather was clear with a half moon and light winds. The German pilots reported back that the defences in Belfast were '*inferior in quality, scanty and insufficient*'. In fact it was reported at the time that people heard the

planes first, then the anti aircraft fire and only then did they hear the sirens of warning. A Luftwaffe pilot gave the following interview on German radio:

We were in exceptional good humour knowing that we were going for a new target, one of England's last hiding places. Wherever Churchill is hiding his war material we will go...Belfast is as worthy a target as Coventry, Birmingham, Bristol or Glasgow.

The dock area and shipyards were a good target as they had little security in force and that they also stored a good deal of inflammable material so any bombs dropped would ignite material for devastating effect.





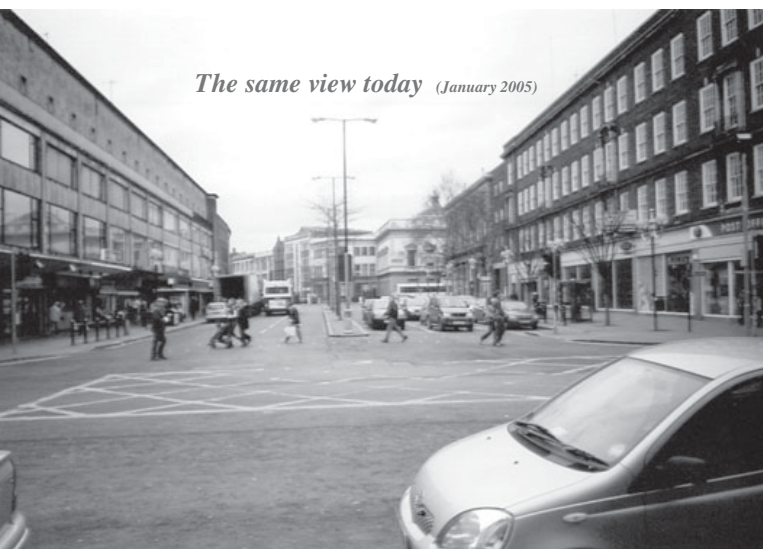
Bridge Street as it was before the German bombing



Bridge Street the morning after the raid



After the clear up



The same view today (January 2005)

The Duncrue Street area was badly damaged with the premises of timber merchants McCue Dicks devastated by fire. The first casualties of the air raid took place in Duncrue Street when a parachute mine killed two air raid wardens. A McDonald and B E Harkness were running toward the parachute mine believing it to be a German parachutist when the bomb exploded.

A number of working class houses in the Docks area were also damaged, as were houses on York Road and the Shore Road. A large bomb on Alexandra Park Avenue blew out a fifteen-foot wide crater although no houses were damaged, not even the windows in the surrounding houses and commercial buildings were broken.

The east side of Belfast was particularly badly hit in the Dockside Raid when over 800 incendiary bombs were dropped on the Newtownards Road, Templemore Avenue and Albertbridge Road. Most of the fires were put out quickly with sandbags and buckets of water and damage was mainly caused to slates with scorched floors, ceilings and bedding. Fifteen serious fires did break out and one of the most serious was at St Patrick's Church of Ireland Church on the Newtownards Road.

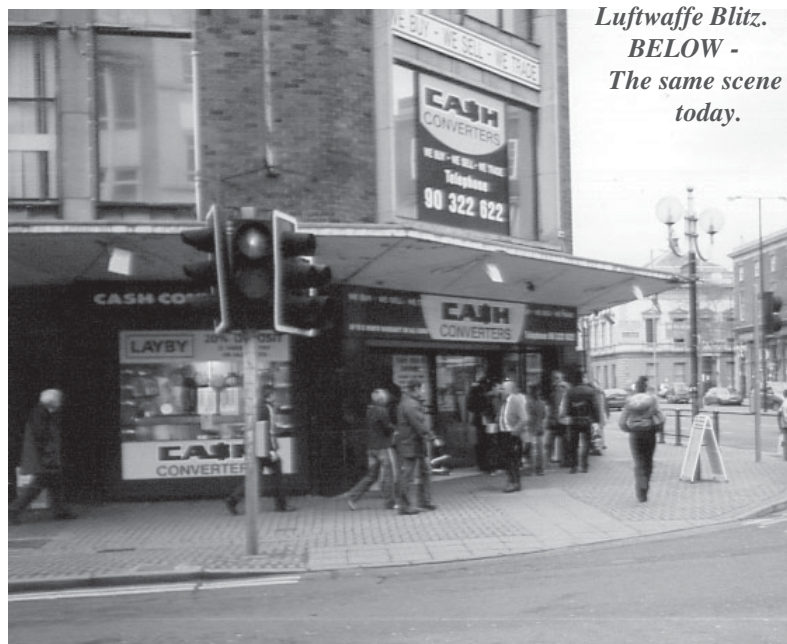
There was a lull in the attack around 2am but the attack started up again at 3.30am when a parachute mine fell on Ranks flourmill at the Pollock Basin killing nine workers and injuring 20. Similar to the attack which killed the air raid officers the men working at the mill ran toward the parachute mine believing it to be an enemy parachutist. A parachute oil bomb fell on the aircraft factory at Short and Harland completely destroying the building, which was built on four and a half acres. This was the largest fire of the raid and many night shift workers died in the blast. The fire brigade were unable to cope with the number of fires as there was insufficient water available to them and due to their small numbers were slow to arrive at fires.

At 4am the air raid was declared over and the all clear was given. The west and south of the city escaped attack and many people in those areas slept through the whole raid. The official casualty figures were thirteen dead; eighty-one injured with twenty three of these with serious injuries.

The local press was heavily censored so as not to affect moral however it was noted that '*everything seemed normal, no visible damage anywhere, there were many more gas masks*'. Due to the controlled coverage by the press rumours spread and many inaccuracies were passed from person to person such as the 'Nazis' had attempted to invade the Isle of Wight or that the aircraft factories in Britain had been so devastated that no planes could be built.



ABOVE - The junction of High Street and Bridge Street after the Luftwaffe Blitz.



BELOW -
The same scene
today.

The Hurricanes of the RAF based at Aldergrove were sent out on patrols but they were not built for night flying, however they managed to bring down one Heinkel which exploded in mid air and plunged into the sea off the Co Down coast. The plane or crew were never recovered.

On the 10th April 1941 a searchlight arrived in Larne and one additional anti-aircraft battery. The smoke screen for the dock area of Belfast was also put in place that was very unpopular with the people of the area as the smoke was black, heavy and foul smelling which permeated everything in its path.

The people of Belfast were affected in many ways by the first attack but this mainly fell into three categories:

1. People who talked constantly about the raid and prepared meticulously in case of another attack.
2. People who were not worried during the day and ignored precautions and raids but who panicked when there was an alert at night.
3. People who adopted a fatalistic approach and remained calm throughout.

There were many rumours that Belfast would be attacked again but most did not believe this would happen despite the rumours circulated by Lord Haw Haw that there would be 'Easter Eggs for Belfast'. In general the residents of Belfast took it all in their stride and in the words of Frank Skillen the sirens went off with such frequency that 'you could have set your kettle by them'.

Easter Tuesday Raid

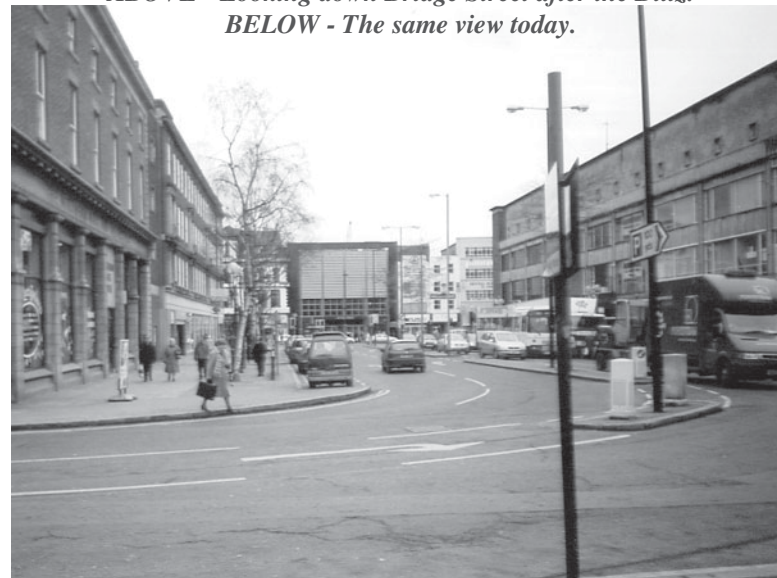
The sky was red, pure red, you would have thought that someone had set fire to the world.

In the days leading up to the Easter Tuesday raid there were many alerts and warnings of imminent attack from the Luftwaffe. Citizens of Belfast reported that the aircraft flew so low over the city that they felt that they needed to duck down to avoid the aircraft. Anti aircraft fire was heard often as the German reconnaissance planes flew over the city.

The morning of Easter Tuesday was dull and overcast and there was a feeling in the city that an attack would happen again at some time. German aircraft were spotted flying over the city but most of the people continued with their usual activities, attending football matches, going to weddings as Easter was a popular time for weddings, and the annual visit to Bellevue to visit the zoo or a trip up the coast on the train. By evening the weather had



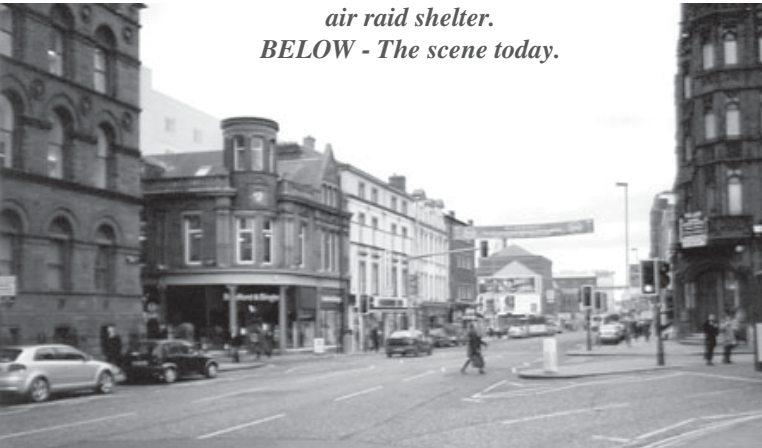
ABOVE - Looking down Bridge Street after the Blitz.



BELOW - The same view today.



ABOVE - Public toilets outside the City Hall being used as an air raid shelter.



BELOW - The scene today.

cleared and the skies were bright and the evening was mild.

At 10.40pm the sirens were sounded and the smoke screen was in force over the Lough but it was over half an hour later before the ominous drone of the German aircraft approaching could be heard. In Co Down they heard the aircraft first and many people set off for high points so that they could look toward Belfast.

The Luftwaffe had set off from Northern France and after small attacks on English cities such as Liverpool, Hull and Great Yarmouth the majority of the air force flew toward Belfast, as it was their primary target for this raid. The Luftwaffe usually followed a course tracking along the coast of Ireland and passing Dublin, up the Co Down coast and on to Belfast. On their return to France they flew via Holywood to Penzance keeping close to the Irish coast on the way. At the time many believed that the Irish assisted the Germans by keeping their lights lit to show them the way to Belfast however accounts by the pilots indicate that often they travelled across the Bristol Channel to the English Channel so it was not their routine to use the lights of the South to locate their target.

The Germans firstly dropped some 300 flares to illuminate Belfast and this bright white light is something that survivors of the Blitz remember. It was eerie in the city that was illuminated so that it was almost daylight and at the same time the people were observing a blackout. Twenty-nine incendiaries falling on the working class

districts in North and East Belfast followed the flares. 674 bombs also fell at an average of two per minute as the raid lasted five hours this time. These bombs devastated whole streets and the sound of these bombs, fitted with organ pipes, were terrifying for all who heard them. It was as if the very bomb was screeching at the people. On top of all this seventy-six land mines were dropped floating to the ground using silk parachutes.

The bombing destroyed houses in the Whitewell area, Cavehill, Antrim Road, York Road, Crumlin Road, Newtownards, Road and Templemore Avenue. In Vervan Gardens off the Whitewell Road twenty-five people died and overall in the Whitewell Road area 46 people died and there were 124 casualties.

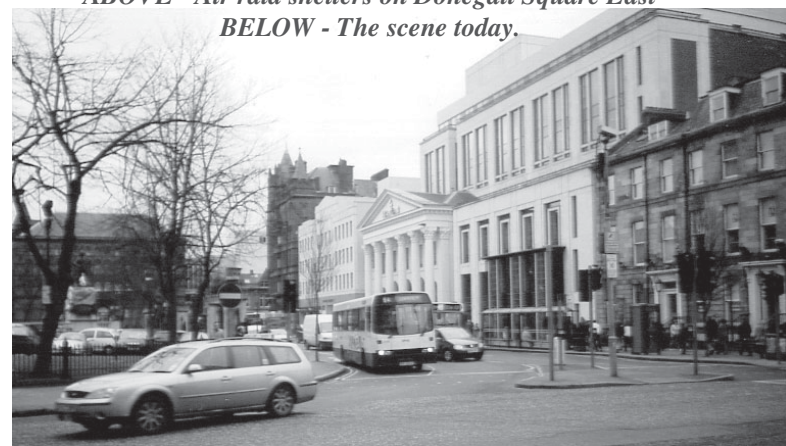
Ewatts weaving mill and the York Street mill, the largest of its kind in the world were both hit during the raid and the surrounding housing stock was destroyed. Over thirty business premises were destroyed mostly businesses involved in textile production and clothing rather than munitions. Also cinemas, banks, garages and tram depots were also destroyed.

In the Duncairn Gardens area forty-five people died in Hogarth Street, many in their own homes, and even in the air raid shelter on the corner of Atlantic Avenue and the Antrim Road. It was felt that there was nowhere safe to go, the people were neither safe at home or in the shelters. Many men were widowed as they had sent their wives and children off to the shelters and they had stayed in their homes only to discover the next day that their wives and children had perished in the attack while



ABOVE - Air raid shelters on Donegall Square East

BELOW - The scene today.



crouching in an air raid shelter which was unable to protect them from the German onslaught. Over half of those who died in this attack were women and children and should have been evacuated to the countryside as the women and children had been in England.

During the raid 745 were killed and thousands were injured. It was the highest number of people killed in one air raid outside London.

Survivors of the attack talk about the red skies from all the fires burning throughout Belfast and the community spirit as people set aside their religious and political differences and sang songs and lifted each others spirits. One song remained fresh in the mind of Mary Wallace of Bloomfield Avenue:

God is our refuge
Be not afraid
He will protect you
In an air raid.
Bombs may be falling
Danger is near,
He will protect you
Till the all-clear.

The smoke screen in action at the dock saved the port, which received little damage although Short and Harland was hit by the incendiary bombs. Many of the parachute bombs did not explode in the area of the harbour as they fell on soft mud and were uncovered at low tide. One

delayed action bomb exploded five hours after the all clear and caused damage to E T Greens flourmill on Donegall Quay.

The air raid precautions service was badly hit during the Easter Tuesday attack with the post at Unity Street being destroyed with the loss of five wardens and seven civilians. The Victoria Barracks was gutted by fire after being directly hit by the Luftwaffe and the Library in Royal Avenue sustained some damage.

Not only did casualties overwhelm the hospitals but the hospitals themselves were also under attack and incendiary bombs hit the Mater Hospital in North Belfast. The nearby Skin Hospital in Glenravel Street was destroyed as was the Templemore Avenue Hospital in East Belfast. The numbers being brought in overwhelmed the city mortuaries and it seemed that people were either killed outright or sustained minor injuries. Most of the injuries were burns and shock.

The attack continued for five hours but by 1.45am the authorities had lost control of the situation as the defences were shattered, fires were out of control and the water supply was critically low. By 2.30am the main arterial roads in the north and east of the city were impassable and at 4.25am an urgent telegram was sent to the War Room in London requesting assistance. Due to the break

BELOW - Not only were the hospitals under immense pressure to deal with the injured but quite a few had been badly damaged or destroyed.





ABOVE - Bomb damage on Donegall Place
BELOW - The scene today.



down in communication London had no idea of the scale of attack on Belfast but help was sent from Glasgow, Liverpool and Preston. The War Room also made contact with the Dublin government and Eamon de Valera the Taoiseach was informed of the urgent telegram and immediately sent thirteen fire engines and seventy men from Dublin, Drogheda, Dundalk and Dun Laoghaire. This was technically a breach of Irish neutrality but de Valera noted that help had been given 'wholeheartedly...they are all our people'.

By the time that the Firemen from the South had arrived the Chief Fire Officer for Belfast, John Smith, was found under a table in the Chichester Street fire station, crying and refusing to come out. There were many courageous firemen but it was felt by the government that the service did not perform well and in fact it was also reported that civil defence workers had also not performed well and had often just not turned in. An American in Belfast at the time wrote home to his parents in California that:

You have heard about how tough the Irish are – well I can say is that the tough Irish must come from Southern Ireland because the boys up in Northern Ireland are a bunch of chicken shit yellow bastards – 90% of them left everything and ran like hell. Short and Harland's the Aircraft factory that builds Stirlings here had 300

volunteer fire fighters in the plant, after the raid they were lucky to get 90 of them.

At 4.25am a state of emergency was called and at 4.55am the all clear was given just before dawn.

I don't think any of us noticed the dawn, for in a sense it had never been night.

Joseph Tomelty

In Co Down those people who had climbed the hills to watch the aircraft were stunned at the great glow coming from Belfast. All of Belfast was cloaked in dust and ash and this dust travelled up to ten miles and the fires could be seen from the Carlingford Hills on the border.

Emma Duffin, a nurse from the First World War was on duty at St Georges Market and recorded that:

All the way to the place I had told myself I was bound to see horrible sights but only when seen could the full horror be realised. I had seen death in many forms, young men dying of ghastly wounds, but nothing I had ever seen was as terrible as this...World War One casualties had died in hospital beds, their eyes had been reverently closed, their hands crossed to their breasts. Death had to a certain extent been...made decent. It was solemn, tragic, dignified, but here it was grotesque, repulsive, horrible. No attendant nurse had soothed the last moments of these victims, no gently reverent



hand had closed their eyes or crossed their hands. With tangled hair, staring eyes, clutching hands, contorted limbs, their grey-green faces covered with dust, they lay, bundled into the coffins, half-shrouded in rugs or blankets, or an occasional sheet still wearing their dirty, torn twisted garments. Death should be dignified, peaceful; Hitler had made even death grotesque. I felt outraged, I should have felt sympathy, grief, but instead feelings of revulsion and disgust assailed me.

There were so many dead that the Falls pool had to be emptied to hold 50 bodies and an attendant remembered:

One coffin contained – all open – a young mother with her two dead children, one in each arm. One lovely girl of sixteen lay in a coffin in her white confirmation robe with blue silk ribbon and black hair.

As Brian Barton in this extract from his *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* published by the Ulster Historical Foundation in 1995 states... *The official history says of this attack; Belfast was sorely tried, no other city in the United Kingdom, save London, had lost so many of her citizens in one night's raid. No other city, except possibly Liverpool, ever did.* In fact, John Maffey, who passed through Belfast on the morning after the first raid, informed the Irish government that the scenes he witnessed there were 'more horrifying than London because of the numbers of small dwelling houses of poor people which were destroyed. Also, in Dublin the German minister, Eduard Hempel, felt constrained to call by appointment (on the morning of 17 April) on the assistant secretary of the Irish Department of External Affairs, J.P. Walshe, to offer sympathy and attempt an explanation. Walshe recorded that the German was 'clearly distressed by the news of the severe raid on Belfast and especially of the number of civilian casualties'. He stated that *he would once more tell his government how he felt about the matter and he would ask them to confine the operations to military objectives as far as it was humanly possible. He believed that this was being done already but it was inevitable that a certain number of civilian lives should be lost in the course of heavy bombing from the air.*

The North part of the city was devastated in the attack which many people have speculated over the years to be due to the German Luftwaffe mistaking the Waterworks

LEFT - Luftwaffe target map for the Belfast Waterworks proving that this was indeed a deliberate target. The section at the bottom translates GB 53 75 Belfast Waterworks

1. Pumping station approx. 550m²

2. Additional pumping station approx. 400m²

3. 7 filter beds

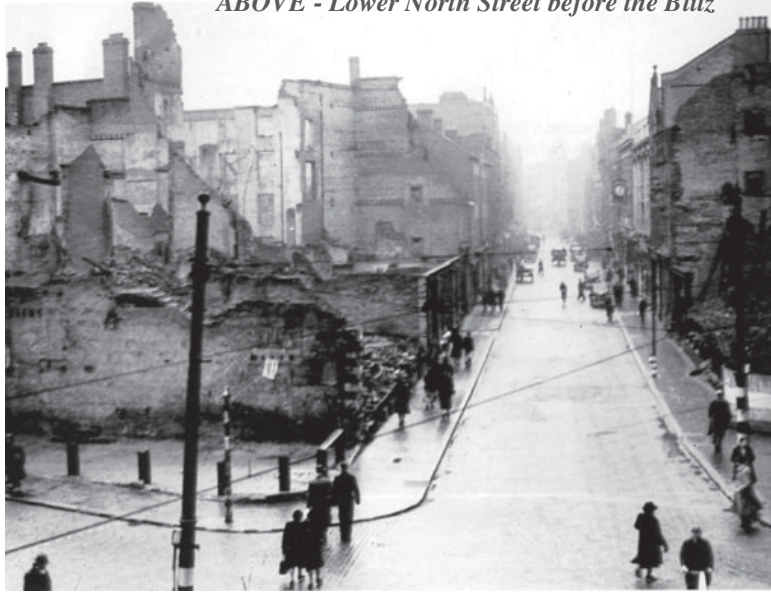
4 Sluice basins

Site area approx. 950m²

Total demensions approx. 350,000m²



ABOVE - Lower North Street before the Blitz



ABOVE & BELOW - After the air raids



BELOW - The scene today



on the Antrim Road for the harbour. This theory is highly unlikely as the German pilots were flying in good conditions with flares lighting up the sky. The archives show that they had detailed maps of the area however on some of their maps the Waterworks was still listed as being a source of water supply for the city when in fact it had not held this function since the turn of the century when the water supply for Belfast was changed to come from the Silent Valley in Co Down. Obviously a water supply station so close to the city would be a real target for the German army and so we can only assume that the devastation of North Belfast was planned and the German leaders believed the Waterworks to be a legitimate target.



ABOVE - Destruction at the junction of York Street and Lower Donegall Street.

BELOW - The junction today



The Immediate Aftermath

Major Sean O'Sullivan, an ARP observer, travelled up to Belfast from Dublin on the morning after the attack and observed:

In the Antrim Road and vicinity the attack was of a particularly concentrated character and in many instances bombs from successive waves of bombers fell within fifteen to twenty yards of one another...In this general area, scores of houses were completely wrecked by explosion, fire or blast, while hundreds were damaged so badly as to be uninhabitable...In suburban areas, many were allowed to burn themselves out and during the day wooden beams were still burning...During the night of 16-17, many of these smouldering fires broke out afresh and fire appliances could be heard passing throughout the night...It is estimated that the ultimate dead may in the neighbourhood of 500, and final figures may even approach 2,000.

The rescue service felt the want of heavy jacks, in one case the leg and arm of a child had to be amputated before it could be extricated... the greatest want appeared to be the lack of hospital facilities...At 2pm on the afternoon of the 16th it was reported that the street leading to the Mater Hospital was filled with ambulances waiting to set down their casualties. Professor Flynn, head of the casualty service for the city, informed me that the greater number of casualties was due to shock, blast and secondary missiles, such as glass, stones, pieces of piping, etc...There were many terrible mutilations among both the living and the dead – heads crushed, ghastly abdominal and face wounds, penetration by beams, mangled and crushed limbs etc...In the heavily 'blitzed' areas people ran panic-stricken into the streets and made for the open country. As many were caught in the open by blast and secondary missiles, the enormous number of casualties can be readily accounted for. It is perhaps true that many saved their lives running but I am afraid a much greater number lost them or became casualties...During the day, loosened slates and pieces of piping were falling in the streets and as pedestrians were numerous many casualties must have occurred...a second Belfast would be too horrible to contemplate.

In the aftermath of the attack measures were at last put in place to secure the safety of the citizens of Belfast. More money became available for security, as the general feeling in the city was that Belfast had not defended itself and that the Germans could do what they wanted to the city. The vulnerability of Belfast had been exposed as the telephone communications had been severed and radar direction lines were severed. Evacuations procedures were put in place in an effort to remove children and

women for the city and instead of using air raid shelters people moved out to the country and slept in the fields. All the animals in Belfast Zoo were shot for fear that if the zoo was bombed the dangerous animals could escape causing more problems for the city. Two RUC marksmen were sent to Bellevue Zoo and the Belfast Telegraph recorded that the Head Keeper Dick Foster *stood by with tears streaming down his face, as the executioners proceeded from cage to cage and despatched the animals 33 in number, and a vulture.*

The military on duty in Belfast were frustrated and astonished at the lack of effort shown by many of the male residents of Belfast in attempting to restore normal life and undertaking rescue work. Troops who spent thousands of working days helping people couldn't understand the widespread looting which took place after the air raids and also the attitude of young men who refused to help them in their task but preferred to stand around watching them do all the work.

The fear in Belfast had reached epidemic proportions and there were queues of people at the railway stations just wanting to leave Belfast and not caring where the train was travelling. Military lorries were used to evacuate expectant mothers and children to the country and the country people although welcoming were shocked at the poverty of the city dwellers. They were also shocked at

the smell and filth of the people and the behaviour of the children was a shock to them. By the end of April 1941 over one hundred thousand people had self-evacuated, or 'ditchers' as they were known.

In her diary at the time Moya Woodside noted: *Evacuation is taking on panic proportions. Roads out of town are still one stream of cars, with mattresses and bedding tied on top. Everything on wheels is being pressed into service. People are leaving from all parts of town and not only from the bombed areas. Where they are going, what they will find to eat when they get there, nobody knows. This business presents a problem of the first proportions to Stormont...My mother telephoned to say that she took in eight evacuees last night, two mothers and six children. Says one mother is about to have another baby any minute, that they are all filthy, the smell in the room is terrible. They refuse all food except bread and tea; the children have made puddles all over the floor etc...She is terrible sorry for them and kindness itself but finds this revelation of how the other half live rather overpowering...Belfast slum dwellers are pretty far down and to those not used to seeing poverty and misery at close quarters the effect is overwhelming.*

'The smell is terrible', said my sister-in-law. 'They don't even use the lavatories, they just do it on the floor,

The Belfast Telegraph and Belfast Post, April 17, 1941

BLACK-OUT: To-night, 8.0—To-morrow Morning, 5.46

The Northern Whig

AND BELFAST POST

No. 41,373

BELFAST, THURSDAY, APRIL 17, 1941

ONE PENNY.

'CO-OP' MILK
PASTEURISED
—the Milk the Doctors order—
BELFAST CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY, LTD.
DAIRY DEPT., FEDERATION STREET
Tel. 57451

BELFAST'S
Balance Your Budget
With a Pre-Tax Set
ROSEMARY RADIO & ELECTRICAL CO.
(Chas. F. H. Rosemary, Prop.)
31, ROSEMARY ST. Phone 24771

200 FEARED DEAD IN NORTHERN IRELAND BLITZ

Germans Claim Attack Heavy As Any Launched On British Ports

"HUNDREDS OF BOMBERS" LEAVE BELFAST STREETS IN RUINS

A HEAVY DEATH-ROLL—POSSIBLY 200—IS EXPECTED AS A RESULT OF YESTERDAY MORNING'S GERMAN AIR RAID ON NORTHERN IRELAND. RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS IN BELFAST WERE THE MAIN TARGETS, AND SECTIONS OF THE CITY FAR REMOVED FROM MILITARY OBJECTIVES WERE LAID IN RUINS.

WORKERS' HOMES WIPED OUT

The enemy claim that hundreds of bombers pressed home the attack, and declare it was in every way as heavy as those directed against armaments centres and ports in Britain. But although industrial premises were damaged, working-class districts took the heaviest battering.

OUR HEROES

People there withstood the ordeal in a way which has drawn praise from English evacuees and military alike. Deeds of marvellous endurance and heroism were performed by Civil Defence services and ordinary civilians.

Young Men Rush to Join Up

Several air raid shelters received direct hits, and a police barracks was also hit. A fire station, Constable's, and two regional headquarters, North Belfast, a group of houses, Mr. Martin's, and four members of the group were killed when their cars were hit. The latter were killed when their cars were hit. The latter were killed when their cars were hit.

British Government

Tells Ulster

ALL WE CAN SEND IS YOURS!

death the streets when a bomb struck the house, and the father and mother, with three children, were killed. The young man, who was in the car, was killed. The young man, who was in the car, was killed. The young man, who was in the car, was killed.

Belfast Hospital Blitzed

5 ENEMY SUPPLY SHIPS,

3 DESTROYERS

ANNIHILATED
TRIPOLI CONVOY FIGHT



A corner of a hospital shows the nature of the Nazi attack on Northern Ireland, which was described as vicious and indiscriminate.

THE ADMIRALTY STATES:—BRITISH NAVAL FORCES ON TUESDAY NIGHT INTERCEPTED AND ANNIHILATED A SOUTH-BOUND ENEMY CONVOY BETWEEN SICILY AND TRIPOLI. THE CONVOY CONSISTED OF FIVE SUPPLY SHIPS, ESCORTED BY THREE DESTROYERS.

Two of the supply ships were vessels of about 5,000 tons, heavily laden with motor transport. These were sunk. Another was an ammunition ship of about 4,000 tons, which blew up with a terrific explosion. The other two ships were vessels of about 3,000 tons, probably transports. These were also blown up.

The convoy escort consisted of the Italian destroyer Luca Targui, of 1,000 tons, and two smaller destroyers. All three were sunk.

BRITISH DESTROYER TORPEDOED

During the successful operation H.M.S. Melrose, Commodore W. B. Eaton, R.N., was hit by torpedoes and sunk. The captain of the ship, Commander R. E. Eaton, was killed.

The loss of the ship was a severe blow to the British Navy. The ship was a fast and powerful vessel, and its loss was a serious setback to the British Navy.

NAVY SHELL LIBYAN COAST

THE ADMIRALTY ANNOUNCED last night:—The C-in-C, Mediterranean, reports that the enemy's operations on the Libyan coast are being constantly and successfully

No Immediate Threat To Egypt

LAST night's communication from the British C-in-C, Mediterranean, reported that vigorous action by our patrols in the Sallum sector on the Libyan and Egyptian borders had again caused the enemy losses in men and vehicles and prisoners had been taken. The communication added that the situation was unchanged in the Tobruk area.

Further it was stated in London that the C-in-C, Mediterranean, reported that the enemy's operations on the Libyan coast are being constantly and successfully

Push Not Yet Exhausted

A British spokesman in London stated that the enemy's operations on the Libyan coast are being constantly and successfully

grown-ups and children'. She said she had been given the job of finding private billets for the evacuees and she was ashamed to have to ask decent working people with clean houses to take in such guests. More are 'scared out' than 'bombed out', too.

Lord Haw Haw and his radio broadcasts played a great part in peoples lives at the time with many people listening to his misinformation such as – he (Hitler) will give us time to bury our dead before the next attack, or- Tuesday was on a sample, or People living in such and such an area will have their turn.

The Fire Raid

On Sunday 4th May 1941 Lady Spencer noted:

We all had a late breakfast. It was a halcyon day, a light frost early and very hot late with a drenching dew and lovely tang in the air. We were in the garden all day

Moya Woodside recorded on the same day:

Alert last night of about two hours' duration, but nothing happened. Stayed in bed. I am glad to discover that each time it sounds I felt less nervous. Eventually, I suppose, one can become accustomed to anything.

At 11.30pm the smoke screen covered the entire port area and the red alert was called at 12.10am on the early morning of the 5th May 1941. Just half an hour later the drones from the enemy aircraft could be heard approaching Bangor and the towns and villages on the outskirts of the city. The aircraft were coming from the direction of the Copeland Islands and across to Carrickfergus. Others arrived from the south and the attack began in earnest at 1.00am with the Luftwaffe using the usual Heinkel HE111s and Junkers JU88s. The aircraft approached singly, not in formation and during the course of the raid around 100,000 incendiary bombs were dropped from around 200 aircraft.

Within sixty minutes the fires had gone out of control and the brigade were unable to cope with the extent and numbers of fires. By 2.00am the initial raid was over but the flames and glow from the bombs laid a path for the oncoming aircraft.

The target of the raid had been the shipyard and aircraft factories and enormous damage was caused to both these industries. Almost two thirds of the premises of Harland and Wolff were destroyed, company records and anything wooden was burned. There were so few firemen and engines to cope with the damage that military personnel and the crews of the ships in the port came to help. Again de Valera sent up fire crews from Dublin, Dundalk and Drogheda.



ABOVE - Corner of High Street and Skipper Street
BELOW - After the clear up.
BOTTOM - The corner today



The German pilots described the scene when they returned home. They noted that they had never seen anything like it before, the sea of flames over Belfast was astonishing to watch:

I can really say that I could not believe my eyes. When we approached the target at half-past two we stared silently into a sea of flames such as none of us had seen before...within the target area there is not one black spot...In Belfast there was not a large number of conflagrations, but just one enormous conflagration which spread over the entire harbour an industrial area here was the last hideout for unloading materials from the United States...here the English had concentrated an important part of their war industries because they felt themselves safe, far up in the North, safe from the blows of the German airforce...this has come to an end

Many of the pilots reported that they could see Belfast burning as they flew over the coast of England.

The east of the city was badly damaged during the raid with streets such as Chater Street, Avondale Street, Bryson Street and Mersey Street were extensively damaged. In each of these streets over half the houses were destroyed.

For the first time the centre of Belfast was hit badly with high explosives and incendiaries falling in Shaftesbury Square, City Hall, Bedford Street, Castle Place and York Street. Some of the oldest buildings of Belfast were destroyed, particularly in the High Street, Waring Street and Rosemary Street areas. The Albert Clock was set ablaze, as was the International Bar on the corner of York Street and Lower Donegall Street. Many commercial premises such as Gallagher's, the Bank Buildings, McMullans, and the Ulster Arcade sustained sufficient damage that they were later deemed unsafe and were either partially or completely demolished. Jimmy Mackey, a regular fireman, recalled:

At the larger fires, there were firestorms. As the flames took hold, there was a great in-rush of air; they sucked it in creating a shortage of oxygen and making breathing difficult.

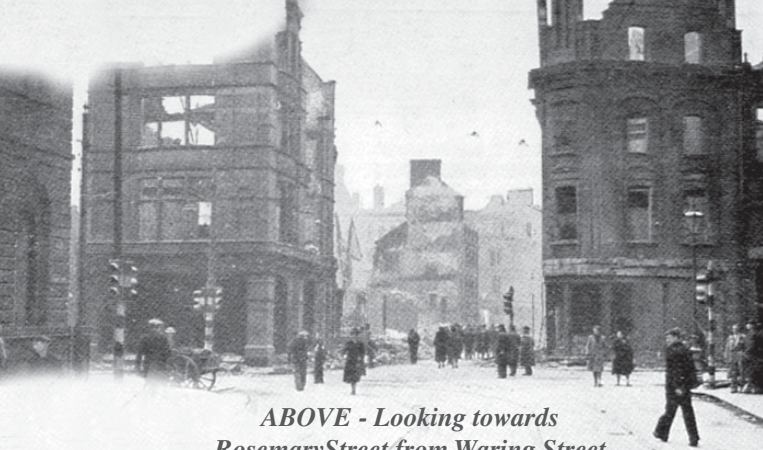
That night almost three hundred people, many from the Shankill district, took refuge in Clonard Monastery, whose 'Domestic Chronicles' record:

The crypt under the sanctuary, also the cellar under the working sacristy has been fitted out and is opened to the people, women and children only, as an air-raid shelter. This act of ours is very much appreciated by all, Protestants included. Prayers are said and hymns sung by the occupants during the bombing.

Luckily the timing of the attack ensured that casualties were at a minimum, the early hours of a Sunday morning were a quiet time in Belfast, however 150 people were killed and many more were injured. A second attack on the 6th May killed 14 people.

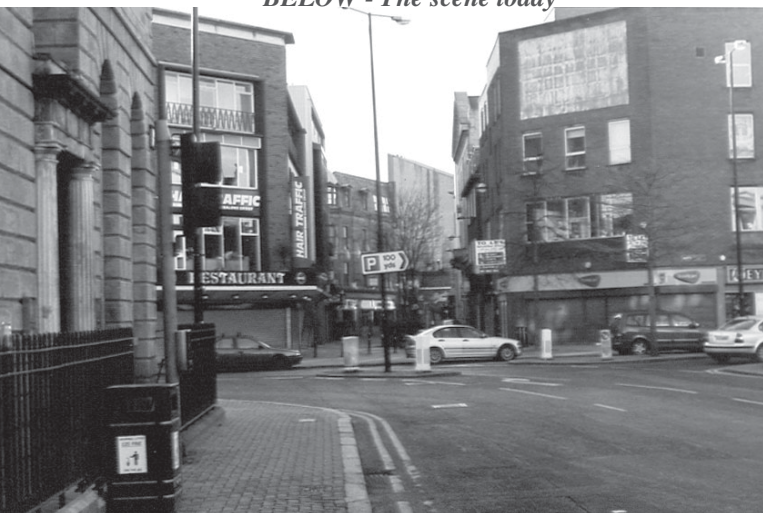
A lone German aircraft flew over the area bombed and made a photographic record of the damage, which was later published in Der Adler and accompanied, with analysis of the attack. This was the only time that Northern Ireland made it into the German Press and the German public were led to believe that Belfast had been destroyed and in particular that Harland and Wolff and the complete shipyard and aircraft industry had been wiped out. This was not totally true but Harland and Wolff later made a claim for three million pounds for the damage sustained during the attack. This was the largest single claim made by any UK company during the war. Over 53% of Belfast's housing stock had now been destroyed and if the people of Belfast had not been so





ABOVE - Looking towards
Rosemary Street from Waring Street

BELOW - The scene today



religious in their attitude to a Sunday many thousands of people may have been killed in this last attack on the city.

Emma Duffin of the Stranmillis Road noted at the time: ***the smell of burning was in the air. The grass was strewn with blackened and charred papers. There was a sheet from a child's essay book. On the top of the page, I read, 'The end of the world'. It seemed appropriate. It was the end of the world as we knew it.***

Brian Barton writes that after the May raids the assessment given in the German media that Belfast's industry had been devastated beyond recovery would have been widely accepted within the city itself. Morale all but collapsed. A Ministry of Home Affairs' report estimated that by the end of that month as many as 220,000 persons had temporarily fled from the capital. They scattered through Ulster and beyond. Many children from North Belfast went as far as Kerry and Cork to stay with relatives and friends. They arrived in Fermanagh having *'nothing with them only night shirts'*; 10,000 crossed the border. Superimposed on the massive British military presence, available accommodation was stretched beyond its limits. Dawson Bates had to inform cabinet of the rack-renting of barns, and in some areas of up to thirty people crowded together in small houses. Even in early August 1941 Moya Woodside described a friend whose car broke down...in a tiny seaside village...***The food situation is alarming. He could not***

find...anywhere to stay the night and had to sleep out in the sandhills...He was unable to get anything to eat...even tea and bread. Village shops were completely sold out. Three weeks earlier, she herself visited a family in Belfast which was ***paying the full rent for a house of which the two upper rooms were quite uninhabitable, the downstairs windows covered with felt, and the gas supply cut off. All cooking had to done in semi-darkness over an open fire.*** It was *'little more than a shelter. Yet there is competition even to get these'*. Thousands of those remaining in the city 'ditched'; during the hours of darkness they walked along the main road out to the suburbs, to shelter in parks, ditches and hedgerows, until first light when they felt it safe to return. The scale of continuing public fear was highlighted when, after an air-raid alert on 23rd July 1941, at 2am, an estimated 30,000 fled from the city in cars, bicycles or on foot; an eyewitness likened it to 'crowds at a football match'. That night no aircraft appeared and no bombs fell in Belfast.

The War and Ireland

Many people in the North believed that the South of Ireland was unaffected by the war in that it remained neutral throughout and in fact as previously noted it puts its neutrality on the line to help the people of Belfast during the air raids.

However in the first two weeks of the war 28 ships were lost due to the Irish ports not giving access to allied navies and in particular the Royal navy felt the loss greatly. Louis MacNeice, an Ulster poet, commented in 'Neutrality':

***But then look eastward from your heart, there bulks
A continent, close, dark, as archetypal sin,
While to the west off your own shores the mackerel
Are fat – on the flesh of your kin.***

In Donegal throughout the early months of war and into 1940 villagers talked about how their cottages shook every night with all the bombing in the Atlantic. The neutral waters around Donegal allowed the German U Boats to wait for allied shipping and local fishermen sold their catches to the German sailors. However at the same time British officers and members of the British Royal Family took holidays in Donegal and enjoyed the hospitality offered to them by the people of Donegal.

Many bombs fell along the East Coast of Ireland and on the 28th May 1941 the air corps recorded 50 German planes flying in a Southeast direction. Some went to Dublin and others towards Belfast with other planes turning at the border at Coothill. The Luftwaffe realised its error and the attempted air raid was abandoned however on the 30th May Dublin was bombed with one particular 500 pound bomb causing structural damage at

the junction of North William Street and North Strand. After this gas masks were distributed and there was some fear amongst the people of Dublin.

In Dublin VE Day was remembered by some unfortunate incidents. Some Protestant students of Trinity College ran up Allied Flags over the entrance to the University and then proceeded to burn a tricolour and throw it into the street. The incident was followed by two students from the National University, one of which was the future Taoiseach, Charles J Haughey, who set fire to a Union Flag. The gardai got the situation under control when an unruly crowd threatened to invade the grounds of Trinity College but the mob smashed the windows of restaurants in the area. The straining relationship between Dublin and London was put under further strain by Churchill's speech of May 1945:

This was indeed a deadly moment in our life and if it had not been for the loyalty and friendship of Northern Ireland we should have been forced to come to close quarters with Mr de Valera or perish forever from the earth. However, with a restraint and poise to which, I say, history will find few parallels, His Majesty's Government never laid a violent hand upon them though at times it would have been quite easy and quite natural, and we left the Dublin Government to frolic with the Germans and later with the Japanese representatives to their hearts' content.

De Valera was restrained in his response and it was noted that although publicly Ireland maintained its neutrality, with its governments knowledge the allies were allowed to fly across Donegal in search of U-boats, and service men were often helped to make their way to Northern Ireland. The aid sent during the Blitz however was graciously acknowledged and Eric Scales a Stormont official noted at the time:

Perhaps the most spectacular feature of each of these raids was the immediate dispatch on each occasion of these voluntary firemen from a neutral state, racing through the night, with their peacetime headlamps blazing, to fires that none of them could ever previously have imagined. Such transcends the ordinary business of regional reinforcement.

Many people of the time believed that this would bring the two communities closer together however this was not to be.

After the war the German government paid £327,000 in compensation to the Irish Government. Dublin was the last Irish city to be bombed by the Luftwaffe and there were 23 dead and 147 injured in this last attack.

After the War

The Reverend Dr J.B. Woodburn, moderator of the Presbyterian Church during the war commented:

After the Blitz of a few weeks ago I was inexpressibly shocked by the sight of people I saw walking in the streets. I have been working 19 years in Belfast and I never saw the like of them before – wretched people, very undersized and underfed down-and-out looking men and women. They had been bombed out of their homes and were wandering the streets. Is it creditable to us that there should be such people in a Christian country?... We have got to see that there is more talk of justice; we have got to see it enacted, and the work will have to begin immediately. If something is not done now to remedy this rank inequality there will be revolution after the war.

Few in number and of short duration, the raids on Belfast may have been but on two occasions at least, they were as severe as any on the rest of Britain. Nevertheless, any advantage the Luftwaffe might have gained was inevitably lost by their failure to press home the attack. Belfast would not be attacked again and the city was soon back on the road to recovery. Within a few months, Belfast, and indeed the rest of Northern Ireland, was contributing more to the war effort than it had done before.



ABOVE - Destruction at the junction of York Street and Great Patrick Street.

BELOW - The junction today





*ABOVE - There is no doubt that the German bombing campaign was truly devastating.
BELOW - Dublin did not escape the wrath of the Luftwaffe as this picture of North Strand shows.*

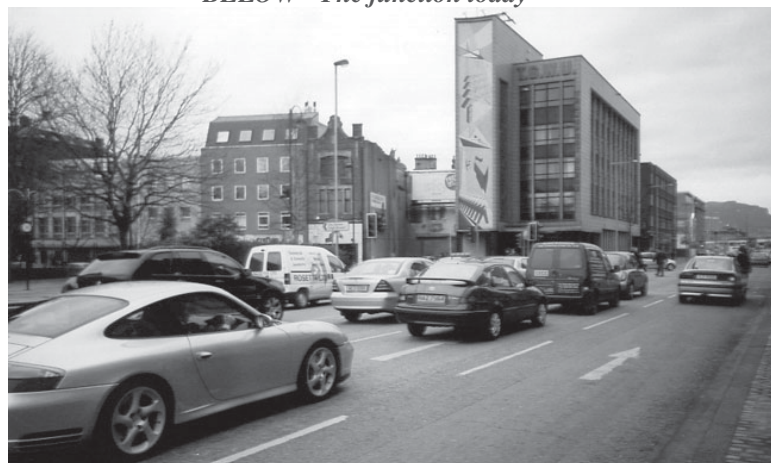




ABOVE - Destruction at the junction of High Street and Victoria Street
BELOW - The junction today

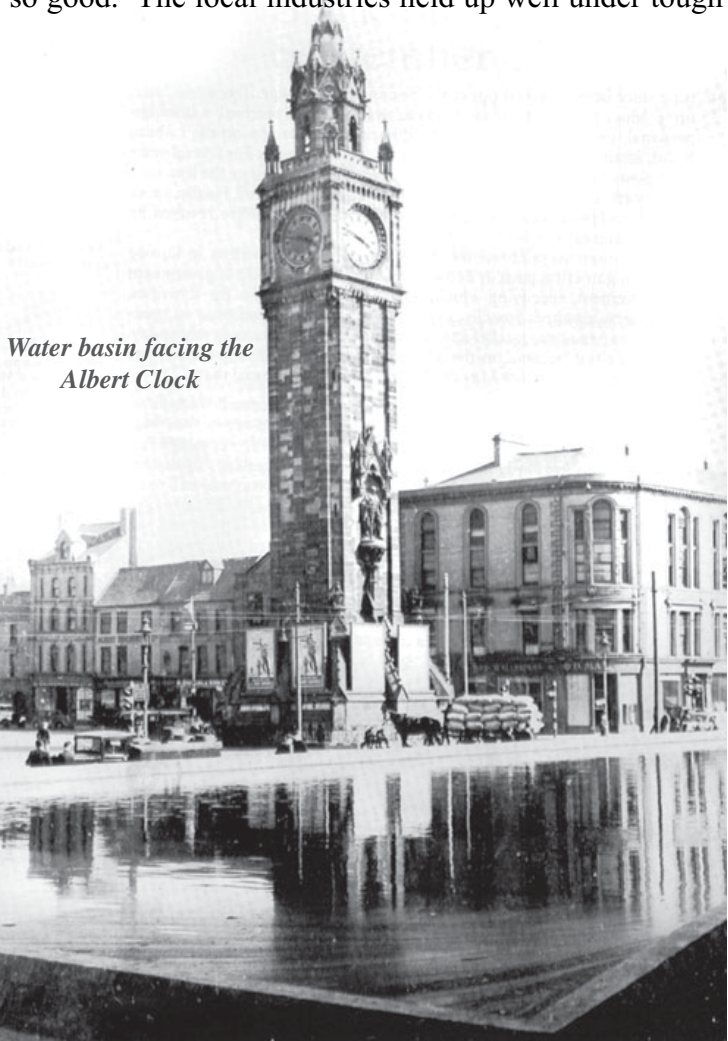
VE Day was celebrated in Belfast with large crowds on the streets and Protestant areas painted red, white and blue. The YMCA supplied 4000 free meals on the day and the Belfast Telegraph reported that for the first time in six years the City Hall was floodlit. As the illuminations were switched on at 10.40 pm there was a tremendous cheer from the thousands of people, among them allied service men, who were impressed by the majesty of the building silhouetted against the darkening sky. The Albert Memorial was also floodlit, and here also large and excited crowds assembled. Huge bonfires blazed in many parts of the city and around them bands of young people danced in jubilant mood right into the early hours of the morning. Effigies of Hitler were burned in the streets and in Bangor the pubs on the waterfront supplied free beer.

In fact immediately after the war Belfast had never had it so good. The local industries held up well under tough



export conditions and the living standards for the vast majority were very good. The government in London underwrote the cost and the Unionists felt firmly in control. For many the golden age of Protestantism had returned, however social injustice and for many the poor housing conditions that existed before the war continued and for those who had lost their homes during the Blitz times were very hard as they waited for new housing stock.

The Reverend Dr J.B. Woodburn again noted after visiting the bombsites of the Blitz:



*Water basin facing the
 Albert Clock*

I hope and trust that they will never be rebuilt again...A minister said to me, whose congregation had been bombed...if he could get the people entirely out of the way, he would be happy if the Germans would come and bomb the place flat.

After the Blitz 100,000 people were temporarily without homes and 15,000 had no homes at all. Housing provision became a priority and a huge rebuilding programme began. The allocation of these new houses and the increased public spending of housing would lead to problems later in 1968-9 as the local authorities who allocated council houses took no steps towards equality in their distribution. Health provision was also improved through the National Health Service soon after the war and education improved dramatically by the 1960's.

Resources and further reading

Bardon, J. *Belfast: An Illustrated History* Belfast 1982

Barton, B. *The Blitz: Belfast in the War Years* Belfast 1989

Barton, B. *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* Belfast 1995

Beckett, J. *Belfast: The Making of the City* Belfast 1983

Carroll, J. *Ireland in the War Years* London 1975

Davison, R. *The Belfast Blitz, The Irish Sword*, Vol XVI, No 63, 1985

Doherty, J. *Post 381* Belfast 1989

Fisk, R. *In Time of War* Dublin 1983

Irving, D. *Hitler's War*, London 1977

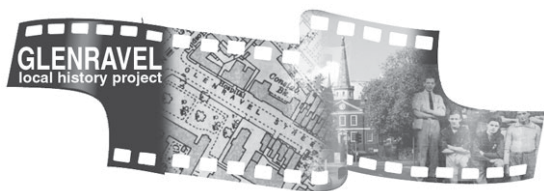
Moore, B. *Emperor of Ice Cream* London 1967

www.thebarrack.com

www.bbc.co.uk

www.historyireland.com

www.ulst.ac.uk



**Heritage
Lottery Fund**

These tours are organised by the North Belfast based Glenravel Local History Project with the invaluable help of the Heritage Lottery Fund. This is just one of three tours which we do at present with the other being around the historic Clifton Street Cemetery and Belfast's Victorian Red Light District. If you are interested in group bookings please feel free to contact us at the address below.

We are also working on several new tours and for information on these look out for our local historical publication *Belfast Magazine* for details.

Ashton Centre, 5 Churchill Street, Belfast BT15 2BP. Tel: 9074 2255 or 90202100

E-Mail: glenravel@ashtoncentre.com or glenravel@thebarrack.com

www.glenravel.com www.thebarrack.com www.belfasthistory.com