

Lesson 3 Challenge 1

First-hand accounts of the disaster

Read these first-hand accounts and answer the questions which follow.

Alf Morris, who was 13 at the time, tells what happened to him on the night of 3rd March, 1943:

My father instructed me and my aunt, Lillian Hall, to go to the shelter from 106 Old Ford Road. We went out the door and started walking towards the tube. As we got to Globe Road the air-raid warning started sounding. We got up as far as Victoria Park Square and then the air-raid warning was dying away. We got to the entrance of the tube and started to walk down. I was at the top and my aunt was to the right, and I was walking down the centre. I got to the middle of the staircase and the rockets fired. As they went up they made a tremendous 'swooshing' noise and we all thought it was a bomb. Everybody started to shout, 'There's a bomb, there's a bomb, get down, get down.' They surged downstairs and I got separated from my aunt. My aunt went to the right and I went to the left. I got pushed and shoved and pushed and I got carried, and I ended up at the third stair from the bottom. The people were just falling around me. I was standing upright. There was a little handrail and there was rough concrete that I was lying against. These people were dropping all around me and I went to move and I couldn't. A lady air-raid warden, she grabbed me by the hair. I was hollering and hollering as it hurt, but she didn't let go, and eventually pulled me free by grabbing me from under my arms. Mrs Chumbley; I can see her face now. She went, 'You go downstairs and you say nothing.'

I was crying and I walked down the stairs and at the bottom there was a thick steel door. I pressed the bell and the man pushed the door open and said, 'What are you crying for, boy?' I was frightened, I didn't say a thing. I walked down to my bunk and I was still crying and sat on my bunk. All the women and men kept saying, 'What's the matter, Alfie?', 'Why are you crying?', 'Where is your mother?', 'Where's Lily?' I didn't say anything.

My aunt came down about fifteen minutes later. She was short of her coat, her shoes, and her stockings were all torn, and she was all bruised down one side. They said to her, 'What's the matter?' She didn't say anything.

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William and Estella Nichols lived on Old Ford Road and had two daughters: Jean, aged 16 and Babette, aged 11. When the siren sounded on 3rd March Estella and her daughters walked to the bus stop to get to the tube shelter. Babette remembers:

The no. 8 bus was just pulling away so we had to wait a few minutes for the next one, a 106 (lucky for us we missed that first bus as I don't think we'd have survived the crush). We got to the station and there were a lot of people there going in, the searchlights were going around the sky, but I don't remember any aircraft up there. Then suddenly there was this terrific noise of rockets going up, it was very frightening, and with that the crowd of people waiting to go into the station started pushing. I can remember being pushed along in the crowd with my sister holding onto my hand; I fell over something but my sister hauled me up and we were then pulled out of the crush. We didn't have any idea where our mum was, but we were taken over to the shelter under the railway arches. There were several people there who knew us, and my sister was asking anyone if they'd seen Mum. She was told by someone to go into a room to see if she was in there; unfortunately all the people in there were dead. Thank God she wasn't. It transpired Mum had been pulled out and taken over to St John's Church.

I've no idea how we came to be together again, but I can remember walking home with our bundles in the early hours of the morning. As we got near our house, a policeman neighbour was coming out of his house to go back on duty. He took us into his house, and his wife made us a cup of tea. Whilst all this was going on my dad, who worked for the Admiralty as a lorry driver, heard about the disaster when it came into his depot on the wire. He knew we'd be down there, so he dropped everything and rushed down to the station. He then helped to pull the dead out whilst looking for us. He worked there for several hours, and then made his way home. As he came down the road, he saw the same policeman who'd helped us, and he told Dad that we were all safe and in his house. With that, Dad collapsed onto the pavement and the policeman and another neighbour picked him up and carried him into the house we were in. From what I remember everyone was in tears, and I couldn't understand why my big strong dad was crying.

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Alfred and Caroline Perryment had three children: Alfred Jr, Iris and Peter. On 3rd March Mrs Perryment's sister, Mrs Mary Land and her two children, Barbara and Joanie, accompanied her to the tube shelter, along with Peter and Iris, after hearing the warning. Peter remembers the night very well:

My mother, my aunt, my two cousins and my sister were coming towards the air-raid shelter, and we got about 100 yards away and the sky opened up. My mother said to my sister, my little cousin and myself, 'You three run in front quick', so we ran in front. We got about half down the stairs in the middle and we couldn't get any farther, and there were still people coming in behind us. I was there a long time and I was getting crushed, so what I did was to put my hands together, crept low down as far as I could, and my sister and my cousin were just in front of me on my left, and they were standing up. I don't know how long I was there for just on my hands and knees. After a considerable time they were moving all the people behind me. I didn't know that they were dead. When I finally got turned around, a policeman got hold of me and said, 'Who are you here with?' and I said 'I was here with my mother but I don't know where she is.' He said, 'Come back with me and I'll take you across the road to the air-raid shelter under the arches.' When they took me out, they were laying all the dead bodies on the pavement. I didn't know they were dead because they were all the bodies behind me. My sister and cousin were dead, as well as all the bodies in front of me. At the arches he said to me, 'Wait here until the All Clear goes', so that's what I did.

I came out and I was going back towards home and I met my older brother and he said, 'Mum is looking for you and Iris and Barbara everywhere.' We went home; my mother and my aunt were there and they asked me, 'Where is Iris, and Barbara?' I said, 'I don't know, they were with me, in front of me.' The next morning my mother, my aunt, Alfie and myself went round the hospitals looking for them, and of course we couldn't find them and nobody knew anything about it. We went home at about 1.30 and my father came home from work, and my mother said, 'We can't find Iris or Barbara'. So he went to the London Hospital and couldn't find them there and he went to the Bethnal Green Hospital and a man told him that there were more bodies at the church. About an hour later he came back. The first words he says to my mother, 'She's dead, Caroline'. My aunt said she had to go find Barbara, so my dad told my brother, 'Don't let Aunt May go, you go and see if you can find Barbara.' So my brother went to the church and was walking along the dead bodies, and he saw a little pair of black shoes and asked to see the body; the man turned the blanket back and that was Barbara.

Some of the boys that died in the disaster were in my class. Jimmy Taylor was one of them. In the list of the dead there is a family of Hoye. Their son, he was with his mother and three sisters, and he was the only one to survive. He asked me how I survived, and I told him I put my hands up like so and crouched down on my hands and knees, and he said that was exactly what he did.

When my mother died recently we found Iris's coat from that night in her wardrobe. She had kept it all those years.

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First-hand accounts of the disaster:

George and Louise Newman had one son, George, in the army, and four daughters: Louisa, Eileen (Peggy), Rosina (Rosie) and Doris. Louisa remembers:

As we were walking along, Rosie's shoe strap broke, and we stopped to wait for her. Doris had tonsillitis so my father went ahead with her to get her settled. My dad never stayed with us in the air-raid shelter; he would take us down there, make sure we were settled and then would wait it out with his friends in the Black Horse pub.

As we started to go down the steps all I remember is the four of us being pushed up against the right hand side of the wall; after that I don't remember anything until we were down in the underground and were waiting for my sister and dad to come. In the morning there was still no sign of them, and my eldest sister Peggy went to the police station to look for them. She eventually was directed to St John's Church which was being used as a temporary morgue. Peggy was then told to search up and down the rows of bodies to see if she could identify her dad and little sister. She later said, 'You couldn't put a pin between the bruises on some of the victims.'

When they brought the bodies home Doris didn't have a mark on her, but my dad was in a closed coffin as he had a huge boot mark on his face.

It seemed that it was fate that my dad and Doris would die together as she idealised him, and I don't think he would ever have recovered if he had survived without her.

Eric Linden was a messenger for the Daily Mail:

Normally if the warning went my father, who was an air-raid warden, would either go to the post if he was on duty, or he would come home. In this case he didn't come home. I knew he wasn't on duty, so I went out to look for him, and that's how I came across what was going on at the station. People there were trying to help and pull the bodies from the top of the stairs, but it was hopeless. I didn't know that my father was actually there under the crush, he was one of them killed.

I rang the story into the Daily Mail and they sent a reporter and a photographer. The story was never used; it was killed by the War Office who had decided that it was not in the public's interest if it was realised the shelters were not safe havens.

Agnes Morris was with her family in their Morrison shelter on 3rd March. Her Aunt Lydia, however, preferred to go to the tube shelter. Agnes remembers:

My brother George Morris was out on his bike that night. When he came home he told us that there had been an accident down the tube at the Salmon & Ball pub. Lots of people had died and he had been helping to fetch them up. He said they had to put the bodies anywhere they could: churches, hospitals, on the pavements, and in Bethnal Green Gardens behind the tube station.

The story going round afterwards was that somebody shouted, 'Bombs!', causing a panic; a woman carrying a baby fell down and everyone else fell on top of her.

The next day when people didn't return home their relatives started searching for them. In some cases finding the victims was made more difficult because there was nothing to identify them. Their belongings had been stolen. My Aunt Lyd used to take all of her valuables such as jewellery, money, ration book, etc. down the tube with her. It took two days to find her; she was in St John's Church but had no identification on her. All her jewellery was missing. On her face was the mark of a heel of a man's shoe where she'd been trodden on.

Lesson 3 Challenge 1

First-hand accounts of the disaster

How did people find out if their family members had died?

What happened to the dead bodies?

What emotions do people reveal in their accounts?

Lesson 3, Challenge 2

Under the two headings, record the reasons why the Bethnal Green tube disaster happened. Make sure you have found the causes in the inquest report into the disaster.

| Physical causes of disaster | Psychological causes of disaster |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | |

Peer assessment: check with a partner and see whether you have found the same reasons. Can you add anything after talking with your partner?

Lesson 3, Challenge 2

Causes of the disaster, from the Dunne inquest report (1943) Summary

The causes of the disaster can be divided into two main groups:

The psychological change in the way the people felt about air raids and shelters.

The physical causes.

More than half of Bethnal Green's total shelter space was in the tube station, which was a much larger proportion than in any other borough around. This showed that the people here tended to prefer this type of shelter, even though other shelters might be nearer to their homes. Apart from regular users of the tube, there were other people who lived further away who would also use it if there was a very heavy air raid.

On 3rd March 1943 people were nervously expecting an air raid by the Germans because Berlin had been bombed two days before by the Allies. Also, in the newspapers there had been descriptions of new types of bigger, deadlier bombs which might allow less time to take cover. People also knew of the dangers of splinters falling from the anti-aircraft barrage, but they were quite unfamiliar with the new anti-aircraft rocket guns which were tried out for the first time that night.

A lot of children who had been evacuated during the Blitz had now returned to the East End of London, and their parents were anxious to get them into the safest shelter possible.

All of these reasons led to there being a loss of self-control amongst the hundreds of people all trying to get into the shelter quickly; and the large numbers of small children slowed them down.

The shelter only had one entrance, which was unusual considering how large the shelter was inside.

The lighting on the stairs was very dim so that people were more likely to lose their footing and, if they did, the darkness would cause confusion.

There were no handrails to steady people down the centre of the staircase.

There was no crush barrier outside the entrance to prevent the huge pressure of a crowd.

There was a sudden rush of about 350-400 people towards the entrance.

Probably no other London shelter had these problems all at the same time; and one has to remember that it was not designed as a shelter but as a tube station.

Lesson 3, Challenge 2

Causes of the disaster, verbatim extracts from the Dunne inquest report (1943)

Dealing now with the contributory causes of the accident, they may, I think, be conveniently separated into two main groups:

a psychological change in the attitude of the population towards air raids and shelters generally; and

the physical causes:

The borough had some 60 per cent of its public shelter accommodation in this tube, a much larger proportion than any neighbouring borough. This had instilled in the minds of the people a marked preference for this type of shelter, to the exclusion of more easily reached shelters more widely dispersed. Apart from the regular users, a large number of people not in the immediate vicinity of this shelter had come to regard it as a desirable haven to resort to in the event of what might prove to be a heavy raid.

A particularly strong apprehension of drastic reprisals for the recent heavy raid on Berlin. This apprehension was fostered by newspaper accounts of the effects of new types of bombs.

A realization that new bombing tactics allowed far less time to get under cover than formerly was the case, and that a raid might be expected to reach its maximum intensity in a very short time. In the new type of raid the air-raid warning might precede the bombs by a very short margin.

A wholesome respect for the danger from splinters from our new barrage. The mouth of the shelter stands, as I have said, in a somewhat exposed position.

A lack of knowledge of the nature and appearance of the anti-aircraft rockets now in use.

The desire of parents to get their children under cover quickly, which induced numbers of people not hitherto users of the shelter to go there before a threatened raid. A very large number of children have fairly lately returned to the area.

All these factors combined to produce a loss of self control in some hundreds of people attempting to enter the shelter.

The physical presence of large numbers of children who have come back recently to the area retarded the speed of intake into the shelter, and the speed at which people could reach it.

The shelter has only one entrance. In this it is, if not unique, very exceptional in relation to its size.

The lighting on the stairs was very dim, which not only increased the chance of a fall on the stairs, but was bound to produce confusion if one occurred. If a fall occurred, however, no lighting could, in the circumstances of the present disaster, have prevented that happening which did happen.

Lesson 3, Challenge 2

Causes of the disaster, verbatim extracts (continued)

There were no handrails down the centre of the stairway. These might have enabled a person falling to save himself. If such a person was burdened with a child in arms and a bundle, as many were, their value would be problematical. If a jam happened despite their provision, they would almost certainly make matters worse. As a contributory cause I attach little importance to their absence.

The absence of a crush barrier, allowing a straight line of pressure from the crowd seeking entrance to the people on the stairs. This was, in my opinion, the main structural defect at the time of the accident.

The main and proximate cause was a sudden rush for the entrance by probably 350-400 people.

The question as to how far these factors should have been appreciated by the local authority and provided against must be a matter for individual opinion. It is one thing after a 'fait accompli' to make a retrospective analysis such as is contained in this report and that after an exhaustive enquiry into all the matters which have now thrown light on the position. It is quite another to be sufficiently prescient to give the proper values in advance and to take the right action upon them. A fairly simple inductive process enables one to realize now that this accident was more likely to happen at this shelter at this time than previously. Similarly we can say now, that while most of the factors present here are present in other shelters, it is quite certain that not all of them are to be found in any one other shelter and that therefore it was more probable that this accident should happen at this shelter than at any other.

One must bear in mind that no actual indication of such a disaster had previously been given, and that the physical imperfections of this shelter entrance are exactly reproduced in scores of other tube entrances in the Metropolitan area. This similarity may well have served to obscure the significance of the exceptional feature here, that this was the only entrance into the largest deep shelter in this part of the metropolis. Further it should be remembered that this was not a specially designed shelter. In the circumstances the local authority had to make the best use of what there was: radical alteration was at no time a practical possibility. For myself, I confess surprise that the accident has not happened before, and no one, I think, can exclude the possibility of its happening elsewhere.

by Laurence Dunne, 23rd March 1943