



The night the bombs fell on East Finchley

Mike Coles tells the story of the night 80 years ago when German bombs brought death and destruction to Woodside Avenue and Fortis Green, and uncovers a startlingly vivid letter from an eye-witness that reveals the quiet courage of the people on the ground.

Walking around a leafy East Finchley today on a sunny May day, even in a pandemic, it's hard to imagine what it was like 80 years ago. When we look back to May 1941, we imagine it in black and white, but of course the daffodils were out and the trees were blossoming then, just as they are today.

The difference is that then we had been at war for 18 months and the Blitz had been going on for eight months, every night raining death and destruction from the sky. We know now that the night of 10-11 May was effectively the last night of the German bombing campaign, which had failed to cow London or do the economic damage the Nazis had hoped for. Instead they were turning their attention to Russia and the Eastern Front.

Wembley at 5.30pm they were unaware of the urgent news from RAF Intelligence at Harrow on the Hill.

The Luftwaffe used intersecting radio beams to help their bombers navigate; pilots followed one beam and when it intersected with another the plane was over the target. The RAF detected that the beams had been turned on and were centred over London. With a full moon, and an exceptionally low tide to hamper fire fighters, a big raid was likely.

And so it proved. Sirens began wailing at 11.02pm and the bombing started immediately, continuing through the night until the all-clear sounded at 5.57am. It was the heaviest, most destructive, and most prolonged raid of the Blitz. In



This RAF photo from 1945 shows the bombed houses had not been rebuilt. Photo Imperial War Museum

central London. Nearly 1,500 Londoners were killed and 100,000 houses destroyed.

A small survivor

It's unlikely that Woodside Avenue, just 150 metres from Cherry Tree Wood, would have been a target but lost bombers frequently dropped their bombs anywhere. So it was that a parachute mine, designed to explode at rooftop height with devastating effect, landed on Woodside Avenue near the allotments at the junction with Fordington Road. Another bomb had dropped on Fortis Green at the junction of Leaside Avenue just a couple of minutes earlier, probably from the same plane.

In the official listing of Civilian War Dead, Edith Amy Smith, aged 50, of 37 Woodside Avenue, N10, was killed in

the incident. Her son Ronald Horace William Smith, 19, died later at the Hornsey Central Hospital.

After the incident, a tortoise was found alive in a bomb crater in Woodside Avenue, possibly a pet of the Smiths. The animal was taken in and cared for by

a neighbour until they moved away and the new owner, who still lives there, took over its care. The tortoise, called Adolf in honour of his survival, hibernates every year and the good news is that, 80 years on, Adolf has just woken up for the summer of 2021.



Houses on the bomb site today. Photo Mike Coles

Cup Final weekend

Saturday 10 May 1941 began in East Finchley like any other day in the Blitz. Londoners had been resilient but were now very weary. However, there was a bit of optimism. A week earlier the government had introduced double summertime, which suddenly gave everyone two extra hours of daylight in the evening. The Rex Cinema (now the Phoenix) was still showing films, The Old White Lion pub in the High Road and the George pub (now demolished) in Market Place were still open and beer was not rationed.

In the afternoon the FA Cup Final was on at Wembley and men left the pub early to get home to listen on the radio: Arsenal were playing Preston. It was reportedly not a great game and ended as a draw.

As the fans were leaving

total, 541 bombers came, some on two sorties, and 505 reached the main target, the docks and



Parachute mines being dropped over London. Photo Imperial War Museum

Where the bombs fell

Anyone interested in finding out where bombs fell in London during the Second World War can use the interactive maps at bombsight.org. This fascinating website allows you to focus on any area of the city to see the number and type of bombs that dropped there during the Blitz between October 1940 and June 1941.

The city-wide view showing every bomb is a startling sight in itself, bringing home the scale of the nightly terror that Londoners had to suffer, and more locally the maps pinpoint bombs that fell in East Finchley in the High Road, Huntingdon Road and King Street, among others.



Adolf the tortoise in 2018, still living in Woodside Avenue. Photo Mike Coles

Carey's war memorabilia

By Diana Cormack

When Carey and David Miller moved into their home on Woodside Avenue more than 40 years ago they took over care of Adolf the tortoise, pictured above. He had been found shell-shocked in a crater resulting from the parachute mine that dropped nearby in 1941.

Years later a sort-out in their loft revealed other survivors from the Second World War in the form of protective helmets and gas masks. One of the helmets was German, which could be related to the fact that

the previous occupants of the house were German. If only Adolf could speak!

Please call 020 8883 6315 if you would like to see, have or purchase any of the war memorabilia.



A helmet and gas mask among the memorabilia. Photo Mike Coles

East Finchley Baptist Church

We meet each Sunday for worship at 10.30 am. If you would like to join us please go to our website for further details. All welcome.

For more information please contact the Church Office
Email: office@eastfinchleybc.org.uk
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