

She saw by Robert Westall *it happen* - An eyewitness talks about the Blitz

A London lady talks about how she experienced the Blitz at the age of six:

1940 – The night the bombs fell

☞ Late autumn we had yellow chrysanthemums on our sitting-room window-sill. That night the grown-ups in our shelter kept saying the raid was specially heavy. "One night they *will* get the railway line," said Mother. It was common knowledge that the railway line a quarter of a mile away carried ammunition trains from the factory at Park Royal.

There was a tremendous bang, and the shelter lights went out. I expected the shelter to collapse, but nothing hit me. We heard bricks falling, people shouting.

"My God, we're hit," screamed Mother, and immediately got out of the shelter. Then she leant back in, outlined by search-lights.

"Come out," she said. "I don't believe it."

We climbed up the ladder. All the hens were cackling wildly and flapping. Fires in the distance, but everything looked the same as usual. We ran up the back-garden path and through the house. Just then my uncle came in the front door.

"Keep those children in," he shouted. But we all ran past him.

There was a huge hole opposite – two houses down, looking like teeth that needed filling in the semi-dark. Bricks were still falling and a ring of wardens shouting, "Keep back, keep back!" to the people who were pouring in, from up and down the street.

Then Mr Leggatt was helped out of the ruins of his house, bleeding round the head. Then his son, with only a scratch on his hand.

After a long time, bombs falling all round, whistles blowing, planes roaring, searchlights picking out planes and barrage balloons overhead, the ambulance came. A stretcher was carried out, the body covered over completely. Then another, but the face showing, covered with blood.

"It's Margaret," everyone whispered. "Then Mrs Leggatt is dead."

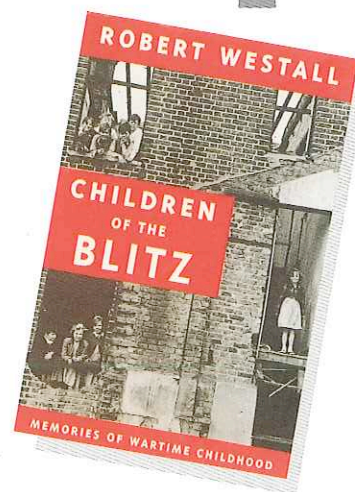
"Here – what about the Joneses, next door?"

"It's a miracle."

A warden yelled at my mother, "Get those kids indoors – there's a bloody raid going on!"

Margaret and Mr Leggatt had been folding a tablecloth by the larder door. Dozens of jars and bottles had been blown into fragments, and Margaret was still having operations five years after the war to remove the glass. She was eighteen.

All our downstairs windows were broken, but for some reason, the upstairs ones weren't. The broken glass had got into the yellow chrysanthemums. My



mother immediately picked it all out, and they lived for three more weeks. The house was thick with fallen soot. Precious, my doll, had a white Victorian frilled nightie that had to be destroyed, it was so filthy. I *hated* Hitler.

After the bomb site had been tidied up, our gang used to play there and have secret fires. Until one day a woman saw us and said "That's where Mrs Leggatt died. You kids ought to be ashamed." We never went there again to play, but set up a little stone and put flowers on it in summer, and leaves in winter, and holly at Christmas.

Fatty Waller said we ought to send Margaret Christmas cards, so we all told our mums we were being kept in at school, and went up to Willesden Hospital with them. They took the cards, but they wouldn't let us see her.

On Christmas Eve we all went to the bomb site and sang "Away in a Manger", then

Whistle while you work

Hitler is a twerp.

Goering's barmy.

So's his army.

Whistle while you work

Then we didn't know what to do, so we all went home, and got into trouble for being so dirty.

1940 – In the shelter

We had an Anderson shelter at the bottom of the garden. The three of us shared it with Maude and Laura Rowlands (two maiden ladies who lived next door) and their fat old brown-and-white mongrel, Patch. It was very damp. My mother caught lumbago from the damp and eczema from spring-cleaning with washing-soda, as there was no soap to be had. Every morning she had to drag herself backwards up the shelter steps, in time to make our breakfast before we went to school. If you were late, and there hadn't been a raid the night before, you got caned. Fortunately we lived by the railway. There were raids every night.

1940 – Landmine

We were all in our shelters, and in spite of an air raid some miles away, most of us were asleep. Suddenly there was a lot of whistling, men shouting, "Everyone to the front of their houses." Then a loud-hailer, "This is the police – everyone to the front of their houses, PLEASE!"

My mother said, "They must be mad, with an air raid going on."

"Perhaps the Germans have invaded?"

When we got to the front, wardens and police were telling everyone they had ten minutes to get out of their houses and go to friends at least half a mile away. If they didn't know anyone, they were to go to Harvist Road School – *my* school.

There was an unexploded landmine in Doyle Gardens and as soon as all the neighbouring roads had been evacuated, they would be closed, so the Army could move in.

"Be as quick as you can – DO NOT WAIT TO DRESS. Turn off your gas, electricity and water. If you can find your pets take them. Do not waste time looking for them. Take your ration-books, if you can find them quickly. Take what blankets you can carry."

The warden marched alongside us. We were all still in our night clothes. The raid was now overhead. Ack-ack guns fired from Roundwood Park. We heard a plane crashing. Searchlights all over the sky.

"I'm frightened," I said to the warden.

"Here's my tin hat," he said, putting it on me.

"I want one, too," said my brother. He was only four, and my mother kept carrying him, then putting him down. The warden left us, to hurry other people on. One woman was carrying a budgie ...

It didn't feel like half a mile – more like ten. Grandmother lived near Harvist Road. She was very frightened, being knocked up at two in the morning, as my uncle was a warden and she thought he'd been killed.

My mother gave her the big blanket, and she settled Mother on the couch in the living-room, and my brother on cushions on the floor by her side. Then she wrapped me up in the big blanket, found a pillow and put me to bed in the bath. I went to sleep at once, the helmet beside me.

Haydn Davis Jones during World War II.

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• *Talk about what it must have been like to be a child in World War II experiencing bombing and landmines. How would you have reacted?*

B 43 C 43

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