

In Plymouth during the Blitz

In the summer of 1940 I returned to Plymouth from Farnham where I had been unhappily teaching in a private school. I found job in a school over the river in Saltash. For fear of air-raids on the bridge some of the little children from the Plymouth side of the river had their lessons in someone's front room in St Budeaux. At the same I played in a Concert Party, accompanying a couple of singers who did songs from the shows. One of the singers, a man called Westcott, was the medical officer for the Port and he arranged for me to learn to drive and to get a job with the Civil Defence. This must have been in the autumn of 1940, about the time of the raid on Coventry. Part of the training was to drive outside the Dockyard when the workers were leaving, to get us used to coping with rushing crowds of people.

The first aid post was in Kerr Street. We worked there in three shifts, 8am-2pm, 2-10pm and 10pm-8am¹, although if the siren went for a raid everyone was expected to go to the post. The first job of the morning shift was to check the ambulances to make sure they would start up. At first there was a lot of time spent sitting around. There was a piano and a billiard table. People would sing and I would accompany them, and some of the men taught me snooker.

This all changed when the blitz started in March. There were two nights of heavy bombing in the centre of Plymouth, and then a month later it started again, mainly concentrated in Devonport and the docks.

I can remember walking through the park to the first-aid post at night. The bombers would drop flares, chandeliers that lit up the whole area which made us feel very exposed. And when the bombs started falling it was something that no-one who didn't live through it can really imagine. Once when we were driving along our ambulance was blown up in the air, and when it came down my colleague Elsie said, 'Keep going,' so I did. We had to make our way through crowds of people and avoid the fallen buildings and craters in the road, with just our torches and heavily shaded headlights to guide us.

Most of our ambulances were dreadful Austin 10s with difficult gear changes, but there was one American model (a V8[?]) and everyone wanted to drive that. Each ambulance could take up to four stretcher cases. Medical orderlies (men) would come out with the ambulance and they or the men at the scene would help us lift the casualties into the ambulance, and might also help us decide whether to take them to the first aid post or directly to the Albert Hospital.

There were auxiliary nurses at the post to tend the injured. They gave us some basic first aid training. I saw some terrible things. I watched while a nurse picked hundreds of glass splinters from a man's head. I remember a pregnant woman who was found pinned to the ground by a fallen beam. The men lifted the beam and put her in the ambulance and we got her to hospital, but I don't think she lived. A man was killed by a land-mine as he looked into his family's Anderson shelter. He had just come to see if they were all right. They had to pull the shelter apart to get the family out.

¹ Why not three equal 8-hour shifts. Presumably it was so that people would have either the morning or the afternoon for their normal work and the chores of day-to-day living in wartime.

My mother would sometimes go across to the bungalow on Treganhawke Cliff to get away from the bombs, while my father and Roy were fire-watching in Brunswick Place. One day a bomber came over the cliff and dropped a bomb. Mother came out of the bungalow, wearing a colander on her head. One day she and Dad and Auntie Ella and Uncle Phil came to see me at the first-aid post. Uncle Phil said he took his hat off to me for the work I was doing. Uncle Phil was a lovely man who had been in China during the Boxer uprising, and who later died of a haemorrhage while on duty in Scotland. The woman in charge of our post was awarded the George Cross, which she said was a tribute to all of us.

All this time what I really wanted was to go to a music college, but my parents could not afford it. One of the teachers at Devonport High School, Miss Jago, had paid for my lessons with Mr Weekes, who got me up to LRAM standard. Music was a big part of my life.

With the concert party I went round the camps entertaining the soldiers and seamen, and even went to Dartmoor Prison. In Dartmoor we weren't allowed to come in contact with the prisoners, apart from the trustees who served us tea in the kitchen, so we all had to keep on the stage. There were guards armed with pistols in the hall while we performed, and we were told to sing nothing too sentimental and definitely nothing Irish.² Some of the more dangerous prisoners were pointed out to us. My Dad, who played in a jazz trio, also entertained in Dartmoor. He told me of one of the prisoners who had a pet mouse which did tricks.

I also played in concerts with Mr Weekes or with Dr Moreton³ the city organist, to raise money to restore the organ of St Andrew's Church which was destroyed in the bombing. I had other musical work. I would play the piano when the orchestra was rehearsing for concertos, for example when Moura Lympany was coming to play a Rachmaninoff concerto. Brass players from the Marines would sometimes play with the orchestra and if they were on duty and couldn't come to rehearsals I would play their parts on the piano. When I was engaged to play a Mendelsohn concerto with the Torquay orchestra, Dr Moreton played the orchestral part on the organ so that I could rehearse.

² Presumably the ban on sentimental songs was to prevent the prisoners being upset by thoughts of home and loved ones, and the Irish ban must have been because there were IRA prisoners.

³ Dr Harry Moreton (1864-1961) was organist from 1885 to 1958 (Encyclopedia of Plymouth History: www.plymouthdata.info/PP-MoretonHarry.htm)