

A Newton Abbot Resident Remembers World War II

When World War II broke out in 1939 I was fourteen years old. I remember that I had a friend whose parents kept the Keyberry Hotel and my memory of that day is of my friend telling me that her father was an Army Reservist and so would have to go to war.

This made me wonder about my own father who had served in the Gloucester Hussars in the First World War and had fought the Turks in Palestine. He would have been in his forties at the outbreak of the Second World War, and he was employed by the Great Western Railway as a Divisional locomotive Inspector. He travelled all over the South Western Region sorting out problems, attending inquiries and generally advising drivers and firemen of the huge steam locomotives then in use. However, I soon learned that he was too valuable to the GWR and having spent four years in the Army in the First World War, he would remain at home.

The radio was full of Adolf Hitler and his soldiers going into Poland and of Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, who people said had not been quick enough to grasp the dangers of Hitler's might. People talked of a quick war – 'soon be over' they said, no one envisaged six years.

Air raid sirens were fixed on the roofs of schools and the Police Station. They were tested in case of an air raid and went off frequently during the war. There was one on top of Decoy School which made a great din – wailing for the alarm and one note for the all clear. Before long we were issued with air raid shelters. I remember we fixed ours up in our living room and used it as a table. It was very big and my brother and I used to play table tennis on the top. It was called a Morrison Shelter and was made of steel and had wire netting sides which were removable. My mother put a big mattress and pillow inside which made it comfortable. When there were night alarms we sometimes slept in there.



Some people had shelters in their gardens. These were partially sunk into the ground and you went down some steps to get in. Along the sides were benches or bunks. The shelter was covered in turf or even flowers in order to make it look part of the garden from the air.

A shelter such as this was built at the side of Decoy School. I remember going into it, as a friend whose father was working on it took me in. Unfortunately, the shelter became flooded as they had dug down into the water table and it was not fit for use. Consequently, when the siren sounded all the children at Decoy school were distributed around the houses of Deer Park, St Michael's and Kingskerswell Roads. Often people were not at home and teachers would be racing around trying to fit children into homes. The reason for this was that if the school had received a direct hit by a bomb, a lot of children could have been hurt.

The shelter at Decoy school was adjacent to the old school building on the allotment side.