

BEFORE AND AFTER

by Brian Allen

For a small boy, Selsdon in 1940 was a fascinating place to spend a war. It was rural enough not to attract the attention of the enemy except in the most haphazard unintended way, but close enough to the hapless front line of the Capital, Croydon.

We had a grandstand view of the conflict and could feel involved without being too endangered, a comforting thought for an eight-year old.

The Battle of Britain would soon rage, literally overhead, in those clear blue Summer skies, whilst countless small boys defied their worried mothers and stood at shelter entrances, eyes fixed on the wheeling contrails thrilled by the distant stutter of machine guns.

The opening introduction to the war for two of us was definitely low key but distinctly life threatening. Johnny Barlow and I had "borrowed" his elder brother's most prized possession and set it out on the back lawn of 102 Benhurst Gardens where the Barlows lived. Bobby Barlow's train set was his obsession and strictly out of bounds to us lesser mortals, who were apt to fill the trucks with sand and earth and were interested in spectacular crashes. He was out for the day and we were confident that we could get it all boxed up and replaced before he returned. Fate was about to deal us a bitter blow!

A drone of aero engines made us look up . . . we were no strangers to air activity as Selsdon was in a triangle of Fighter aerodromes, Kenley, Biggin Hill and Croydon. They were the bases for Hurricane and Spitfire squadrons defending the South Coast. The aircraft overhead were twin-engined bombers . . . in perfect formation, nine of them slowly floated towards Croydon. Like all eight years olds of the time, we were experts on aircraft identification and a heated dispute arose as to whether the Bombers were "long" or "short" nosed Blenheims. We both reassured Mrs. Barlow that they would land at Croydon.

For any interested historians, I can now positively state that the first bombing run on Croydon started directly overhead 102 Benhurst Gardens and two horrified small boys.

We saw the bombs leave the aircraft as the Junkers 88's approached Croydon unchallenged . . . for us the first epic battle had begun . . . and ended because at the first crashing explosions, Mrs. Barlow hurried out, grabbed us and thrust us under the stairs into the hall cupboard and we saw no more of the action. As far as I know, the Bombers left in perfect formation and returned, leaving Croydon Airport a smoking ruin.

With hindsight, I cannot see how a set of Costain's stairs could have withstood a German bomb, especially as the gas main and electricity services shared the darkness with us!

Worse still, we had abandoned Bobby's precious train set on the lawn and the wrath of the Luftwaffe was nothing compared to that of an elder brother—bombing would have been the easy way out!

The V.E. Party 1945

After five long years, the war in Europe had meandered to its inevitable close. In Benhurst, as in the whole country there was an excited tension, a jubilation brought on by relief. We always seem to react to such occasions with

bonfires and street parties and Benhurst was no exception.

The fact that a particularly nasty, dirty war was still being fought in the East was temporarily overlooked as Mums got busy apportioning "rations" and started baking "fatless" sponges and "eggless" cakes for the kids' street party in Benhurst Gardens.

I can't remember what was in the sandwiches, apart from a foul-tasting margarine that owed nothing to butter other than colour. It was probably bloater paste or Spam.

It was a time of chronic food shortages and even potatoes and onions were scarce. Somehow the Mums and the few Dads that were around managed to scrape together a collection of cakes, biscuits and squash together with paper hats, which were all arranged on trestle tables outside Mr. and Mrs. Brialey's house number 92. Then all the kids and parents gathered in the road to celebrate the Victory in Europe.

To the residents in today's Benhurst, this may seem an unreal scenario. It would not be possible today with both sides of the road blocked with nose to tail parking and with continuous traffic. It is all very different to those quieter days when the perpetually jolly Johnny Medrow (your Editor's father) and his Express Dairy milk float, pulled by a placid horse, was about the only moving traffic and the few cars owned by residents were shoved up on blocks, covered with sheets awaiting the rediscovery of petrol.

I cannot remember much about the Feast, other than like all kids' parties, the cakes and biscuits vanished like smoke leaving piles of untouched sandwiches in memoriam. I do remember, however, that a policeman Dad had somehow acquired a cardboard box full of assorted fireworks—most of us kids had never seen a firework that didn't leave a 30 foot hole! We were willingly marshalled by beaming parents away from the food to watch the display in the fading evening light. The policeman and another Dad were importantly arranging the event. It obviously required a lot of stage management that involved patting pockets containing matches and the usual police phraseology like "Stand well back there" and "Move away please".

The policeman stepped forward to open the event, and the first "Ooooh" came from the eager crowd as he lit the blue touch paper. If memory serves me right, it was a Roman Candle that opened the show, but events then happened so quickly that everything seems hazy—or is it smoky?

About the second brightly coloured ball of fire came sideways out of the Candle and straight into the box of fireworks . . . for a frozen second, Time stood still, as the worthy residents of Benhurst Gardens stared with horror at the smoking box. Then it erupted in a cloud of white smoke and flame. Coloured stars shot in every direction, there were continuous explosions and lighted Chinese Crackers were thrown everywhere to add to the confusion.

Kids and parents, veterans of the Blitz, Doodlebugs, V1 and V2 etc., etc., scattered in blind panic to seek shelter behind the privet hedges and low walls.

It lasted only a minute or two before the silence that follows disaster settled on the scene . . . the white smoke slowly drifted away to disclose a burning cardboard box and a red-faced policeman.

We also drifted off to bed, whilst the parents cleared up the debris . . . a spectacular and memorable end to the street party and a fitting conclusion to the end of World War II.