

## **When the Inverdene air-raid shelter was bombed**

By Brian C. Searle

I was only a young schoolboy at the time, but I would like to tell you a true story of what happened to me on the night of 21<sup>st</sup> / 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1941 during the height of the Plymouth Blitz.

With my father away working in the north and my older sister staying with friends, the remaining family members in the house that night were my mother, my maternal grandfather (a truly wonderful fellow in his early 70's) and myself. The air raid warning had been sounded some time before my folks decided to go to the public shelter situated by the edge of Plymouth's Central Park. The air raid shelter was only 300 or 400 yards from our house, but by the time we set off bombs were dropping from German aeroplanes. and there were tremendous bangs as anti-aircraft guns opened up. With shrapnel raining down and A.R.P. Wardens yelling at us to take cover, the three of us cautiously made our way to the shelter. It was a reasonably spacious shelter set underground with two entrances. Quite a large number of local residents had gone to the shelter on hearing the wail of the siren and were comfortably seated by the time we arrived in a somewhat dishevelled state. My grandfather decided to remain by the entrance with his pipe smoking pals and my mother and I went just inside where we sat with a neighbour named Mr Turner.

After some time, a neighbour called Mrs Hawkins with her two children, David and Pat, who were two of my playmates, came from the inner area of the shelter and asked my mother if she would exchange places as she needed some air. My mother agreed and together with Mr Turner, she and I moved towards the inner chamber of the shelter. More time elapsed and then there was an enormous explosion. The lights went out and screams rent the air and the choking dust permeated everywhere. We appeared to be trapped. The shelter had received a direct hit on what was later established to be the entrance area where we had been sitting, probably less than an hour before. Sadly, my grandfather and a number of friends and neighbours died that night including Mrs Hawkins and her two children who had been sitting in the seats previously occupied by us.

The vast majority of the people in the shelter were saved that night, but all those who were sitting towards the end which received the direct hit perished. The last three persons to be dragged out of an escape hatch alive were Mr Turner, my mother and myself, and I remember spending the rest of the night being very sick.

Months later, after my father had returned home from his detached duty in Newcastle he too had a lucky escape when minutes after using the upstairs toilet in our house, a large bomb dropped in close proximity, and a huge rock hurtled through our roof and smashed the toilet pan into a thousand pieces. On another occasion, an incendiary device pierced our roof while we were all in the public shelter, and the house was only saved from destruction by the brave intervention of neighbours, who were on duty locally as Wardens.

As you can see, it was pretty hectic in Plymouth during the Blitz, and indeed throughout the war.