

1939 to 1945 – Selsdon Through the Eyes of a War Baby.

(All photos taken Nov 2018)

We entered the war in September 1939. Two weeks later I was born at The World War I, Purley War Memorial Hospital (see below) and so can claim to be a genuine “war baby”. After a few days I was taken home to live, until 1963, at Abbey Rd in Selsdon.



In late 1944 I started school at Selsdon Primary. An important part of my early learning took place in the school’s air raid shelters. This was due to the regular phut-phut as doodlebugs flew overhead. So my earliest years span all but 2 weeks of war time Selsdon.

For Selsdoners, the war began on the evening of 15th August 1940. Or to be more correct, not on the 15th but over. This fateful day, right at the beginning of the Battle of Britain, was when the Luftwaffe mounted a surprise attack on Croydon Airport. It was also a surprise for the Germans, because their intended target was Kenley Aerodrome, a much more important military airfield!

Navigation was very basic at the start of the war so the German bombers were following railway lines which were clearly visible from the air. Their route plan was to follow the railway line from East Grinstead to Kenley. Here, the very visible chalk pit beside the railway line was their marker to do a left turn to home in on the adjacent airfield. Fortunately for Kenley but unfortunately for Croydon, the North Downs hump led them astray. The railway line disappears through a tunnel which exits by Woldingham railway station. The tunnel confused the German bombers, who lost their way, went off course and instead attacked Croydon Airport.

The noise of bombs exploding, anti aircraft guns and the ensuing melee of German bombers and their protective support fighters being chased and machine gunned by R.A.F fighters, brought Seldoners out into their gardens to view this exciting and noisy spectacle in the sky above. Of course I did not see this, being only about 10 months old, but I have heard the story many times from my Mum and others who did.

So what are my earliest memories?

For me, it was the latter part of the Blitz which ended in June 1941. Due to heavy losses the Luftwaffe changed their tactics from day time to night time raids. My earliest memories are of being brought downstairs from my cot, wrapped in a blanket, to fall asleep hiding under the stairs until the "All clear" siren sounded. This spot, the cupboard under the stairs, being the safest place to shelter if you did not have a proper air raid shelter, which we did not. So many nights were spent in this routine with the four of us, Mum, Dad, me and my elder brother Michael in this cramped small space. And of course not forgetting the gas masks with which we were all issued!

There is one occasion which I can specifically date to the Blitz, when I would have been only about 18 months old. This is due to an entry in a record of bombs dropped during the Blitz, which is recorded at <http://bombsight.org/bombs/20779/>

It was a high explosive bomb which fell in what we children called the "back fields" because they were at the back of the houses in Greville Ave. These fields are now built over as part of the Ashen Vale housing estate, but in my childhood days some were used for growing food and some left fallow. The fallow fields were our playgrounds, and the large crater from this high explosive bomb became a favourite place in which to play.

This bomb was dropped during a night raid and the blast showered me and my cot with glass as the bedroom windows were blown in. Our back door was blown off its hinges and the front door burst its locks from the force of the blast. Fortunately no injuries to me or anyone else!

I should perhaps point out, that the Germans did not just drop bombs, but "sticks" of bombs. These multiple bombs would spread out in a random line in the wake of the plane. For example I remember a bomb site in the Addington Rd, a bombed out bungalow near the bottom of York Rd, and just the base of a demolished semi on the corner of York Rd/Greville Ave. These are all in a rough line with my bomb crater in the back fields, probably all from the same stick of bombs.

My knowledge of the bombing raids was then restricted to the local area within walking distance. It is only now, by seeing the location of bombs which fell in and around Selsdon (see <http://bombsight.org/explore/greater-london/croydon/selsdon-and-ballards/>) that I can realise how bad it was. However this web site is only part of the picture. Bombing raids continued but at a much lesser level after the Blitz, and of course there were still the V1

flying bombs to come. One of which fell in Ingham Rd, next to Selsdon School – a very lucky miss for us school children!

I can for example remember on one occasion, going to the shops in Selsdon with my mother, to find that an incendiary bomb had left a burnt out shell at the bottom of Kingsway Ave. The day before it had been a house! And there was a short cut to the shops by going over a bomb site in Sundale Ave (previously a row of terraced houses) into Dulverton Rd, and then along the footpath into the Addington Rd by where Aldi now is. When I grew older, my friends and I used to go out and explore the gardens and ruins of several local bomb sites. These became our adventure play grounds.

Life to some extent was then dominated by two things – air raids and shopping. Let me start with air raids. I have already mentioned that we did not have an air raid shelter, but both our next door neighbours did. On our right was the Penson family who had an above ground, brick built shelter protected by sand bags. Mr Penson was away serving in the RAF. On our left were the Blagdens who had the more common, Anderson shelter. These were of corrugated iron sheet construction, buried in the ground. Mr Blagden was away serving in the army. Next door to the Blagdens was the Smith family. Mr Smith was in the Royal Navy and the last dad to come home after the war ended.

My Dad served in the First World War so was too old for military service. Instead he was on a roster to do night time fire watch from the top of his office building in London. Very important during the Blitz.

Most households did have a shelter, most commonly an Anderson in the garden, or some, an indoor Morrison Shelter. Additionally there were public shelters dotted about Selsdon so it was not a problem for us to find shelter, especially during daylight hours, when as a child I was often out playing with friends or at the shops with my Mum.

My house backed on to Selsdon Recreation Ground, or the “Rec” as we all knew it. There was a purpose built Air Raid Wardens Post here, hidden within a clump of trees and next to it an air raid siren.



The post was manned 24 hrs a day to sound the alarm and respond to injury/damage as a result of any bombing incidents. Another important job for them was to patrol the streets at night to check and to rigidly enforce the blackout. We had thick blackout paper fixed with

drawing pins to the window frames. The slightest chink of light brought a knock on the door and dire warnings from our local Air Raid Wardens!

Also in the Rec was a purpose built, public air raid shelter. It's location is still just identifiable, being the vestiges of what was a long raised bank with trees behind. It is beside where the post war swings and see-saw were later installed. The long, underground shelter had entrances at each end, and an emergency escape hatch in the centre of the tunnel. The hatch was reached via iron rungs set in a vertical shaft.



The first time that I actually saw a doodlebug was from this shelter. It was a sunny summer's day and I was playing in the woods in the Rec when the siren went off, so we did not have far to run. Soon after, the phut-phut indicated that the V1 had (safely for us) passed over. One of the men who was at the shelter entrance, shouted that he could see the small, winged missile continuing on towards London. I rushed out of the shelter to get my first sighting of a flying bomb!

This bomb shelter had another important role to play for us young children. It was our Aladdin's cave! When not being occupied for its intended use, it was a long, pitch black tunnel. We kids would feel our way through from one end to the other. And as we grew older and taller, we could climb up the rungs and out through the escape hatch. The underground shelter continued to serve this purpose for some years after the war ended. It was a huge loss when our tunnel was filled in and the entrances and central exit were concreted over.

Also gone is the sound of the warning sirens and their "all clear". After the war these fell silent but were brought back into use during the cold war. They were planned to be used to advise us of a nuclear strike, and /or an ensuing windblown cloud of nuclear radiation. We again heard the familiar wail when the sirens were tested out. It may seem strange but when the sirens finally fell silent, I really missed the haunting sound of the siren and the all clear. They say that a picture is better than a thousand words, and words cannot

adequately describe the haunting sound of the war time siren. If you want to see what this period of my young life was like and hear the sound of a siren this is worth a look at, http://www.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/subjects/history/ww2clips/sounds/air_raid_siren

The arrival of the flying bombs in June 1944 coincided with an even more historic event – the D-Day landings! Unbeknown to me then, I was seeing small bits of the complex jigsaw that was being put together.

There was increased air activity. Huge waves of bombers flying over, heading south to pound Northern France, support fighters, attack fighters, and of course troop movements.

The latter were more evident as they were close by, only feet away. Long columns of army lorries, armoured cars, jeeps, field guns and much more as they noisily trundled up the Addington Rd whilst we were on our almost daily shopping trips. This was part of the build up of troops who were shortly to set sail for the beaches of Normandy.

These were exciting times, more war time memories next month.