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Exeter Blitz And Other WWII Stories

In April we published stories of the Bristol Blitz found in our Archives. At the same time by chance we came across a hand-written story of the Exeter Blitz, which we think is worth publishing also. Paul and Margaret Hulbert have found some other stories and pictures to go with it to make it more interesting. A typewritten copy of Mr Beckett's article has been deposited with the Devon Records Office.

Exeter Blitz

**Personal Experience of the Exeter Blitz with
Special Reference to the Destruction of Electricity House
by the late D.P. Beckett
written on 22nd July 1942**

It was not my night for reporting in on an alert, consequently I had not left home when the HE's began to drop. In accordance with instructions I remained there whilst they were falling and although I was on the lookout for a suitable lull for my journey to the office, none occurred and so it was not until some 5 minutes after the last HE fell that I began my ride.

My journey was both slow and circuitous; slow because I was crunching over broken glass and slates from the very beginning and often bumping over larger debris, and circuitous because High Street, Southernhay and New North Road were impassable through large fires and piles of debris. I had to proceed via Paris Street, Denmark Road, Magdalen Road and Street and South Street. The all-clear sounded whilst I was crossing Magdalen Bridge. South Street was impassable above Guinea Street owing to large fires on both sides, so I crunched my way through Guinea Street and Market Street only to find Fore Street blocked for the same reason. I therefore parked my motorcycle at the corner of Market Street and Fore Street and proceeded on foot around the back of the Market, up Milk Street and George Street and in through the back passage, some burning buildings on the lower side of George Street being just far enough away to permit of my doing this.

I thus arrived some ten minutes after the all-clear to find that the building had been badly shaken by HE's, the telephones were out of order and no ARP messages had been received, the electricity supply had failed, but that the emergency lighting in the shelter was functioning satisfactorily, which it continued to do to the last, and that some fifty members of the public were sheltering unharmed. I then made a tour of the building, including the roof. I found that the garage shutter had been blown in and that every pane of glass in the building had been smashed, including all the glazing in the partitions, so that everywhere was thick with broken glass. Many of the partition walls themselves had been buckled and displaced several inches so that some of the doors had blown open and could not be shut, whilst others were jammed shut and could not be opened. This damage had been caused by 4 HE bombs, a light one in South Street at the corner of George Street, which had smashed up our EHT, HT and LT cables, and three heavy ones in Fore Street on Turners, Marks & Spencers and Hills & Steeles respectively.

The hydrant system was intact and the petrol driven pump was running satisfactorily, which it continued to do throughout, save for a brief shutdown, when the petrol tank ran dry and had to be replenished. Two premises were blazing on each side of South Street at a point between George Street and Guinea Street, whilst in Fore Street, Hills & Steeles and Marks & Spencers were on fire together with the premises opposite. The wind was blowing straight down South Street (approx. NW wind), so that as regards the South Street fires, it was neither assisting nor retarding their spread towards Electricity House, which seemed in no immediate danger, particularly as in South Street, there was a break in the buildings formed by George Street and the site of St. George's Church.

After a quarter of an hour or so, however, it became obvious that the firemen were unable to prevent the flames from spreading, particularly in South Street, where owing to the inflammable nature of the premises (all lathe and plaster) the fires were creeping upwards against the wind. After a building had been on fire for a few minutes, the beams would give and it would burst asunder, the entire structure collapsing like a pack of cards amidst a shower of sparks, leaving just a big heap of blazing embers right across the street – a most awe-inspiring sight!

As under these circumstances, Electricity House might very well become involved, we arranged with wardens to evacuate the shelters to a safer spot and began to remove our more valuable records and the instruments and load them into the lorry, the mains car having unfortunately received damage when the shelter was blown in.

The meter testing and fault locating instruments were removed from No.1 Air Raid Shelter, the maps, mains books, load connected records, various other mains office books, meggers, trays of meter reading books and rentals from the strong room, various cycles from the garage, the standard clock and some rotating sub-standard meters from the meter test room and voltmeters, ammeters etc from the instrument room. Next I remembered that there were usually meter reading books left in a nest of steel drawers in the General Clerk's Office. Unfortunately this proved to be locked, a most unusual occurrence, and I was unable to find the key, so it was necessary to shift it bodily. As the lifts were out of order, we slid it on its back down the stairs and were successful down the first flight, but unfortunately it jammed on the corner at the start of the second flight and we were unable to move it with the manpower at our disposal. We then broke open the drawers with a crowbar, but this wasted a lot of valuable time and in the end the drawers were found to contain only one meter reading book and a number of loose cards. I should certainly not have bothered to salvage them had I been aware of their small number, as the time could have been to better advantage in saving current correspondence files, Robertson's ledgers and some of my own books.

Whilst the drawers were being broken open, firemen entered the building and ran out hoses through the garage to try and prevent the substation roof from catching fire from the Dolcis Shoe shop and two more hoses upstairs to try and prevent the meter test room roof from catching fire from the Chevalier Inn. We assisted them with one of our hoses at each point, but of course they only produced a trickle compared with the full-sized article. These efforts however were of no avail, particularly as flames could gain access through all the broken windows on the Chevalier side. The firemen finally abandoned their task as hopeless and left just as we were breaking our last drawer open.



**Fig.1 Typical Blitz Scene
Bedford Street**

We succeeded in this and followed them out about half a minute later.



**Fig.2 Deller's Café in ruin
after the Blitz**

circumstances did not arise and instead the building was attached on the two sides by fires, which had attained such a magnitude, that no appliances available could deal with them.

Our salvage was taken to Gales Garage in Velwell Road, and as we drove off at about 4.30 we could see the flames licking through the windows of Mr. Batefone's office from the front of the Chevalier, whilst opposite Burch & Co were well alight on the top floor and Cornish's roof was beginning to catch. I collected my motorcycle from Fore Street after circuitous walk, and rode out to the Emergency Report Centre, while the others followed with the lorry after unloading the salvage.

To sum up, Electricity House was lost because, although its fire-fighting appliances could probably have coped with the fall of incendiaries and nipped a fire in the bud, such

The Exeter Raid

by Paul Hulbert

The biggest raid on Exeter took place in the early hours of 4th May, 1942, when 20 Luftwaffe bombers flew up the Exe estuary, no doubt navigating by the river. The first bombs fell at 01.51 am, and by 02.15 fires were raging throughout the city centre. At 02.19 the telephones and lighting failed, and by 02.30 the Telephone Exchange and Gas Works at Haven Banks were on fire. A Fire Barge in the River Exe was sunk by a direct hit, and fire-fighters were strafed by machine gun fire from the attacking planes. The bombers left the area at 02.50. The fires continued to rage, and it was not until 7th May that fire-fighters were finally stood down.

Many treasured buildings were destroyed. One with a family connection to Margaret and Paul Hulbert was Deller's Café. This very grand building was opened in December 1916. It was advertised as "one minute from Trams", and the grand entrance of the "Cafe of the West" was in Bedford Street.

It fast became the meeting place for local young people of the time, and it was here that Paul and Margaret's sister-in-law's parents first met – by no means the only couple to have become acquainted there. There were ornately decorated balconies around the main atrium, and an orchestra performed three times a day.

Although Deller's did not receive a direct hit during the May 1942 blitz, the building was badly damaged by fire. It could have been refurbished, but the decision was taken to pull it down, and so vanished a piece of Exeter's social history.

DELLER'S CAFÉS



Interior of Main Cafe, Bedford Street, Exeter.

MORNING COFFEE.	TABLE d'HÔTE LUNCHEONS - 2/- & 2/6
DEVONSHIRE TEAS	FISH TEAS & SUPPERS GRILLS
3/6	TABLE d'HÔTE DINNER 3/6
LIGHT SUPPERS and SNACKS - 1/6, 1/9, 2/3.	
VARIED À LA CARTE MENU AT POPULAR PRICES.	
SPECIAL QUOTATIONS FOR PARTIES LARGE OR SMALL.	
GWEN MASTERS AND HER ORCHESTRA.	
DELLER'S	THE CAFÉS OF THE WEST BEDFORD ST. (OPPOSITE FROM CATHEDRAL.)
BRANCH CAFÉ: 48 & 49, HIGH STREET (OPPOSITE GUILDHALL).	

**Fig.3 Deller's Café
Pre-war Advertisement**

Power Station Tale

by Bill Bye

When the Second World War broke out, Bill Bye was only 16 and was ordered to climb a 60ft ladder to reach the Exeter Power Station roof and to black out its skylight windows with bitumen.

"I was told that this was necessary to prevent the moon from reflecting off the glass and guiding in German bombers," Bill explained. But what a tough job it was for a young lad. "They showed me to the foot of this 60-foot ladder with a large drum of black bitumen paint, a bucket and brush. I had to keep filling the bucket with bitumen, then carry it all the way up the ladder ready to start painting all the windows - and there seemed to be hundreds of them. The job took me three weeks and my overalls got so caked in bitumen that they would virtually stand up on their own. When I completed the job my mother said the overalls were past cleaning, so we just dumped them."

A Topsham boy, Bill became an apprentice bricklayer and plasterer with the Topsham Building Company when he left Topsham School in 1937 at the age of 14. "My pay was two shillings (10p) a week," he recalled. "My mother had one shilling and sixpence of that (7.5p) and I kept the other sixpence (2.5p) for myself: - enough in those days to buy you three pints, though unfortunately I was too young to drink. During my first two years in the job I was baked in the summer and frozen in the winter. Then the Topsham Building Company closed down because it was unable to obtain the timber it needed due to wartime shortages and government restrictions. I then went to work for PL Curtis, a building firm in Magdalen Road, Exeter, and they were the ones, who assigned me to that job on the power station roof. Climbing up and down that 60-foot ladder every day gave me all the exercise I needed to keep physically fit, but it made my legs ache a bit. It was quite a relief, as you can imagine when I was taken to my next job at the Exeter Cattle Market at Marsh Barton".

"An apprentice carpenter from Topsham, Don Norton, and I were given drums of paint, some green and some brown, which we had to daub on all the concrete surfaces in the market to camouflage them."

This seemed to amuse farmers visiting the market, especially when they had a few drinks with their lunch in the market canteen and were a bit under the influence. They used to ask: 'What be doin' all this for boy? The Germans won't be coming over here to drop bombs on our market. They ain't that daft!'. Several jokingly said they would bring their cows in for us to paint them in camouflage, though they feared that when they came to get the animals back, they wouldn't be able to find them.

Bill volunteered for air crew in the RAF and was bitterly disappointed on his first interview after enlistment to be turned down because his mathematics was not good enough. The army, though, was glad to welcome him. After two years with Topsham Home Guard, armed with a blunderbuss and bayonet, his father had given him, he was called up and posted to a light infantry unit at Bodmin. He then answered an appeal for volunteers for the tank regiment and was sent to Catterick Camp in Yorkshire for training, an experience he enjoyed despite icy weather. He told me "This was the territory in which the Bronte sisters wrote their novels. As I remember it, quite a lot of tanks were lost in bogs on the Yorkshire Moors. I expect they are still there now. I can't remember any of them ever being pulled out."

Bill fondly remembers how he parked his Churchill tank outside a Yorkshire pub while the crew went inside for a drink. He said: "I was sitting on the kerb eating a sandwich when a soldier came out, looked me up and down and asked: 'What the heck are you doing here?' "He turned out to be my old bricklayer mate from Exeter, Jack Johns. Out of all the soldiers in England and the hundreds of people in that Yorkshire village, who could ever have imagined that we would meet up like that. What a coincidence! It shows that miracles do happen". "I never saw Jack again after the war. Someone told me he had emigrated to Canada."

Bill's unit eventually saw service in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia with the 8th Army, making history when it captured a German Tiger tank weighing 62 tons. Today the tank is an exhibit

in the Bovington Museum where it has been restored to full working order.
(Acknowledgement is given to the Express & Echo, Exeter, which published this tale)
