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The day Abbots Gardens was bombed

On 15 November 1944, just six months before the end of the Second World War, a German V2 rocket landed in Abbots Gardens, killing five people. Here David Smith recalls that fateful day.

Our road is, by London standards, fairly quiet but it became for a few days the focus of much attention and activity by the emergency services.

East Finchley at this time was a dangerous place to live. Four high explosive bombs had been dropped on Brim Hill and a V1 blew up in Widecombe Way. There was a parachute mine in Ossulton Way, and another in Chapel Street that killed many people there and in the High Road. A large group of incendiary bombs fell between Totnes Walk and Brim Hill, and a high explosive bomb fell at the end of Aveton Road, where Prospect Ring is now.

So imagine the scene on this particular day in November 1944. At No 107, Mayzell Houghton was boiling a kettle to make a cup of tea. Next door, at 109, Margery Fulford had just walked to the shops to buy some torch batteries for the black out, leaving behind her mother Mrs Payton and her son John, aged five. They were probably sitting near the coal fire to keep warm. It is quite likely that John was listening to Children's Hour on the BBC Home Service. Round the corner at No 17, I was sitting by the fire with my mother. Margaret Edge, from No 15 next door, was with us, practising on our piano.

Huge blast

There was no means of knowing when a V2 attack might happen: no air-raid siren was sounded and the first thing that people would experience was the explosion, followed by the roar of the rocket motors catching up.

At 5.18 pm there was an almighty bang and the house shook. Our piano played all its strings at the same time, an uncanny sound. We heard the sound of falling and smashing glass from all around. We went to the front door and looked out, to see smoke rising above the rooftops. In fact, the 'smoke' was dust. Surprisingly, nothing caught fire.

My mother feared the worst. The Fulfords were good friends of ours and I went to nursery school with John. Margery Fulford was coming back from the shops when the blast occurred. She says she saw a cloud of dust rising in the air and hurried home, to find her house reduced to a pile of rubble. Her mother and only child were trapped beneath the debris. The road was empty.

Occurrence No 568

Then the emergency services arrived and started to search. I have copies of the Air Raid Damage Reports for Occurrence

No 568. The first one is timed at 17.46, 28 minutes after the event, and talks of approximately 20 casualties, some trapped. At 20.55 the WVS Canteen was sent for to provide drinks and food for the rescue workers and residents who could not cook anything. At 21.15 the form records the stark facts: "Boy & Woman released Dead. Removed to Mortuary".

The road remained closed for some time. We heard later that Mrs Houghton had been permanently blinded by the explosion of her gas stove. During the evening we had a steady stream of callers because our telephone was the only one still working in the road. Many people wanted to tell their relatives that they were still alive.

Destruction and rebuilding

The damage caused by the explosion was colossal. Nos. 107-113 were destroyed. Other houses including Nos. 105 and 115 had to be rebuilt and many others partly rebuilt where side or front walls had been shattered. In the outer circle the following houses were listed as war damaged: Nos. 79-129 with the exception of No. 121. In the inner circle it was Nos. 48-70 inclusive. Most other houses in the vicinity lost their windows and suffered what was described officially as "superficial damage" to doors and ceilings.

The Fulfords returned to Abbots Gardens, living firstly at No. 63 and then very pluckily returning to No. 105, only two doors away from the site of their shattered first home. Here they raised two children, Alan and Sheila.

The names of those who died as a result of the bomb attack were:
Arthur John Fulford, aged five.
Alice Helen Payton, aged 64.
Florence Annie Eveleigh
June Lamperd, aged 14
Ruby Lamperd, aged 39.



Little Red Riding Hood (Lauren Appleby), Cinderella (Emma Odell), Jack (Daniel Summers) and the Baker (Dominic Brewer) go Into the Woods. Photo by Scott Collier

Fairy tales go wrong in the Woods

By John Lawrence

There's still plenty of time to catch the Christmas show at the theatre Upstairs at the Gatehouse in Highgate, and it comes highly recommended. Into the Woods is the Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine musical that brings together Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel and Jack and the Beanstalk and mixes them up into a new tale of giants, witches and magic spells.

Each character desperately pursues their hearts' desires and, by the end of the first act, they all reach that 'happy ever after' moment. Then, in the second half of the show, they are forced to deal with the consequences of their wish fulfillment and to question whether they are truly happy.

This is a show that can be enjoyed on many levels. Sondheim fans will savour some of his most intricate and at times downright beautiful tunes and lyrics. Adults, and particularly parents, who have seen loved ones go off into the big, bad world will recognise the themes of longing and loss. Meanwhile, children can enjoy watching their favourite fairy tale characters making a mess of things and behaving badly.

Every member of the large cast is terrific and director Racky Plews has captured all

the emotional power of Sondheim and Lapine's story as well as doing a tremendous job of choreographing the frantic action scenes.

TV and stage star Paul Nicholas appears as narrator, interacting and singing with the cast thanks to some very clever video technology. Don't miss this ambitious production. It's funny and moving, with a

lot of heart, and it's only down the road.

Into the Woods runs until 1 February with evening performances from Tuesday to Saturday and a matinee on Sundays. Tickets range from £8-£15, with £40 family tickets available. Telephone the box office on 020 8340 3488 or visit www.upstairsatthegatehouse.com

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