

On Sunday 7th July 1940 at 11:04am, the first of many bombs fell on the town of Eastbourne. Between July 1940 and December 1941, over four hundred bombs were dropped. In the aftermath, Robert Thomas Hines and other ARP wardens would have sprung into action, rescuing survivors, putting out fires and assessing damage.

The Air Raid Precaution service, set up by local councils, was instrumental in preparing people for an air attack by Germany and her allies. The service was open to men and women of all ages and included veterans of World War One. Robert Hines was 57 when he joined as an ARP warden in 1938, having previously been in the horse transport unit of the Royal Army Service Corp in the First World War. He retired as a warden in 1939 but seems to have come back in some capacity in 1940, perhaps prompted by the imminence of an aerial attack. ARP wardens were split into wards and each warden had their own area or street to look after. Their job was primarily to report any bombings and other incidents and respond if need be. This meant that they were often one of the first people on the scene, helping the survivors. A number of comedic stories filtered through the local service including one about a woman whose house had suffered minor bomb damage. The wardens attempted to evacuate her but she refused to leave until she had tidied up the mess with a dustpan and brush. Another, which I can relate to greatly, involved a woman frantically searching through the rubble of her home, not for her husband but for her cat!

Preparations for air raids were underway long before the first bombs dropped. In July 1938, the first siren trials were held in Eastbourne and the following year was the first blackout drill. Another drill, held on the 14th May 1939 and watched by the Home Office, involved British Bombers flying over Eastbourne as enemy invaders and dropping bombs. Bombs, including gas bombs with harmless gas, which had already been placed around town would explode and the ARP would have to respond. Umpires also gave the ARP other scenarios such as an enemy plane crash landing in Langney and the room of a house being on fire. All of these drills and preparations earned Eastbourne the reputation of allegedly having the best ARP preparation in the country.

Despite this, in January 1939, Eastbourne was classed as a “safe zone” as it was thought preposterous that Hitler would order an attack on a sleepy seaside

town. Many children, estimated to be around 16,000, their mothers and teachers were evacuated out of London to Eastbourne. Although some enjoyed being here, many did not and the homes they were billeted to were not happy either. The Billeting Tribunal dealt with all issues pertaining to evacuees. The children were accused of being verminous and leaving a “legacy of disease, dirt and squalor”. London schoolmasters warned against “cowardly libel” as a way of shirking their duty.

Most children were evacuated as a school unit with their teachers and headmasters/mistresses. One of these, Woodmansterne Road School from Stretham came to Eastbourne. Whilst in Eastbourne the headmistress, Miss Jolliffe, collected newspaper articles on evacuees- most of them were not very nice. The stories of alleged mistreatment of the evacuees from Stretham made it all the way to their local paper in London! However, London headteachers rebuked these accusations and said that the children were being very well taken care of.

The most frequent issue brought before the Tribunal seems to be the cost of keeping the children. For the first five weeks of the evacuation scheme, the government paid £20,000 to Eastbourne residents (nearly £787,000 today). Soon after, the government announced that parents would have to pay according to their means. Keeping children was incredibly expensive when you consider government advice that they required a pint of milk a day each and their own bath water each day!

Alongside the cost of maintenance, rationing hit some households quite hard. In this photo, volunteers are handing out Ration books at the Town Hall. Rationing continued to be a hardship after the war. In July 1946, 2500 people had signed a protest about bread rationing which had been in force for many years previously and clothing items were rationed until the early 1950s. Shopkeepers were running out of food due to the stockpiling of non-rationed food and constant queues... sounds quite similar to headlines today- minus the toilet roll of course!

Within just over a year of being declared a safe zone, Eastbourne became a defence area. Restrictions were imposed on entering and leaving town, the Eastbourne name was blacked out on signs, vans and advertisements and the

military imposed a seafront curfew. Eastbourne Pier was mined and ready to be blown if the enemy tried to land and approximately 3000 local children were evacuated.

Eastbourne had very few defences initially. A station at Beachy Head, manned by the Royal Observer Corps, was responsible for sounding the alarm to warn of incoming planes. The snag with this, however, was that they had to radio a controller in Kent for permission to sound the alarm but they could only do this if more than one plane was present. This meant that by the time the alarm went off, bombs were already dropping. Seeing how much damage was being caused by single bombers and the delay in obtaining permission, they took matters into their own hands and raised the alarm without seeking permission first. By ignoring protocol, they bought the people of Eastbourne a few crucial seconds. The ROC put pressure on the government to allow a local, quicker alarm system, nicknamed "Cuckoo", and the government relented. It was found that radiolocation was not effective in detecting low-flying aircraft and without the eyes and ears of the ROC on lookout, Eastbourne would be woefully ill prepared for incoming attacks.

In June 1944, unmanned bombs, called Doodlebugs, started flying over Eastbourne. They were named after a small racing car from America, "Doodlebug", as the sound of the bomb mimicked the sound of the car's engine. These Doodlebugs would often crash prematurely on their way to London, including on Eastbourne. This is a part of a doodlebug which you'll find in our collection. You'll notice the bullet holes from attempts to bring it down over land. Realising that it would be better to deal with the issue before they reached British soil, the government ordered large numbers of anti-aircraft guns to the south coast to destroy them out at sea. Returning RAF pilots would often tip them around and send them back the way they came.

At the end of World War Two, despite the large-scale destruction Eastbourne experienced, the people rebuilt their homes and their lives. The lives lost have been remembered in many different ways and have taught us lessons in bravery and stoicism.

I leave you with this, a letter to an Eastbourne newspaper about residents welcoming evacuees- "Never has a great nation entered so quietly and calmly,

with such firm and good-natured determination, upon so great a task. We are as ready and prepared as sane foresight can make us to meet the future”.