

Air Raid Precautions in the Borough of Wembley during World War Two.

When the prospect of war loomed again in the 1930's, memories went back to the First World War, when London had been bombed by German Zeppelin airships and long-range Gotha aircraft, and poison gas had been used as a weapon. The Government started to make plans to protect the civilian population as best it could, and all local Councils were instructed to make plans for Air Raid Precautions ("A.R.P.") in their areas. Wembley Council appointed Jack Eddas as its A.R.P. Officer in February 1938.

An A.R.P. lapel badge. [Brent Museum collection]



Mr Eddas and his team organised the distribution of gas masks to all the residents of the borough, and started planning and recruiting for an air raid wardens' organisation and for air raid shelters, ready to put these plans into operation as soon as another war with Germany seemed inevitable. A special Civil Defence Committee, chaired by the Mayor, Malcolm Campbell, was set up in July 1939, and eighty Warden Posts were organised across the whole of the borough. At its height, Wembley's A.R.P. Service had around 2,500 air raid wardens, some working full-time and paid £3 a week, but 95% of them were volunteers, both men and women.

A recruiting poster for air raid wardens. [Source: Imperial War Museum (?)]

The Council appointed a Chief Warden, who had 12 District Wardens under him, each responsible for supervising all of the A.R.P. Posts and wardens in his District. Each District was one of the "wards" from which Wembley's councillors were elected, and two councillors acted as Deputy Chief Wardens. Cllr. Hollings looked after the northern area, covering the wards of Roe Green, The Hyde, Fryent, Chalkhill, Preston and Kenton, while Cllr. Yarwood oversaw the southern area of Wembley Park, Sudbury Court, Sudbury, Alperton, Central and Tokyngton wards.

Fifty of the warden posts were built under the supervision of the Borough Surveyor, at a cost of around £50 each. They were very basic brick-walled structures, with a flat re-inforced concrete roof. The rest were set-up in parts of existing buildings, with the owner paid 5/- (five shillings) a week in rent. Each post was equipped with a table, two chairs, hat and coat hooks and a notice board. The photograph aside shows one of the Wembley warden posts, possibly in The Avenue, Wembley Park, which the wardens had decorated with their own sign! The name they chose for their post combines a rattle, with which they would warn residents of a possible gas attack, and a bell which they would ring to signal the "all clear" after such a warning.

Wembley A.R.P. Warden Post 32, with two of its wardens.

[From a 1964 magazine article. Photograph probably from the Imperial War Museum collection]



Public air raid shelters, often larger versions of the warden post design, were built by Wembley Council in shopping centres and in residential streets. Large shelters were also built at schools. Pam, who was at Fryent School at the time, remembered the air raid drills: *'Every time the sirens sounded we had to go to the shelters at school, whether we were in the middle of a lesson or not. The shelters were corrugated iron tunnels covered with earth. They had cement floors, and we all sat down the sides on wooden benches. It was not possible to have proper lessons as the shelters were long and the teacher could not be heard, so we played "cats cradles" and did "french knitting" with a cotton reel.'*



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Air raid shelters at Sudbury Primary School.

[Source: Brent Archives - Wembley History Society collection]

Corrugated iron "Anderson Shelters" were delivered free to the homes of families who qualified (with a household income of less than £250 a year), but these did not prove very successful as the local clay soil did not allow water to drain away, so they flooded whenever it rained. A similar fate occurred to a large underground public shelter which Wembley Council built in Roe Green Park. This was soon closed because it was unsafe through flooding, although later in the war the fire brigade would use it as an emergency reservoir! Several thousand indoor ("Morrison") "table shelters" were also distributed in the borough.

Many home owners had private air raid shelters built in their gardens. From 1939, they could borrow money (up to £50) from the Council on a 10 year mortgage for this purpose. The scheme got off to a slow start, but in the year from July 1940 onwards the Council had to deal with dozens of applications every week.

A 1940 newspaper advert by a builder in what is now Blackbird Hill, for pre-cast concrete air raid shelters.

[Source: Brent Archives – local newspaper microfilms]

SECTIONAL VIEW OF DE ANGELUS HOUSEHOLD TYPE SHELTER

This type of Shelter is extremely strong, gives great security. Constructed of PRECAST REINFORCED CONCRETE, approved design. Spacious interior, always dry, safe and durable under all conditions. Simple to erect, cut view at right.

DON'T LEAVE IT TOO LATE

SECURE YOUR SHELTER NOW

PRICES ARE SURE TO RISE AS DEMAND INCREASES, MATERIALS MAY BECOME SCARCE—delay will be inevitable. WE CAN DELIVER IMMEDIATELY FROM STOCK.—ALL SIZES TO SUIT REQUIREMENTS—

NO INITIAL OUTLAY — REPAYMENT OVER 10 YEARS

Shelter as supplied to numerous Councils and Authorities

NO FEAR OF FLYING GLASS IF YOU USE—

GARINOL—ANTI-SPLINTER LACQUER AS USED BY WEMBLEY FIRE BRIGADE. BY TEST—THE BEST, LONGER LASTING, AND MORE EFFICIENT. OR THE VERY LATEST PRECAUTION—ANTI-SPLINTER NET, MADE IN ATTRACTIVE LACE DESIGNS. ADHERS DIRECTLY TO WINDOWS, WILL STOP GLASS FLYING. PRICES FROM 5s. TO 2s. PER YARD, VARIOUS WIDTHS.

ALSO SUNTEX ANTI-SPLINTER LACQUER

D. W. PRICE & SON,
12, 13 & 14, THE PARADE, KINGSBURY LANE, BLACKBIRD CROSS
Phone: G2L 8254



Although some of the shelter designs offered by local builders were specialised, most used brick walls on a concrete base, with a re-inforced concrete roof. There must have been hundreds of these across Wembley during the Second World War, but very few remain. The shelter aside, in a back garden in Church Lane, Kingsbury, and still in use as a garden shed, was photographed in 2009.

[Photo donated by the householder as part of the Saint Andrew's New Church 75th anniversary project]

The declaration of war in September 1939 did not bring immediate air raids, but this gave Wembley's A.R.P. Service the chance to put the training the wardens had already received into practice. They could get the civilian population used to carrying their gas masks at all times, and to observing the "black-out", and give advice on using sticky tape or lacquer on windows, to reduce injury from glass splinters should a bomb explode nearby. Dark blue overalls were issued as uniforms to the men and women who had volunteered to be wardens, and they were given extra first aid training, as well as the usual "drill" activities which helped build team work and discipline.

A.R.P. wardens marching in Salmon Street, 1941.

[Source: Brent Archives – online images]



Although there were 80 Warden Posts spread across the borough, it was decided that only 35 of these should be "key posts". These would be run by full-time wardens, and manned every night between at least 11pm and 7am. They (and a few other posts) were provided with electric light and heating, and with telephones. The other posts would be manned if a "Yellow" air raid message was received by Wembley's A.R.P. HQ, and passed on to the Post Warden, either by telephone to his home, or by messenger. Wembley's new Town Hall, in Forty Lane, was



nearing completion when the war broke out, and the Control Room there was organised by the Town Clerk, Kenneth Tansley, and operated 24 hours a day by volunteers from the Council's staff.

Wembley Town Hall, c.1951.

[Source: Brent Archives – W.H.S. Collection]

The long-expected German air raids finally reached Wembley on 27 August 1940, when a number of incendiary bombs fell in the Barn Hill and Salmon Street areas. The A.R.P. wardens dealt with these quite well, using the tools and training they had been given. More raids soon followed, including high explosive as well as incendiary bombs, and the wardens found themselves dealing with incidents involving casualties and serious damage to property. Wembley had to endure this "blitz" through until May 1941, although other parts of Britain and its capital suffered much greater losses.

Bomb damage in an unidentified Wembley road.

(Wartime secrecy laws meant that the location was not marked on these official photographs.)

[Source: Brent Archives - war damage photos]



Geoff's father was the senior warden at A.R.P. Post 37, situated in the garage of a bungalow in Wyndale Avenue, Kingsbury. On the night of 25 September 1940 he heard the rustling of fabric as a parachute mine drifted over their housing estate, before hitting the back of a shopping parade in Kingsbury Road. The wardens were quickly on the scene, but two mothers and their children, a girl of seven and a baby boy, who lived in flats above the shops, were killed by the blast, and extensive damage was caused.



443 to 449 Kingsbury Road, the day after the parachute mine struck in September 1940.

[Photo by Leslie Bunting, for the Ministry of Information. Brent Archives – war damage photos]

The A.R.P. wardens were not the only Civil Defence staff and volunteers to deal with this, and other, attacks. First aiders from a Medical Service Unit, which had recently moved into a former coach house at the nearby Kingsbury Manor in Roe Green Park, were also involved, along with members of a specialist Rescue Team.

The Eton Grove (Queensbury) Rescue team in 1941, made up of men too old for military service or in reserved occupations.

[Photo courtesy of Beverley Lester, whose father was one of the team]



Wembley's Civil Defence and Fire Brigade services came under the most pressure on "Black Friday", the night of 15/16 November 1940. An estimated 3,000 incendiary bombs resulted in 62 separate incidents across the borough, with many homes and business premises damaged or burnt out. Local voluntary fire teams, using stirrup pumps, helped deal with such attacks, but they also led to compulsory fire guard duties for all eligible residents. By the end of the war, around 25,000 of Wembley's citizens had spent many nights "fire watching".

In the early days of the war, Wembley organised a number of supplementary fire parties, and made stirrup pumps available, which with those purchased in large numbers by the householders were brought into very useful service on many occasions. Wardens and the supplementary fire parties saved many homes from destruction by fire bombs.

With the advent of compulsory fire watching, a fire guard organisation of 25,000 members was built up, and in co-operation with N.F.S., trained, both in fire fighting methods and in the operation of the fire guard plan.

Extract from an article on Air Raids in "The Wembley News", 29 December 1944.

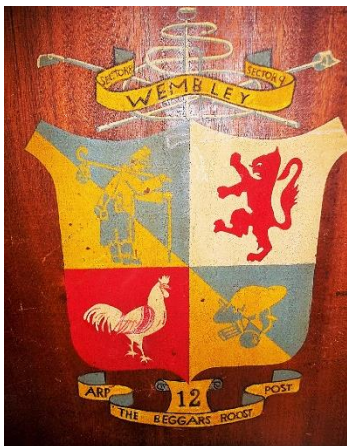
[Source: collection of the late Richard Graham]

Elizabeth was a schoolgirl when she went with her family to a public shelter in Bacon Lane, Kingsbury, as the sirens sounded, one early evening in February 1941. The air raid was very close, and they sang nursery rhymes to comfort her younger brother. One of his favourites was "There was a crooked man ...", and when they could finally come out of the shelter he pointed to their home and said: '**we've got a crooked house!**' The next door house had taken a direct hit, and their own was so badly damaged that the Council rehoused them for the remainder of the war in a property it had requisitioned, half a mile away in Valley Drive.

A man died in the bombed house, as he had just come home from work, and told his family that he would eat his dinner in the kitchen before he joined them in the shelter. This may be the same incident as when an A.R.P. warden in Roe Green Village saw some light from a house in Bacon Lane, and was knocking on the front door to tell the occupant to 'Put that light out!' Just as he did so, a bomb fell on the back of the house, and the blast threw him out into the road – luckily, he survived.

The A.R.P. wardens of Post 11 in Roe Green Village.

[Photo supplied by Geoffrey Hewlett and published in "Tea & Memories", courtesy of Debbie Nyman]



Post 11 was probably in the same District as Post 12, the "coat of arms" plaque from which has recently been loaned to Brent Museum. This illustrates the good humour which Wembley's A.R.P. wardens managed to maintain (see also the Post 32 sign, page 1 above), despite the difficult circumstances they had to face.

The "coat of arms" for Post 12 ("The Beggars Roost").

[Courtesy of Cheryl Hutton]

Between May 1941 and February 1943 Wembley suffered no further raids, but the A.R.P. wardens still had to be vigilant every day and night. March 1943 saw some major raids with high explosive bombs, and similar raids early in 1944 caused one of the worst incidents for casualties that Wembley experienced. On a Saturday evening, 19 February, a pair of 4-bed Council houses at Birchen Close took a direct hit from an HE bomb. Eight members of the Whitfield family and seven members of the Metcalfe family were killed, and an A.R.P. warden patrolling nearby was injured by the blast, and died later in hospital.

1944 also saw a barrage of V1 flying bombs between June and September, fourteen of which landed in Wembley, causing some casualties and damage, including the destruction of Wembley Hill School (later the site of Copland School, now Ark Elvin Academy). By the end of the year, reporting restrictions were lifted, and the full story of Wembley's air raids and Civil Defence efforts could be told.

From the front page of "The Wembley News", 29 December 1944.

[With thanks to Barbara Clarke, from the collection of her late brother, Richard Graham]



Although German air attacks with V2 rockets continued until March 1945, none of these fell on Wembley (although several caused deaths and damage just across the River Brent in the Borough of Willesden). The A.R.P. wardens continued their duties until the war in Europe ended in May, but the tally of Wembley's air raid casualties and damage stayed the same as that reported at the end of 1944.



The 9,000 recorded bombs which had been dropped on the borough included nearly 7,500 small incendiaries, 526 high-explosives, 600 anti-personnel and smaller numbers including oil and phosphorous bombs. Civilian casualties numbered 149 killed, 401 seriously injured and around 400 "less seriously injured". Over 18,000 houses, more than half of those in Wembley, had been damaged in the air raids, including 528 demolished or damaged beyond repair and 449 so seriously damaged that they were uninhabitable.

The report about Wembley's air raids includes a section on the warden's service, which begins: *'Residents have been apt to think of wardens in terms of men and women who worry them about the black-out. Few people realise the unselfish service which the wardens have given to the community'* In fact, many people in Wembley must have experienced the work of the A.R.P. wardens at first hand, but at least that introduction allowed the writer to record the many responsibilities they had carried out, including the "Extra Duties" shown in the extract aside.

Extract from "The Wembley News", 29 December 1944.

The Second World War seems a long time ago, and although history books record the efforts of soldiers, sailors and airmen, it would be easy to forget the work done by ordinary local civilians. Unexploded bombs, mentioned in the extract above, sometimes give us a reminder, like the 500 pound bomb uncovered on a construction site at Empire Way in May 2015, seventy years after the war ended. I hope that this article has helped to share the story of Wembley's A.R.P. wardens with readers today.



Two images of the Empire Way unexploded bomb, May 2015.

[Photos by Rupert Frere, Army Bomb Disposal Unit]



Philip Grant, Wembley History Society, June 2017.