

Revealing Brixton's Wartime Story

When spades struck metal in our garden in St Saviour's Road, our first fear was, *is it an unexploded WW2 bomb?* Thankfully not. Instead, it was a perfectly preserved Anderson shelter, one of millions of small air raid shelters that became a fixture in British gardens during the Blitz. *But how did we come to have them in our gardens?*



St Saviour's Road Anderson Shelter Discovery, 2024

PREPARING FOR WAR

By April 1939, newspapers were urging people to prepare for air attacks as WW2 began to unfold. The Advertiser declared it "a matter of urgent public interest" that every household should "provide adequate shelter," warning "everybody is going to be in the front line" and protection "must be regarded as an individual responsibility." Anderson shelters even began appearing in property letting ads as a selling point alongside standard amenities. Officials favoured small household shelters over large communal ones, fearing mass sheltering would concentrate casualties where bombs hit. The government's Anderson shelters were free to those with a garden, earning under £250 per year (£22,700 today), otherwise they cost £7 (£636 today).

The Ministry of Home Security issued detailed shelter construction pamphlets for one penny, with easy-to-follow plans for shelters accommodating six people. They advised families to wear warm clothes and bring money, important papers, battery lamps, hot drinks in hay-wrapped bottles, thick blankets and a candle in two flowerpots for heat.

Government films tried to maintain morale, acknowledging families might be "chilly, uncomfortable" with "everyone getting temperamental" on long winter nights. Toys, books, tea and biscuits were recommended to help families "spend a comfortable night undisturbed by the Blitz," ready to "carry on work in true British style" the next morning.

Despite the official guidance, some made other choices. One resident said "the kitchen table was enough protection." Another in nearby Clapham wrote "I slept in my bed

only throwing the bedclothes over our heads whenever the engine stopped." Shelters often flooded, and many found the familiarity of their own homes more comforting.

WARTIME LIFE & THE V1 CAMPAIGN

John Kenny from Brixton Hill, described how children adapted, "we were to spend our days looking for shrapnel and our nights being woken by Air Raid Sirens, watching the searchlights crossing the dark sky." The routine became familiar. The wail of sirens, the dash to shelters in nightclothes, the "crump crump" of bombs falling, and finally the All Clear. Life continued despite regular bombing. One wedding announcement recorded: "the bride and bridegroom took cover in the Anderson shelter" during the reception.

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But between June 1944 and March 1945, V1 Flying Bombs brought fresh challenges. In that time, 83 died from 21 V1s falling on SW2. On 18 June 1944, the first V1 in Brixton struck Lyham Road between the prison and Dumbarton Road, killing 5. Others later hit Beechdale Road, Brockwell Park, Acre Lane, Baytree Road, Trelawn Road, Brixton Water Lane and Effra Parade.



Rescue at the Information Centre Acre Lane, June 1944 Flying Bomb incident, where 25 died

Known as 'Doodlebugs', they had a distinctive buzzing sound. Once the noise stopped, there was just 12 seconds before 1,900 pounds of high explosive hit the ground. They came around the clock in all weathers. Lucy Awdry wrote, "the first day we did not know what they were... our own gunfire was incessant and far more terrifying." One resident described waiting through those "alarming few seconds till the succeeding crash," as "nothing like the Blitz, but we are all three years more weary."

THE CLOSEST CALLS

In Brixton the reality of war was ever-present. When the V1 struck between Baytree Road and Sudbourne Road in July 1944, demolishing 20 houses and killing 3, the residents of our shelter would have heard the devastating blast.

Some experienced multiple strikes. Robert Bullen's home on Endymion Road was first hit by incendiaries in March 1941, which his father extinguished. Then in June 1944, a V1 blew the back off the house.

But it wasn't just headline-grabbing flying bombs that destroyed homes. Countless incendiary bombs rained down during the conventional Blitz, starting fires that could consume entire streets if not quickly extinguished. Unexploded bombs were also a constant threat, requiring regular visits from bomb disposal teams, including at the end of St Saviour's Road.

ANDERSON'S PROTECTION

Over 3.6 million Anderson shelters were distributed across Britain. The corrugated iron construction was designed to be partially buried, with curved shapes deflecting blast effects. The corrugated design made them exceptionally strong. A 1939 local newspaper stated, "fragments flying horizontally from exploding bombs would hold scant peril for the occupants, blast would affect them but little." They needed to be covered with at least one foot of earth, "the thicker the better" to "absorb shock impulse occasioned by the detonation." Official guidance recommended positioning shelters away from buildings, with doorways facing away from houses, to prevent exits being blocked by debris. This placement was crucial because the risk of falling buildings was considered as significant as the bombing itself. These structures were never bomb-proof against direct hits, but they could "resist a 50kg bomb falling six feet away," and protect against shrapnel and falling anti-aircraft fragments. As the 1939 Advertiser warned: "everything that goes up has got to come down again," with shell fragments striking the ground at 800 feet per second.

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Flying bomb incident at Ellerslie Square, Brixton, 24th June 1944, showing the damaged but still standing Anderson shelter in the foreground. Behind lies the devastated Sunlight Laundry, which employed 400 staff before the V1 attack.

SURVIVAL AND LEGACY

By May 1947, Lambeth Council offered families the chance to buy their Anderson shelters for £1. Unclaimed shelters were considered "government property and must not be retained." But behind this bureaucracy lay many human stories.

The 1939 census reveals the residents who used our garden shelter during the Blitz were Olive Griggs, her children Owen (policeman), Enid (drapery saleswoman), and Doris (bank clerk), and her uncle Alfred Dance. In January 1940 Owen joined the RAF, but by 1942 was captured and held as a Prisoner of War until it ended in 1945.

Remarkably, he and his family back in Brixton all survived the war. Their Anderson shelter is a reminder of the local, ordinary families who endured extraordinary times and the thousands Brixton households who faced each day uncertain whether their neighbours, neighbourhood, and lives would still be there tomorrow.

IMAGE CREDITS

- 1: St Saviour's Road Anderson Shelter Discovery 2024 Courtesy of Lucie Branczik
- 2: Lambeth 00225: Flying Bomb incident showing a woman being rescued from rubble at the Information Centre Acre Lane. 26th June 1944. Courtesy of LB Lambeth Archives
- 3: Lambeth 00176: Ellerslie Square Brixton, 24th June 1944 Flying Bomb incident. Courtesy of LB Lambeth Archives

Lucie Branczik

BIBLIOGRAPHY

If you are interested in reading more about this subject, the author supplied an extensive bibliography with this article.

It is too long to print in our newsletter, but you can find the article with the full bibliography on our website here:

brixtonsociety.org.uk/local-history/articles/

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