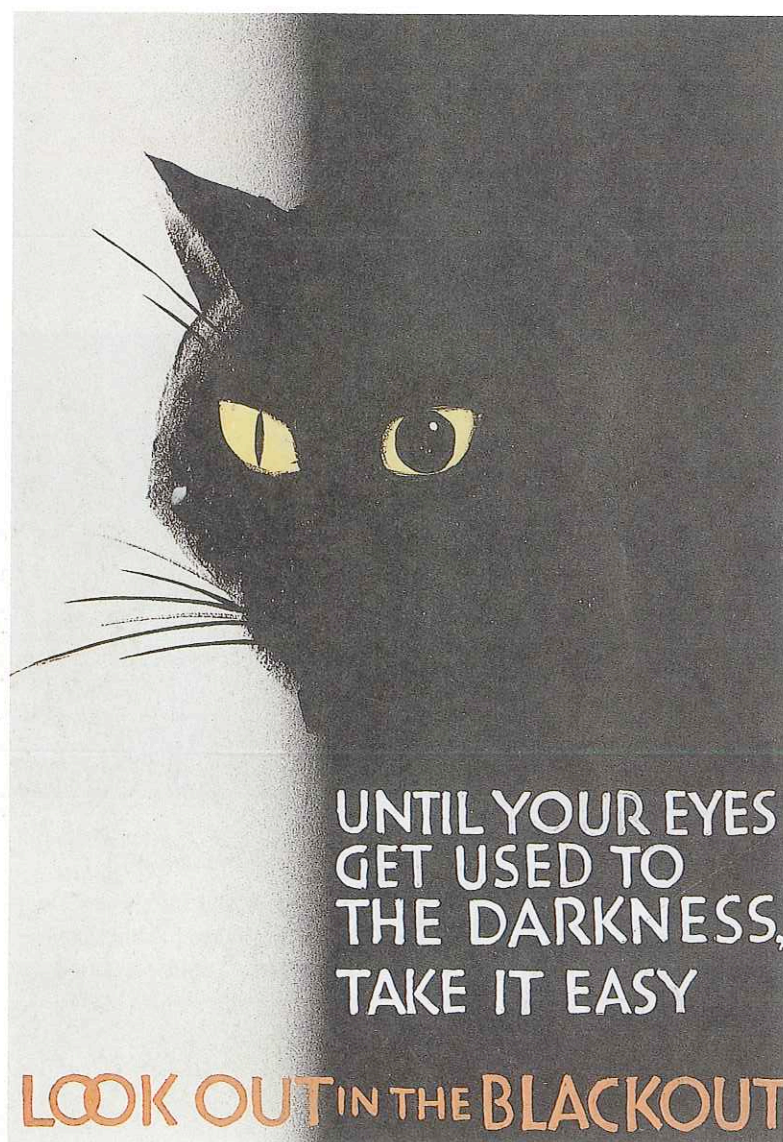


5

How did people cope during the Blitz?

1. Try to find out how people coped during the Blitz by skimming this chapter for three minutes. Take notes of the most important facts.
2. Tell your partner about the chapter, based on your notes.
3. Listen to and/or read the chapter.

British Poster from
World War II.



Blackout

Though Britain's anti-aircraft defences didn't have much success against German bombers, other measures were taken to make it difficult for the enemy. All street and shop lights were turned off and homes had their windows blacked out with thick curtains or blinds. The blackout was supposed to make it more difficult for German bombers to find their targets at night. A city like London with all its lights on would be easily found otherwise.

Taking shelter

By the time the war started, 38 million gas masks had already been issued. These were never needed since gas was not used in the Second World War – although people weren't to know this at the time. For a long time civilians carried their gas masks about with them in case of a gas attack. Even babies' prams were made gas-proof.

The real danger, though, came not from gas but from bombs. The government had already begun to prepare for air raids by issuing Anderson shelters as early as February 1939. Two million of these had been given to families in cities likely to be bombed by the time war broke out. They were free to families earning less than £250 a year. This was at a time when the average worker's wage was about £300 a



A family of Londoners with what's left of their Anderson shelter.

year. Made from curved corrugated steel sheets bolted together, they were half buried in the garden. They were not very popular because they were damp and tended to flood. But most people preferred them to the brick shelters the government provided for the people in the local area.

None of the shelters protected you from a direct hit or from the blast of a near miss. Victims of blast often showed no signs of injury. The blast pressure simply crushed the internal organs of the body and sometimes stripped the clothes off them. Sometimes the blast would tear bodies apart.

What Londoners really wanted to use were the underground stations. At first the government would not allow them to be used as shelters. It was afraid that the people, once inside these deep shelters, wouldn't come out and this would be bad for morale. But in October 1940 the government had to give in and they were opened up.

The most popular stations were the deepest, such as Hampstead, and queues for these began as early as 10 am. In the deepest ones you couldn't hear the noise of the bombs and so had a better chance of getting some sleep. People were desperate for a place on the platform and fights occasionally took place.

After 10 pm the current was switched off and Londoners could sleep along the track. Those who couldn't get to the platform had to make do with a night on the

Sleeping on the escalator of an underground station.



London's underground stations made very popular shelters during the Blitz.



A two-tiered Morrison shelter from a government catalogue.



stairs or escalators. At first there were no proper toilet facilities and the best that could be arranged were a few buckets screened off with a blanket.

'Last orders'

The tube stations were used by only about 15 per cent of the London population. More than half preferred to sleep in their own homes where they used steel-framed Morrison shelters inside the house. These were about the same height as a table

and big enough for a couple of adults and children to shelter beneath.

Most of the rest used their Anderson shelters or the public shelters. Some, though, used no shelters at all and simply sat out the raids in pubs, singing very loudly so as not to hear the sound of the bombs. In some cases, no doubt, 'last orders' meant exactly that. Those who lived in cities outside London had no tube stations in which to shelter. Many of these simply 'trekked' each night out into the country and slept where they could – barns, cowsheds, even ditches. There were 50,000 trekkers each night out of Plymouth. The government disapproved of trekking because it suggested that morale was cracking.

*During one of
Hitler's last raids
in 1944, a little
girl is being carried
from her home.*



Rescue work

Rescue work was a difficult job. Workers were paid about £3 a week – much less than the average wage at the time. Former building workers made the best rescue workers because they had a good knowledge of how the buildings had been made and where to look for survivors. The risk from collapsing buildings and broken water and gas pipes all made rescue work more difficult and dangerous. Some 5,000 building workers had to be released from the army to help with the repairs to bomb-damaged homes. Accommodation for those who lost their homes was very poor to begin with. For instance, 200-300 people crammed into a hall with only ten buckets for toilets was not unusual.

Ill-feeling between classes

There was sometimes bad feelings between the upper and lower classes. Plush West End hotels had their own *private* and comfortable shelters which the ordinary population couldn't use. On one occasion this led to protesters occupying the shelter of the Savoy Hotel.

This ill-feeling was made worse by the fact that most German bombs fell on the working class, industrial areas of big cities such as the East End of London. Few fell on the richer West End or comfortable suburbs. It seemed to some, therefore, that

the poor were doing more than their fair share for the war.

Despite all this, morale did hold up and the civilian population remained firmly behind Churchill's policy of continuing the war until it was won. A different kind of spirit gradually emerged. As the historian, Peter Lewis, put it, "Londoners as a whole did not lose their nerve, but they lost their reserve."

A 47

- *Talk about how you think you would cope with bombing, blackouts, shelters and rescue work if there was a war like this today.*

B 47 **C** 22

- *Write a short story about the photograph of the rescue worker and the baby, Reader page 85. You can either*
 - a. write what happened to the family in the house, before, during and after the bomb dropped*
 - or*
 - b. write about this day in the rescue worker's life, seen through his eyes.*