



PEOPLE MAKING ENQUIRIES AT THE FOOT OF THE SHELTER STEPS. THE STAIRCASE IS 10 FT. WIDE, WITH A LANDING 10 FT. WIDE AND 12 FT. LONG.

## THE 1943 BETHNAL GREEN TUBE SHELTER DISASTER: AN ORAL HISTORY

Edited by Toby Butler



FROM MY  
MOTHER'S PURSE  
MARCH 3rd 1943

**THE 1943 BETHNAL GREEN  
TUBE SHELTER DISASTER  
AN ORAL HISTORY**

**EDITED BY TOBY BUTLER**

Published by  
University of East London  
April 2015

ISBN:  
978-0-9932665-0-8

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Design: John Wallett  
Print: Impress Print Services

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## INTRODUCTION

**One dark, wet evening in 1943 in London's East End, 173 people were crushed and asphyxiated to death as they attempted to gain refuge in Bethnal Green's underground from an expected German attack. Most of them were women and children. The tragic number of deaths makes the event one of the worst civilian disasters in modern British history.**

Although censored accounts of the disaster were reported in the press, many of those involved were directly told not to discuss it, and for some the experience was so traumatic that they did not talk about their experience for the rest of their lives, even to their own families. An official enquiry was held days later but controversially the enquiry report was kept secret until the end of the war. In 1945 the report was released but the documentation and witness statements continued to be classified and were only recently made public.

The death toll was greater than the 1966 landslide disaster at Aberfan and the 1989 Hillsborough stadium tragedy. It seems strange to me that the Bethnal Green shelter disaster is not better known. It was not until some 50 years later, in 1993, that a small plaque was installed above the tube station steps acknowledging the deaths. In 2006 Harry Paticas, a Bethnal Green-based architect, noticed the plaque and decided to find out more. He strongly felt that a more fitting memorial should be designed to acknowledge the personal tragedy of the lives lost and the impact on those left behind; the survivors, families and people from the emergency services. A charity, Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust, was established in 2008 to raise money for the construction of the memorial, which now stands next to the staircase where the tragedy happened.

The Trust approached the University of East London to help volunteers research and interpret the history of the event and to record interviews with survivors. A key aim was to create an audio memorial trail that could give more information about the disaster than could possibly be accommodated on the memorial itself.

Together we established the Bethnal Green Memorial Project, and to date its team of staff and volunteers has collected over 30 oral-history recordings from those involved in the disaster and their families. For some survivors this was the first time that they had spoken publicly about what happened, and for many it has been the first opportunity to discuss the impact of the disaster on their own lives and that of their families. We have also gathered family papers, letters and photographs that have been used to illustrate further the lives that were so tragically cut short on the 3rd March, 1943.

The project has created an audio memorial trail featuring excerpts from the recordings (which you can hear on the accompanying CD), a travelling exhibition, school teaching materials, a website with an online oral-history archive, and now this book. All are free to use, and I hope you feel they adequately complement the new memorial to honour the memory of the 173 men, women and children who died, and go some way in acknowledging the terrible impact the disaster had on their families, rescuers and those who survived.

The project was funded generously by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the University of East London, and we have worked in partnership with the Bishopsgate Institute Library, the Raphael Samuel History Centre, local schools, the memorial architect, the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and a very hard-working and dedicated team of volunteers, to deliver these resources. It has been a great privilege to work on the project with so many dedicated and inspiring people.

If your over-arching picture of East London in the “Home Front” is one of cheerful people singing in underground shelters, then please prepare to reconsider. Keeping up morale was considered essential to the war effort, and the government censor worked hard to ensure that the impression given in the newsreels and press was that Britain “could take it”. In so many ways it could, and did – but of course the truth is messier than a simple matter of cheery resilience against adversity.

In the seven decades that have passed since the Second World War, recorded interviews with those involved have put into words the more uncomfortable side of living in constant fear of aerial bombardment.

In these pages you will find accounts that give a deep sense of the psychological strain and the harsh realities of wartime London. Here you will find the other side of the picture; organisations stretched by circumstances and staff shortages; officials pushed to breaking point; bewildered orphans left to carry on as best they can; scapegoats accused and unjustly blamed. Inevitably there are some passages in this book that are very distressing, including frank accounts of death at close hand and the harrowing experiences of searching for loved ones and identifying bodies. I think we owe it to those involved to listen to what they have to tell us and, in so doing, acknowledge something of the psychological burden that has been carried by them for so many years.

By listening to the voices of those who experienced these events we can get a truer feeling for the appalling impact of war on the families and service personnel who had to endure such terrible circumstances. You can hear their voices on the accompanying audio CD and listen to the full interview recordings at [bgmemorial.org.uk](http://bgmemorial.org.uk).

I hope this project has gone some way in finally giving a public voice to so many who were directly told not to speak.

Dr Toby Butler

University of East London

## *Chapter 1*

### *The story of the disaster*

**Shortly after an air-raid warning on the evening of 3 March, 1943, hundreds of people on the streets of Bethnal Green fled to the underground station for shelter. Just as several buses were emptying near the station, the Royal Artillery fired a salvo of anti-aircraft rockets in nearby Victoria Park, which gave off a loud and unexpected 'whoosh' followed by explosions.**

There was screaming; some shouted that it must be a bomb. People rushed to get into the shelter, but the station's one and only entrance was unmanned. Its first flight of 19 steps, which led down to a landing just above the ticket hall, had no central handrails and was lit by a single, low-watt light bulb.

As people hurried down the stairway a woman with a child stumbled and tripped near the bottom. An elderly man fell on top of her, and this set off a disastrous domino effect that resulted in an appalling human crush, five or six bodies deep. People couldn't move, pinned down by the weight of those above them, and many couldn't breathe. According to the official magistrate's report – which was not made public for two years – “the stairway was converted from a corridor to a charnel house in ten to fifteen seconds”.

This terrible tragedy was one of the worst civilian disasters in modern British history (not directly caused by enemy action). There were 173 deaths, 62 of whom were children. The death toll was greater than that of the 1989 Hillsborough stadium tragedy that claimed 96 lives, and even the 1966 coal tip landslide disaster at Aberfan, in which 144 people died.

While many East Londoners know of the disaster, considering the scale of the casualties it is perhaps surprising that it is not more widely known. Many details of the event were successfully kept from public knowledge during the war. Days afterwards newspapers were allowed to publish reports of the disaster, but they omitted some key details such as the exact location, due to wartime censorship and conflicting accounts of the circumstances. Many survivors said they were told not to talk about it for fear of undermining the war effort. An official enquiry into the disaster was held in March 1943, but after discussions at Cabinet level it was decided that the report should not be published until the end of the war despite protests from local politicians, and the enquiry witness statements were not released until recently. There were also strong psychological reasons why many people, traumatised by the terrible event and the loss of their loved ones, pushed the experience to the back of their minds and never felt able to speak about it.

**So what were the circumstances behind this terrible accident which ended the lives of 173 people, injured more than 90 and traumatised so many?**

## STATION-TURNED-SHELTER

During the Second World War London endured heavy bombing raids by the German Luftwaffe (air force). East London was particularly badly affected because it contained most of London's docks which received imported goods and sent out supplies. Near the docks were warehouses that stored food and raw materials for the war effort; power stations; engineering works and factories that manufactured things like chemicals, textiles, paint and soap. These all became wartime targets, and the communities who lived close to where they worked were particularly badly hit.

As the war drew on, areas of housing also became a target, as both Germany and Britain carried out tit-for-tat raids to demoralise the opposing civilian population.

To protect themselves many people built shelters in their gardens (if they had a garden, and many in London did not) or inside their houses. However, these shelters were cramped, uncomfortable and unlikely to survive a direct hit. Instead, many took cover in large communal shelters in public places. The Government opened stations on the partially completed Central Line, including Bethnal Green Station, for use as public air-raid shelters. As they were deep underground they were regarded as particularly safe. When the siren sounded people would bring bedding, supplies and their valuables down with them into the shelter for the night to wait out the attack. Members of the public could register as regular users of an underground station shelter and buy tickets that would reserve them a bunk-bed (see image on page three).

Bethnal Green Underground Station was still under construction when World War Two broke out; the tunnels had been dug out but the rails had not been laid (soon after the war the first Central Line trains ran to and from Bethnal Green). Despite some concerns that the entrance was inadequate, from October 1940 the station became one of East London's largest communal underground shelters where thousands of people could spend time and sleep safely during air raids.

On the corner of a crossroads by Bethnal Green Gardens (known locally as Barmy Park), the shelter had only one narrow entrance at the top of a flight of stairs (today there are three entrances). The shelter was one of the biggest in London, offering 60 per cent of the shelter accommodation available to residents of the borough. It had triple bunk-beds for 5,000 people and it could accommodate up to 10,000 people, who slept on the bunk-beds in the tunnels or sat on the platforms. With so many people regularly spending time in the shelter, services and amenities developed to meet the needs of this subterranean community. Bethnal Green Public



German bomber, Heinkel He111 over East London. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Library opened a small branch in the shelter; there was also a doctor's surgery, a first-aid post, a canteen and a theatre set up in a tunnel to provide entertainment. These small signs of "normality" helped people take their minds off the devastation taking place above ground. However, conditions were still very difficult. Sanitation was poor and the shelter was often crowded.

After the Blitz (1940–41) air raids became far less frequent, fewer people used the station for shelter. Many children who had been evacuated from London returned to their families. A few hundred people still regularly slept in the Bethnal Green shelter, but most preferred to stay at home or work, or loiter in the streets nearby, only using the shelter if an alert was sounded.

## ANTICIPATING ATTACK

On the night of 3 March, 1943, clusters of people were milling around outside the entrance to the station as they often did when expecting a raid; they stood chatting, smoking and drinking tea.

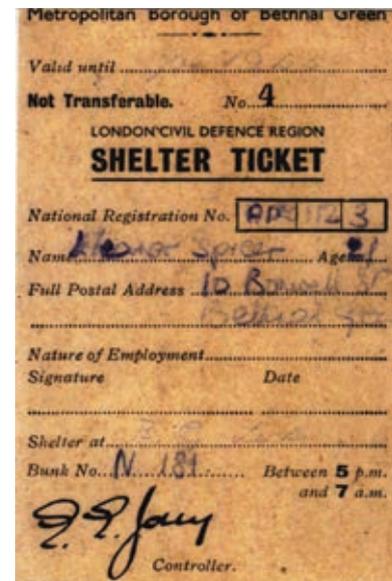
The air-raid siren sounded at 8.17pm. There had been a heavy Allied raid on Berlin two nights previously so many were anticipating a reprisal attack. As a consequence a lot more people than usual made their way from their homes to the shelter that night. In the pitch dark of the blackout, the crowds filed in and hurriedly made their way down the steps in an orderly fashion.

As soon as the air-raid siren sounded, floods of people left nearby homes, pubs and cinemas and immediately began to make their way to shelters. Within ten minutes three buses crammed full of people unloaded their passengers at the entrance to Bethnal Green Station, drivers following their instructions to drop passengers at the nearest shelter as soon as they heard a warning.

As the buses discharged their passengers, the unfamiliar and deafening "whoosh" of Royal Artillery anti-aircraft rockets, fired in nearby Victoria Park at 8.27pm, echoed around the streets. The rockets were from a recently installed "Z Battery", designed to fire salvos of rockets into the air. Already on edge for fear of a German strike, that night they had an unfamiliar sound and people feared they might be explosions of enemy bombs, and there was a scramble to get into the shelter.



Lending library in the tube shelter.  
Photo: Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives



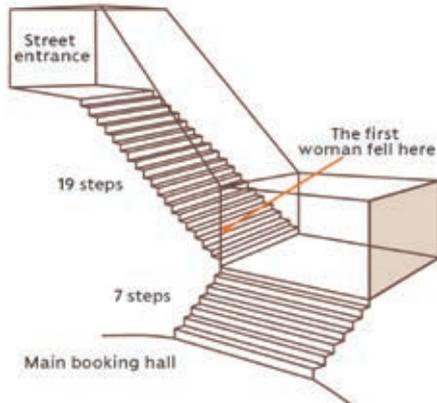
Bunk-bed ticket for the tube shelter.  
Photo: Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust

## HORRIFIC CRUSH

The shelter door was open, but the entrance was unmanned. When bombing was frequent policemen were posted permanently outside large shelters. The comparative lack of raids and a reduction in police numbers due to conscription meant that there had not been permanent police posts at shelter entrances since the summer of 1941.

Because of blackout laws the first staircase was ill-lit by a single, low-wattage light bulb. These 19 steps led to a landing, after which there were seven more steps to the right going down to the booking hall and the escalators. There was no central railing to hold on to. It had been raining that day and the uneven concrete steps might have been more slippery as a result. Suddenly a woman with a child stumbled at the bottom of the steps and tripped over, pulling an elderly man on top of her.

Before they could get to their feet, other people began falling on top of them, and the crowd above, unable to see in the gloom, pressed on down the stairs, unaware of the horror unfolding below them. In a matter of seconds hundreds of people, five or six bodies deep, were piled up on top of each other. In the stairwell at the bottom the pile of bodies was five feet high. People couldn't move, pinned down by the weight of those above them. There was only one officially recorded bone fracture, but the pressure on the people's upper bodies meant that their chests could not expand enough to breathe in sufficient oxygen. Within seconds most were unconscious. Wardens coming up from the booking hall found it almost impossible to extract people; a few babies were carried out and one or two people who were partially trapped by their legs.



Layout of the steps leading from the station entrance.

## RESCUE EFFORTS

The alarm was raised and as the police arrived, with great difficulty and sometimes brute force, they cleared the crowds from outside the entrance and focused their efforts on pulling people out from the top, though one policeman climbed over the crush to try to do so from the bottom, which proved impossible until much later in the evening.

More police entered the station at around 9pm, accessing the site through the tunnel from a maintenance entrance a quarter of a mile away. In an effort to prevent widespread panic, they made no announcement about the accident to the people who had safely settled in the shelter below.

Eventually more than 60 police officers were involved. Police, Home Guards, rescue services and volunteers attempted to pull corpses and injured people from the top of the staircase. The darkness and the pressure and angle of the bodies made extricating people from the crush extremely slow, difficult work. It took more than three hours, until 11.40pm, before the last casualty was pulled out. Over the next hours the true horror of the accident became shockingly clear. An unimaginable 173 people had lost their lives in the crush - 62 children, 84 women and 27 men. Over 90 people were injured, and although many were taken to local hospitals that night, others were too busy looking for their loved ones to be treated until days later. Astonishingly one of the last to be removed was a seven-year-old girl who was not only alive, but walked down to the first-aid post unaided.

## THE AFTERMATH

The scale of the disaster was appalling. It was the deadliest civilian incident of the entire war. But the tragedy did not end there - far from it. The event inevitably had a dreadful effect on the survivors and witnesses, many of whom suffered long-term trauma as a result of what they experienced that night.

Bethnal Green was a close-knit community and almost everyone in the borough knew somebody who was affected by the disaster: someone who had lost a loved one, or suffered injuries, had witnessed the accident or been part of the rescue effort.

For two days after the disaster the Government withheld information to prevent news of it reaching the enemy. Many survivors also reported that they were told by officials not to speak about the tragedy. The circumstances were so traumatic that some survivors did not speak about it for the rest of their lives. With no counselling and no opportunity to share stories, the memory of the disaster stayed deeply buried in the individual and communal consciousness for decades.

The day after the disaster a team of men were dispatched to add central handrails to the station staircase. Meanwhile pressure grew for an enquiry. Rumours began to circulate about who was responsible. Some believed it was caused by a “cowardly display of fear by the foreign-born Jews” (despite the fact that only five Jewish people were identified amongst the dead immediately after the disaster). Others blamed criminal gangs, pickpockets or Fascists, who were said to hang around the street corners near the shelter entrance. Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, appointed the respected London magistrate, Laurence Rivers Dunne, to conduct the investigations



Installing handrails after the tragedy.  
Photo: Tower Hamlets Local History  
Library and Archives



Home Secretary Herbert Morrison, 1947. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

and produce a report. Ignoring pleas for a public enquiry, Morrison stipulated that the investigations should be conducted in private. Between the 11th and the 17th of March Dunne heard testimony from 81 witnesses, and the report included the correspondence between the Borough Town Clerk and the Government (London Civil Defence Region) concerning requests for authorisation to improve the entrance to the shelter.

In recent years researchers have discovered evidence that suggests that the Government also played a role in keeping the full story from the public. These claims of a “cover-up” have centred on the then Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, and the proposals made in 1941 for improved safety features at the tube shelter entrance that were rejected by his officials.

### AN AVOIDABLE TRAGEDY?

In August 1941 Bethnal Green Council had asked the Government (London Civil Defence Regional H.Q.) for money to improve the entrance to the shelter in order to make it safer for large crowds. Unusually for a tube shelter it had just one entrance gate, and in the 1941 Blitz the steps were open to the elements with no lighting apart from two hurricane lamps which were sometimes deliberately broken or stolen due to concern that the light might attract enemy bombardment.

The entrance consisted of a single wooden gate and a larger, double one, the latter being used in the event of an air-raid warning. They opened inwards towards the steps. The letters from the Town Clerk on behalf of the Borough’s General Emergency Committee expressed concern that the wooden hoarding at the station entrance might easily collapse in the event of a surge of people trying to enter, and lead to a serious incident. They requested that it be replaced with a more secure brick wall and piers, with a strong gate to the entrance to provide “some strong means” of preventing entry. The recommendations, which would have cost a little over £88 (about £3,500 in today’s money), were deemed unnecessary and turned down on cost grounds. The Town Clerk repeatedly made the case in correspondence:

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**Letter to London Civil Defence  
Regional Headquarters from  
S.P Ferdinando, the Town Clerk,  
Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal  
Green, 30th September 1941**

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*There is a grave possibility that, on a sudden renewal of enemy air attack, there would be an extremely heavy flow of persons seeking safety in the Tube Shelter, and that pressure from such a crowd of people would cause the wooden structure to collapse, and a large number would be precipitated down the staircase...*

.....

A technical adviser was sent to inspect the entrance, William Kerr, and he gave evidence to the enquiry. Some improvements were recommended (and made); the timber doors and hoarding were strengthened and a corrugated iron roof installed which went some way to shelter the steps from rain and allowed for some limited electric lighting from one bulb, shielded so the light would not shine beyond the top step.

The official enquiry later reported that the specific improvements originally requested by the borough would not have prevented the disaster. Witness testimony revealed that there was no warden or policeman controlling flow at the entrance, so a gate of any design would not have been effective without someone managing it. However, the report also judged that London Civil Defence Region had not adequately considered the potential catastrophic outcome of a large number of people trying to access the shelter, and made several recommendations to increase the safety of shelter entrances.

In the days following the disaster, safety recommendations were sent out to all area technical advisers to check access to all deep shelters, with a description of the entrance to the Bethnal Green shelter. It was sent by the Chief Engineer of the Ministry of Home Security, Sir Alexander Rouse, and began with a request for secrecy: "For the moment nothing should be said to the local authorities". It recommended better lighting of staircases and slopes, crowd control using concertina metal gates between pillars, the installation of handrails at the sides of stairways (and central handrails for wider entrances) and a way for wardens or police to communicate with each other. Meanwhile the public wrote letters to the Government reporting many other unsafe entrances to public air-raid shelters.

Dunne went further than Rouse and recommended that deep shelters should have a covered tunnel before the stairs, so they could be brightly lit; a strong crush barrier outside the entrance to stem crowd pressure; some kind of signalling system so shelter wardens could warn the public of a problem below; two sets of central handrails and a permanent police post outside the entrance. Of course this was all too late for the people of Bethnal Green, but as a result of this terrible accident, safety improvements were made to the Bethnal Green shelter and many other underground station shelters. Covered entrances, bright lighting, handrails, signalling systems and concertina gates are still safety measures used to limit passenger flow by London Underground to this day.



This photograph from the *Illustrated London News*, taken soon after the disaster, clearly shows the condition of the steps. The Dunne enquiry described them as 'plain rough concrete steps with a square wooden insertion on the edge of the tread'. It noted the concrete was 'fairly level' but the wooden edge was worn and uneven in places.

## CONTROVERSY



*Illustrated London News*: ‘Crowds gathered round the entrance to the shelter in which 178 [sic] were suffocated during the enemy raid on March 3.’ The first newspaper reports wrote that 178 had died because at that point five people were still unaccounted for.

Extract from the  
Dunne Report, 1943

Dunne’s first report was submitted on 3 April, 1943. In the report he outlines the various contributory elements to the disaster which have already been described above. He exonerated the police and shelter staff of responsibility for the disaster.

According to the shelter administration there were four wardens stationed between the street entrance and the top of the two (stationary) escalators that led from the booking hall down to the platforms. All were “advanced in years” and none of the wardens were positioned higher up than the booking hall, which is why they failed to witness the accident. Dunne doubted they would have been able to aid the falling woman even if they had been in a position to do so.

Due to so many men having been called up since the Blitz, Dunne explains that there was a shortage of both wardens and policemen which meant that they were no longer routinely stationed at the shelter entrance. Instead police were instructed to leave their beat should an alert sound, and aim to reach the shelter within five minutes. On this occasion, no police arrived until 10 minutes after the alert. He doubted that a lone policeman could have controlled the situation. The most controversial passage was a final conclusion:

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*May I conclude with two short propositions:*

*a/ This disaster was caused by a number of people losing their self control at a particularly unfortunate place and time.*

*b/ No forethought in the matter of structural design or practicable police supervision can be any real safeguard against the effects of a loss of self control by a crowd. The surest protection must always be that self-control and practical common sense, the display of which has hitherto prevented the people of this country being the victims of countless similar disasters.*

.....

This was a crucial element in the subsequent suppression of the report. Morrison argued that “anything bearing on British psychology under strain is of value to the enemy” and at a Cabinet meeting Churchill himself agreed that it should not be published as it would harm morale. Instead Morrison made a short statement to the House of Commons reassuring MPs that action was being taken to prevent similar accidents, and stating that the rumours of involvement of “Jewish or Fascist elements” were untrue.

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Extract from the  
Dunne Report, 1943

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*I should like at this point to deal with two specific allegations which have received some publicity, and which are without any foundation whatsoever. Each may be dismissed with a very few words:*

*a) That this was a panic induced by Fascists or criminal persons for nefarious purposes. There were some deaths among men with criminal records. They and their relatives are as much entitled to sympathy as any of the other victims. This story had some local, and I hope limited, circulation. It is an absurdity.*

*b) That this was a Jewish panic. This canard had a much wider circulation and was, I understand, endorsed by the broadcast utterances of a renegade traitor from Germany [Dunne is referring to Lord Haw-Haw who broadcast pro-Nazi radio propaganda]. Not only is it without foundation, it is demonstrably false. The Jewish attendance at this shelter was, and is, so small as to constitute a hardly calculable percentage.*

.....

During this time Bethnal Green Council came under great criticism from the public and it was accused of negligence for allowing the shelter staircase to remain in a dangerous state. Morrison's statement did nothing to contradict this and despite requests to clarify publicly the situation from the Council, the Government invoked the Official Secrets Act to prevent Council officials from making any details available to the public.

In July 1944 a civil case was heard against the Council for negligence by Mrs Baker who lost her husband and daughter in the disaster. Despite protests from MPs the Government insisted that the case be held in private but the press were allowed to report on the judgement, which found in favour of Mrs Baker and awarded her £1,550. The judge said that the condition of the unfinished steps was dangerous, poorly lit and lacked a central handrail. He found that complaints had been made previously about the steps and the lighting, but nothing had been done, and he also judged that someone should have been on duty at the entrance, and ultimately held the Council legally liable.

The court records of the Baker case have never been found, but the Council was still expressly forbidden to defend itself publicly. The Mayor at the time, Margaret Bridger, and other councillors, were vilified by some in the local community who openly called them murderers. Many people were angry and in need of someone to hold accountable. Margaret Bridger subsequently moved to Birkenhead in immense distress.

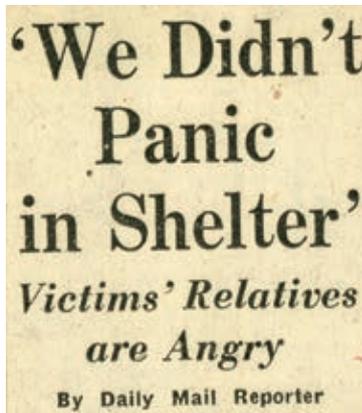
The Dunne report was finally released in 1945. A statement on the disaster enquiry report was read out to Parliament on behalf of Morrison, who on that particular day was absent with a cold and therefore could not be questioned. In his statement, Morrison referred several times to the “loss of self control” of the victims. Dunne made numerous recommendations that suggest the design of the entrance and the lack of staff to administer it were key issues. Yet this was over-shadowed by the question of whether the disaster was caused by people who were panicking. In his report Dunne preferred the term “loss of self control”:

Extract from the  
Dunne Report, 1943

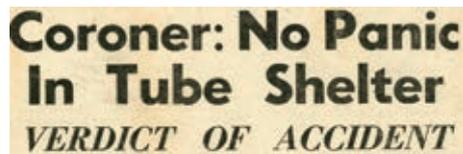
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*Panic is not perhaps the proper word to use, there is no doubt that the crowd of between 150 and 200 remaining outside the shelter were out of hand and frantic with nervousness, confusion and worry, which heavier gunfire and salvos of rockets did nothing to allay...*

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**'We Didn't  
Panic  
in Shelter'**  
*Victims' Relatives  
are Angry*  
By Daily Mail Reporter



**Coroner: No Panic  
In Tube Shelter**  
*VERDICT OF ACCIDENT*

In our interviews several people used the word “panic”, particularly to describe the anxiety felt after the unfamiliar noise of the anti-aircraft rockets and the crowding that occurred at the top of the staircase when nobody could get in. But examination of the witness statements (which have only recently been accessible to the public) revealed little evidence to say that people lost their self control, and many witnesses including the shelter warden, said that on the contrary, people coming down the steps were generally very orderly. And some survivors and officials repeatedly state that there was no out-and-out panic in the moments before the disaster; rather, people were making their way down the stairs quickly under difficult circumstances.

A fortnight after the disaster there was a coroner’s inquest into the cause of death of the victims. This also took evidence from witnesses and shelter staff. The inquest came to what seems to be a starkly different conclusion on this matter. W.R.H. Heddy, the Shoreditch coroner, stated to an inquest jury: “...the evidence before us is quite sufficient to dispel a number of the more sensational rumours which, no doubt, you have been acquainted with. There is nothing to suggest any stampede or panic or anything of the kind...”

Despite this, the disaster is still often described as featuring a panicking crowd, and historian Joanna Bourke even suggests in her book *Fear: A Cultural History* (2005) that this is why the Bethnal Green disaster was forgotten so quickly: “It was panic that people strove to forget as soon as possible, preferring to wallow in fanciful notions of ‘British bulldog

courage’.” Author Rick Fountain is much more critical of the Dunne report and suggests that the section about loss of control is there because it is what the Government wanted to hear. He suggests the report is biased – apart from the contrary witness statements; he is suspicious that evidence was not heard from the head of London Civil Defence Region or the Town Clerk, Stanley Ferdinando. Fountain suggests that Dunne might even have deliberately included these passages to protect the Government and Herbert Morrison (who, he suggests, wanted to cover up the fact that his officials had turned down the Council’s requests to improve the shelter entrance; although, in fact, the specific improvements requested would not have prevented the disaster).

There is no doubt that very many people were trying to get into the largest public shelter in Bethnal Green as quickly as possible. We should not forget that a great many of those involved were children. Some feel strongly that when assessing the causes of the disaster – the design and condition of the entrance and stairs, the lack of staffing, the poor lighting and so on should take centre stage. They argue that Dunne’s emphasis on a perceived lack of self control in a crowd situation unjustly implies that the victims were in no small part to blame.

Some of the interviewees are survivors from the crush, people who were trapped on the shelter steps and somehow survived the ordeal. Some are witnesses who had luckily just got down the stairway seconds before the terrible accident. Others are family members; some spent days looking for their loved ones before finding them, or discovering they had died in the disaster. There are also memories of a doctor and nurses who were working at local hospitals, and memories of friends, witnesses and rescuers. Not least there are stories from later generations of relatives, some who remember stories from their childhood about the disaster, and others whose family never spoke of it until decades later.

For this book we have arranged sections of people's stories organised into different topics so there is a variety of perspectives. All the sections are selective quotations from the oral-history interviews, which in most cases took place in the participant's home. Where possible, alongside each interviewee's name we have put their age in 1943.

The spoken word is created to be heard, not read and it can be confusing when it is transcribed into written words. For example, repetitions and exclamations can be particularly powerful to hear, but puzzling to read.

We have tried to retain as much of the character of the spoken word as possible, but some judicious editing has taken place for the sake of readability.

Minor deletions have been indicated with ellipses (...) and more significant cuts with [...]. If you would like to hear and read the full version of an interview, the complete recordings, with a time-coded summary and full transcript, can be downloaded from the project website [bgmemorial.org.uk](http://bgmemorial.org.uk)

## *Childhood and Sheltering in Wartime Bethnal Green*

**We have collected over 30 oral history interviews with people who were connected with the disaster on 3 March, 1943. As well as their experience of the disaster, we asked them to talk about their lives at the time, the good and the bad, the fun and the hardships of living in wartime Bethnal Green.**

## LIFE IN BETHNAL GREEN

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### Charlotte Spicer (13)

Well, my father worked on the railway. He got killed on the railway when I was about 12 years old. That was about two years into the war, because the war started 1939, so I must have been about 12 when he got killed on the railway.

Anyway, they got him to the hospital, Bethnal Green, and he lay there for about a week, unconscious. Then he sort of came round, and the day Mum was going to take us to go and see him, that morning, we were in the hospital, but before we could go into the ward, he had died. Of course, in those days, to lose your husband, with children, it wasn't good, because if you couldn't afford to keep your children, they used to take them away from you. You didn't have the DHSS and things like that. Of course, my mum's other three children, my two brothers, and my sister, they had started work. There was me, my sister Ada, who's still alive, and then my sister Gladys, she died. Us three little ones, type of thing. What happened was that they came down and were going to take us and put us in a home. Mum said, "No, you're not taking my children away." What she did was got herself an office job, cleaning an office, at Threadneedle Street in the City, so we managed.

Mum used to have to be in work by 5:00, so she used to catch the first bus to Liverpool Street, to go to the City. As I said, I used to get up and get the children, me, Ada and Gladys dressed, ready for school. Then clear the kitchen for her, and perhaps clean the step for her before she came home. Then I used to wash myself and go to school with them.

We managed like that until we got a bit older, and then, as time went on, Mum managed to get a job on the railway at Stratford Market: a guard, seeing the trains out. The railway gave her a job, so we managed, until I was 14, and I went to work. Then my sisters went to work; all went to work at 14.

I used to play with my friends, a group of us. It was near a Jewish graveyard in Bancroft Road. My husband – I keep saying my husband. We were all young kids at the time, weren't we? We were all outside this Jewish cemetery, all playing. All of a sudden, the air-raid siren went. One of the boys – I think his name was Dennis – said, "Come over to my house; we'll all go in there." Well, Stan said to me, "I don't think you should go. You'd better hurry up home." See, my mum always said, "As soon as the



Woman boarding London bus.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

air-raid siren goes, wherever you are, come straight home.” He said, “Your mum will be worrying. You’d better go home.” I said, “I’d better go home.” Well, he came with me, round to my house, and we went into the arches with Mum. Anyway, when it all quietened down, and the all-clear went, we came out, and someone said, “Oh, there was a direct hit in Bancroft Road.” When we went round there, the houses facing the Jewish cemetery, where Dennis and all of them lived had all been bombed, and they’d all been killed. If it hadn’t have been for my husband – my boyfriend at the time – we wouldn’t have been here today, if we’d gone. Apparently, they got a direct hit from a bomb there. It was terrible. See, that was war, wasn’t it? One minute, you were all together, enjoying yourself. The next minute...

I went into Morpeth Street [School]. I think they called it a secondary school, then, but it was a very good school. From there, I did ballet dancing, which I did for quite a few years. You had ballerinas coming to the school. We had to do a dance for them, and they chose two of us to go to train in a ballet school, which cost a lot of money in those days. Only very rich families’ daughters went to them. Anyway, I got picked, and a girl, Joyce Dipple, her name was, the two of us. We used to go to the ballet school. As I got older, I used to go from work to the ballet, and then on Saturday’s, we used to go to St John’s Wood for the class. We also danced at Sadler’s Wells, as one of the little fairies in Swan Lake. [...]

[At Morpeth Street] the headmaster, Mr Bloomfield, his name was, he wanted to me to stay on until I was 16. Anyway, you know what it’s like; all your friends are leaving school, so I wanted to leave. Anyway, my eldest sister got me a job – to learn dressmaking. Mr Bloomfield said, “I’m not giving you a leaving certificate. You need to stay on at school until you’re 16.” Anyway, Mum needed the money; she needed us at work, so I had to go in front of a school board.

I went to work because my mother needed the money. Each week they used to give you a pay packet. You never undid it and took the money out, or anything. I used to take it home to Mum. She’d take it out, and she’d give me two and six back out of it. Mum had the money, and you had two and six, and that had to pay my fares to work, and a bit of lunch, or Mum would do a sandwich for you. It had to last you all week; half a crown, as they said in those days.

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## Doris King (20)

We had quite a large family. My gran, she had 23 children, but, the thing was, a lot of 'em died at three months, nine months. And the only ones I knew was nine uncles and aunts. [...] There were four uncles and five aunts, and that was my gran's family. And we used to live upstairs in my gran's.

Jim was my oldest brother, he was eighteen months older than me, and Georgie was the youngest one, he was six years younger than me. And we got on very well together, even though life you know. [...] I had about fifteen cousins and three girl cousins. I had a happy life and that, but it was poor old days. I used to have sometimes clothes that come off the stalls in the Broadway, near London Fields, and Mum often went there and got me a nice little skirt or a nice little dress. Because we couldn't afford anything else you know. My dad was a carpenter, cabinet-maker, and of course at times he was off work, he were on the dole, and, we used to have to have what we could get, you know. [Sighs.] I don't know. When I think about it, today's children are really spoilt, in comparison. I mean they throw things away today that you can get a second use from. [...]

We used to have a little Easter egg and think the world of it; at Christmas you'd have a little torch or a little doll you know. But, I can't remember right back to when I was really young, six or seven or that, you know. But we moved when I was just fourteen. I left school in the April, and within a week I was at work, and I went to Curtain Road, up Old Street, and I went into...I was a machinist. My mum was a keen machinist, she taught me how to do the machining before I ever went to work.

My younger brother, he went down with rheumatic fever, and, he was very ill, and the doctor said, 'No way,' when the war broke out, no way could he sleep in the damp shelters and that. So, she [Mum] had to take him away.

[With Mum away, Dad fire-watching and older brother in the Air Force] I was on me own in the flat, and there wasn't many families who had children. There was a lot of the older people still living there. But, when the sirens used to go, I used to have to run, pick me blanket up and me pillow, and run wherever. I sometimes finished up under the arches, sometimes I didn't bother to go down because I didn't think it were going to be a bad night. Sometimes you could feel it, and you could hear the drone of the aeroplanes, you know. But, like I say, I done that. I used to keep the flat clean, I used to work from eight till six at night, Saturday mornings as well. And, I really used to do my bit, you know. [...] And I mean I was only 16, 17, and, running, trying to run to different shelters.



Food ration books.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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### Eric Linden (16)

We moved to the East End when I was four or five. [...] I got memories of Green Street as it used to be, with all the stores down each side of the road and the buses never able to get through. Mostly I'm afraid a lot of the memories were of trying to stay out of the reach of the Mosley thugs. It was quite a happy place. [...] My parents had two gown shops in Roman Road, what's now Roman Road, then Green Street, and Mosley's headquarters or the headquarters of the Bethnal Green branch of the Blackshirts was probably 150 yards away. So we were forever in the public eye, so to speak. [...]

It got pretty tense. It tended to get a bit physical at times and became particularly tense on those days when the communists decided they were gonna march, and of course they had to march through Green Street. There were always little incidents going on. [...] Incidents where somebody would tend to throw a milk bottle through the glass windows, lots of those, God knows how many times. Or some of the communists would stage a night raid and go down and pour petrol over the door of the fascist headquarters and set light to it. Those things were going on all the time. I must say the majority of them passed you by. You just knew it was happening, you knew that any minute something could happen to you. [...] Spirit of the time was just, bugger everybody, we're alright. You just got on with it.

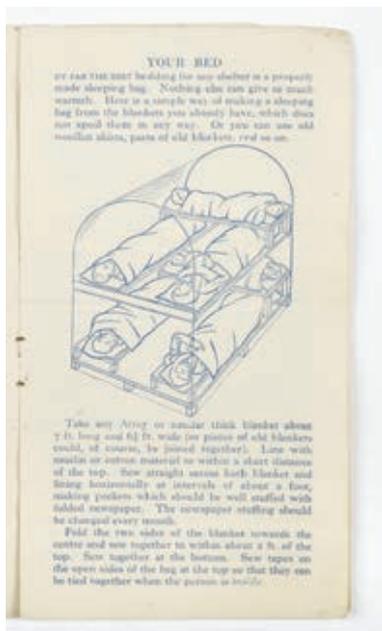


Detail of the Cable Street Mural.  
Photo: Chris Applegate

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### Henrietta Keeper (15)

Saturdays and Sundays we had beautiful food. And Thursdays me mum done bread pudding, I told you. And she used to have a great big conger eel, clean it all out with salt and put the water on it to clean it, and then she used to cut it; little peppercorns, that made it taste nice. We used to have that on a Saturday. And potatoes. They didn't have no money. Not hardly. What [my dad] used to do, he used to go to the Duke of York, put his foot in the door, so that it'd be half open, and he used to sing. And he had such a beautiful voice. And he used to get his cap off, go round and they all put the money in. He was full-up. I remember me being in my kitchen... and he used to take the cap and go... and all the money went... on the table. And that's how my mum could have a lovely roast dinner on a Sunday. And on a Saturday we had the conger eel and potatoes. And not only did we have a lovely roast dinner, we had a lovely Sunday tea later, you know.



Anderson shelter information booklet.  
Photo: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

I was 12 years old, and my sister was 2 years younger. The war was declared and all us school children had to go evacuate. [...] I remember having a little... you put a gas mask on. You had them in a box. You all had your little box from your arm. You had your name there on a bit of cardboard, with a pin. We all went by coach, and we was all took away. I went to a little village called Little Saxham. And there was Great Saxham. But I was with a country family, Mrs Bullers and two sons, Charlie and Eric. And that was 4 miles from Bury St Edmunds. So I was there for three years. Me mum used to come down and see me. After three years I come home... so then we had Anderson shelters in the garden. It was a dug-out, but so many feet deep, it had a galvanised roof, galvanised walls.

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### Hilda Rolfe (14)

[Father] had some swelling in his legs. He just wore a blanket, he was 37 I think when he died, from the swellings in his leg. My mum had one, two, three, four children. One died when she was a baby. [...] If she had been alive now she would've had tablets that would have kept her alive. There was Sadie, Tommy, Rosie and myself. Four of us left. And Mum had to struggle to get food for us, and everything. And she used to work part-time as a French polisher. Six days a week. Very poor. She used to walk about a mile to her job each way. And life was rough. We had two bedrooms in Burnham Estate. Two of us used to sleep together and three of us used to sleep together. All in one room. "I'm gonna turn over now!" We'd turn over in bed. It was really rough, and bugs in the wallpaper. We was in one room, a double bed and a single bed.

'Cause the war started, didn't it, and everything. I can't think of anything happy. [...] My mum used to go up and down stairs to get water outside, for the bath as well, buckets of cold water, to be heated up in front of the fire. Hm. I used to get free milk [at school], other people had to pay a penny for their milk but I didn't have to pay anything for milk in the morning. That's about it, I suppose. Childhood. Holes in my sandals, used to put cardboard inside the shoes. To keep the rain out [...]

I had two sisters, and one brother. It was a tough old life. My mum used to have this little red book where she used to put in; when she got paid at the weekend she used to pay who she owed money to for food. But we'd get a quarter of cheese and a mug of milk and stuff like that from the grocer's. It was real poverty, I don't know how we managed to live on it. We didn't have sweets or anything, and nothing for Christmas. Might get a nut. [...]

I think [Mum] came once [to Somerset where I was evacuated], she couldn't afford to come 'cause it was just my mum and we had three or four kids, she couldn't afford to. She sent me a little box now and again with bits of cake and biscuits and stuff like that, but she couldn't afford anything at all.

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### **John Barnes (10)**

The place, Poyser Street, where we lived, was full of bugs. It was full of bugs and insects. The best thing they ever done was when he dropped an incendiary bomb on number one, because it got rid of all the bugs. That house was absolutely running alive with bugs. My brother, me older brother, used to take a sulphur candle, stand it in the middle of the room, seal all the windows and doors up, light the candle and run out. And lock the doors. The candle let off a terrible poisonous fumes that used to kill them or drive them into the person's house next door. So they got the bugs, see. The sulphur candles were a regular turnout. You done it once every one or two months. The neighbours did the same thing, send the bugs back. It was a terrible place to live, you know, especially for my mother. She had all these kids and we were right at the top. All we had was two rooms. And the toilet was shocking. It was absolutely terrible. I know what poverty is, now. Terrible place to live.

The museum next to the bit of green, which is the Children's Museum now, was open during the war for dinners. They used to serve dinners in there. I used to go every day to have me dinner. My mum used to give me a penny or something to get me dinner as I come out of school. But this particular day, there was a friend of mine that I was in school with, he said, "Are you going to dinner today?" I said "yes", he said, "Come to the pictures with me tonight to the Museum." The museum had a picture palace called the Museum, which is not there anymore. And I said, "Alright, I won't have me dinner, we'll go to the pictures tonight." For some other reason I didn't go to the museum that day to have me dinner, and that was when a bomb fell on that. A bomb fell on the museum. I was in school when it happened. I should have been in there eating me dinner. [...]

Well with me personally, I had a lovely childhood, I would say. Even though it was poverty, it was because you had freedom. I had total freedom. I could do anything, I could go where I liked. My mum had got fed up with kids, she had had twelve of them. She'd got fed up with kids. She wasn't bothered about me. She was, to a certain extent, but I suppose I used to get on her nerves. Thank goodness... he's going out. That was my freedom, that is what I used to enjoy. I used to like that.

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### Ray Lechmere (9)

At the bottom of the street, Entick Street, there was a clothing factory, called London Brothers, it was a Jewish concern, it was a big, big factory, I often wonder if other people remember that. My sister worked there with my mother, they used to make all the uniforms, army, navy uniforms. It must have been a hard life in there, very hard. They used to bring bundles of work home with them. As a child you didn't see much of your mother and father I think because they was either out at work most of the time, I suppose like nowadays. Most of the time you'd be at school, if you was at school, and if you'd come home you'd always be playing in the street. Very seldom you'd be in doors in the house, mainly children was always out playing; as they used to say in those days, children should be seen but not heard.

One of the big things I do remember as well, we'd play hide and seek, was one of the big games you'd play. And there was quite a lot of children down that street. All the bombed houses you'd play in, and as the houses got bombed, it was the ideal hiding places for going, playing and hiding and just roaming the streets and playing, or whatever.

After the bombing raids you'd go out picking up pieces of shrapnel, pieces of bombs anything that came down, I suppose. In our garden, I remember, I think there used to be, whoever collected the most, that day, all the shrapnel and pieces of bombs, and my brother Leslie – I think he was the one that collected most, he used to come home, he'd get a big towel thing with a bomb. We had, at the back of the garden, it would be alright for the old iron people, the back of the garden would be full of pieces that we'd collected. I don't know why we'd collect it, it was just a silly thing to do at the time I suppose but...

I suppose as a kid growing up they were happy, as happy as they could be because you didn't know any different in them days, its only as you get older and you look back and see how terrible it was, it was really, when I look back now, it was really, really bad. At the time growing up you didn't know any different, it was a part of living, I mean in the houses you didn't have baths or anything like that, toilet was out back of the garden, you can imagine the living conditions then was far, far different to what they are today. If you get up during the night to go to the toilet you had to take a walk to the bottom of the garden. Terrible.

Didn't have much schooling, as a six-year-old that come to an abrupt end. Next thing I think I recall was sort of Seaford Street School: really, really bad memories there. There was only two teachers that I remember and they was really sadistic, being a child, if you did anything wrong,



East End children sit amongst ruins of bombed house. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

anything at all, out come the big cane and you'd get six handers. You didn't have to do much to do anything wrong either. I remember once I was sitting in school, I must have been talking to somebody next to me, sitting in the chair next to me, and I got hit by a large bunch of keys; teacher would have a big bunch of keys on his table and I was right at the back of the school, throw them at you full force and they'd hit you and if they hit you knew it, they really hurt. To do that nowadays, they'd be up in court. That was the sort of thing that happened.

School life was terrible, what I remember of it, there wasn't very much in between the air raids and bombing. We was told at the time, if you got more than half way to school you'd carry on and go to school and if you wasn't half way you'd come back home again, so when the warnings went, even if you was almost at school we'd still come back home!

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### Stanley Watkinson (8)

You never went more than four or five hundred yards when you were a kid and you were playing. Unless you went to the park which was in Meath Gardens and it was just across the road from where we were. And it was no traffic lights. Mainly horse and carts to look out for. [...] To us, the kids, there was about four or five of us, a little gang, it was very exciting. When the bombings started, provided it wasn't near where you were, everybody was looking to see what was going on. Not that you could see anything. Crashing, the guns going off. For kids it was just very exciting. [...] I used to go out collecting the shrapnel. From the guns and shells. It was red hot. You'd burn the skin off your fingers from it, it was so hot. Pieces like they're all just metal. If it hit you it would just go in one side of your head and out the other I think. I had a big collection of it, in the garden, in the yard. If I'd took it to the rag and bone man I could've most likely got some money, but I didn't, I kept 'em.

## SHELTERING FROM THE BOMBS

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### Babette Clark (11)

We didn't have an Anderson shelter, cause we only had a back yard. So we had a Morrison shelter. That was one of those metal contraptions. And you'd be lying in there some nights if the warning hadn't gone too late,



Couple sleeping in a Morrison shelter during the 2nd World War. Photo: Imperial War Museum (IWM Non-Commercial Licence 205194913)

and you'd hear the guns go or the bombs coming. [...] When ours was taken down I think they found there was six nests of mice all underneath. 'Cause my mum kept wondering why the pillows were shredding and all that. Well, while we were asleep the mice were having a go. (Laughs.)

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### Ray Lechmere (9)

I remember when they delivered the Anderson shelters, we used to have a big grapevine on the side of the wall in our garden on the right-hand side, and it was a shame, I remember they pulled the grapevine down, because you used to get some lovely black grapes on there, they pulled the grapevine down and they dug a big hole and put this big Anderson shelter in there. We used to stay in that, I think the bombing round the East End was a bit loud, and I think much of the time, it frightened people to go down, you used to get stories about people getting trapped in the underground shelters in the Anderson shelters. They didn't deter anything if they got near it or anything you'd probably get buried in them, it was just a corrugated metal.

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### Charlotte Spicer (13)

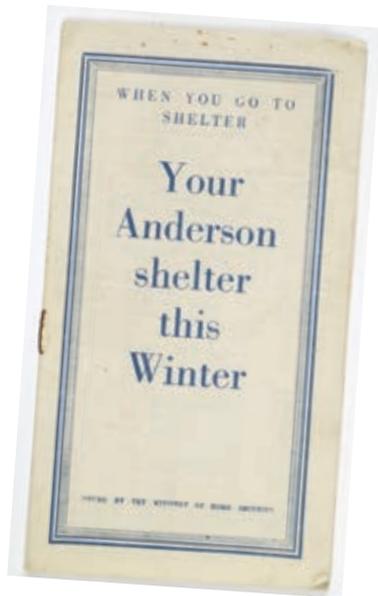
Everyone had an Anderson shelter in their garden – back yard; they used to call them yards, didn't they, not gardens. What they'd done – they used to put all of the earth over the top of the Anderson shelter to disguise it, as though it was just a garden, sort of thing; it wasn't a shelter.

[...] Mum used to feel safer in the arches, with the bunk-beds and all that. It was more comfortable, as well. It was a bit cramped down in that Anderson shelter, and they were very damp, especially in winter time.

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### Doris King (20)

In the flats it was like a square [...] we went down to this new shelter that they made, and it was a long room like this, concrete, there were no toilets, no light. And if you had a candle you could perhaps light a little candle. But, it was so damp, and Georgie [her younger brother] wasn't a well child then. And we went in there, and we all sat there, we were shivering, we were cold, hungry if you hadn't had anything to eat. There were no toilets, which is awful, you know, it's really a messy job and that. And, the basket of bombs was dropped, and Allen & Hanburys that used



Anderson shelter information booklet.  
Photo: Birmingham Museum and Art  
Gallery

to do the baby food, that, that got caught, and where all the debris and that fell, we was in this, this shelter in the middle of the flats... We tried to get out next morning and we couldn't get out, because debris had fell on the steps and we couldn't open the door. And we was all hungry and we wanted to get home, because the sirens had gone, and it happened to be one of the wardens was doing his walk round and he could hear 'em banging on the door. And they let us home and we never went back to that place again. Then we heard that you could go under the arches. Well, I went under; I didn't like going under there. But that's where they were bombing for... with the guns on the railway. And the next thing we heard, "You can go down the tube you know," and I thought, "well the tube is a good place you know".

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### **Stanley Watkinson (8)**

If there was a night raid we didn't have a shelter in our house. Some people had their own Anderson shelter. Our yard wasn't big enough to take one so there wasn't one put in there. There was a couple of brick-built ones. I can't remember when they were built. It wasn't just after the war started they were built. But once again there wasn't a lot of space for people. Most people stayed indoors and sat under the table or under the stairs.

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### **Henrietta Keeper (15)**

My dad had a premonition. He didn't feel safe in that little [Anderson] shelter. And the garden was long and it was right up near the Fowles' house. And there was a big wall. [...] And over the wall was a row of houses, and my dad was right. He had that premonition. So he went to the authorities. [...] He went there and he said, "Could I go somewhere else?" And they said, "Yeah, you can go up... You know Bethnal Green, the arch, where the Salmon and Ball pub is." They now sell office furniture inside. Inside there, they let my dad have a bunk. They used to have bunk-beds. We went up there from then on. We used to go up there roundabout 5 o'clock. That's when sometimes the warning went and we was already in the bunk-beds. When you sleep for the night. [...] They used to sell baked potatoes and they used to have a furnace, and a great big metal thing and it had all holes in it and you could have a warm bite, it was really lovely.

## LIFE IN THE BETHNAL GREEN UNDERGROUND SHELTER

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### Babette Clark (11)

Oh yeah, we used to sleep down there quite a lot. [...] Suddenly there was a lull, the Blitz ended and there was a lull. We moved back to London [after staying with relatives in Torquay], my mum and I left my sister there living with my grandmother. We stayed there in London all through the doodlebugs and the rockets, right until the end of the war.

[...] they never ever had trains come through because it was just before the start of the Second World War they finished the tunnel into Bethnal Green. So there was no tracks, anything laid. And that was how we all come to sleep in the tunnels. [...] It was a big community and everybody knew everybody. It was a typical East End affair, with everybody mucking in with each other.

It was horrible. I can remember that. [...] Well, there was no... as you got to the bottom of the stairs which is now the escalator, I think there was communal toilets there but they were only the chemical ones. Of course the ones you got right down in the tunnel were buckets with chemicals in it. It did whiff down there, believe me. [...] It wasn't like now, people bathing or showering every day. It was a once a month sort of thing, whether you needed it or not.

If the warning started early, eight o'clock or something like that, Mum would say, "Come and get your bundles," which were always made up, sitting in the front room, and we'd go down there. We lived in Old Ford Road, facing what used to be the Lido, that part of Victoria Park [...]. We didn't used to go down there every night, it was only if you kind of knew that there'd been a big raid in Germany, you knew within a few nights, you were gonna get a big raid.



Families shelter in London tube station.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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### Bob Saxon (16)

I must say, I spent one night in the whole war down the tube. Mum persuaded me and said, you look very tired, because I was in the Home Guard. We did all sorts of things in the Home Guard. As I say, we were on the rockets, but before that we had to run around doing all sorts of things. And I was really tired, so Mum said, why not come down the tube. It was during a lot of bombing was going on. I went down there and I could not stand... you could hear the bombs coming down still, and the place stank with fear. People were, you know... smells all over the place.

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### Charlotte Spicer (13)

Well, today there are all the moving staircases. None of that was there. It was just one, long staircase; very steep, it was, and it was all concrete steps all the way down. No bannisters or anything. They weren't very wide, the steps. You went down, and as you got to the bottom, it's just, say, the wall, and to where I'm sitting, that was the only room. You turned right or left, but mainly right was where we went into the tube itself. As you went through the door, on your right, they had a little stage. They used to sell hot food. There used to be a piano there. A fellow used to play the piano. They used to have singers come; entertainment of a night, in there. It used to be quite good, really. [...] Oh, people used to go down there regularly. They used to have their own – "That's my bunk-bed." That sort of thing. (Laughter.) [...] I never went down there to sleep, because where I lived – I don't know if you know Globe Road, at all, Portman Place. It's where the railway is, at the back. At the back of our garden was the railway, and under it was the arches, so we used to go in there; the arches under the railway, the bunk-beds.

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### Doris King (20)

Well, we went down one night, and there was, Mum met an old friend, and the only place you could really get comfortable was to get a sleeper, and you laid on the sleeper. But like I say, with your cushion and your cover, by the time you got up next morning, all the, the drips from the tunnel made all your bedding wet. And one night Mum was saying to her friend, "Oh there is a 'orrible smell. Can you smell it, Mrs Lee?" She said, "No." So anyway, she complained a couple of times, "Oh, it's 'orrible." And when she got up the next morning to fold the cover up and that, she picked her pillow up, and she had put the pillow right on somebody's motion that they had left, the faeces. And, she, she couldn't believe it. She had to take the cover off the cushion and throw it away. [...] People went up the tunnel... but the only way they could see where they were going and where they were, you'd got your braces or your pants, was to have a torch, because it was so dark under the tunnel, the further you went, it was dark. And, when she got up the next morning she had only been laying on that. And we laughed, laugh about it, but it wasn't a very pleasant thing.



Theatre and stage in Bethnal Green Tube shelter. Photo: Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive

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### **John Barnes (10)**

My mother, she had quite a big family. There was nine girls, three boys living in Poyser Street, which was a very terrible house to live in. There was nothing. There was one toilet shared by two families. You know. It was a terrible place to live. But the tube was about three to four minutes walk from number one Poyser Street. And I used to go down the tube quite often, because it was like a play centre for all the kids. The kids used to go down there. It wasn't a tube station then. It was just being made into a tube station. There was no trains going through. It was just like a tube station with stairs and things like that. And the main attraction down the tube station was the bannisters. We used to slide down the bannisters. There was the Kray twins also down there. They used to slide down the bannisters with me. We all used to do it. All the kids. 'Cause it was an attraction. You used to make sure that the warden wasn't there knocking about because he wouldn't allow us there, the kids sliding down there. I used to go down there quite a lot on me own.

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### **Rose Foote (21)**

My mother was terrified cause she was in her late 60s. So she went down the tube, directly the radio went off. If the radio went off you knew the raids were coming. So she used to take her bag down to the tube and she had a bunk there. And she slept there all night. And course I used to go down and see her when the raids was on and make sure she was okay and comfortable, and then come up again to see my father, 'cause he had asthma and he couldn't go up and down stairs. So he had to stay in the flat when the raids were on. But of course I used to go down when the raids started and stay with my mother 'cause I wasn't all that brave.

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### **Stanley Watkinson (8)**

You could get a cup of tea and they had a little canteen down there. Nothing fantastic but yeah, it was good. You wasn't worried about the bombs, you could only hear the thuds now and again maybe. What was happening up there was nothing to do with you. You were down there. Bunk-beds down there, and some people virtually had their own. If you got there, they said, "Oh, that's mine!" You had to go find another one. 'Cause they were down there every night. If you just went down when the sirens went, it wouldn't be very long, the raids didn't last that long, you'd go back home again.

Yeah, the one I remember is the smell from the toilets down there. They put, I forget what you call it, it's a really strong smell. It was all over the place, you couldn't get away from that smell. It killed the smell of anything else I suppose.

There was about two or three boys down there I knew from my school, and there was other kids down there that lived in the area. You could race about, "What are you up to? You're gonna knock everybody over," and that. Kids are kids and all that. I liked it. I really used to like it. 'Cause it was a life.

[Went into underground shelter] Lots, I don't know. I'd say maybe two or three times a week. It depended. I really can't remember now, but I was fairly regular down there. Some people virtually lived there, they used to go down there every night regardless whether there was an air raid or not. We didn't, my mum and I used to run, it was only a five-minute run for us from where we lived to get into the tube. When the all-clear went we'd come up and go back home again. A few times I remember us running back down there again when another raid went. Perhaps half an hour later.



Bethnal Green station: railway under construction. Photo: Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives

Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green

Valid until .....  
Not Transferable. No. 4

LONDON CIVIL DEFENCE REGION  
**SHELTER TICKET**

National Registration No. AD 123

Name.....  
Full Postal Address.....  
Nature of Employment.....  
Signature..... Date.....

Shelter at.....  
Bunk No. N. 181..... Between **5** p.m.  
and **7** a.m.

*E. E. Jay*  
Controller.

*Wednesday the 3rd of March*

When the air raid warning sounded cinemas emptied, buses stopped and families left their homes for the Bethnal Green underground shelter. Hundreds of people converged on the single shelter entrance. Some of the most moving accounts are of friends and families who were separated for some reason; as a result some were caught up in the crush while others survived.

## THE NIGHT OF WEDNESDAY, 3RD MARCH, 1943

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### Ada Magnus (13)

We'd been to this picture palace, I think it was King's Row, I think it was Ronald Reagan, the ex-president, better actor than a president... I shouldn't say. It was originally called Smarts. [...] And then it was called The Rex... We came out from there 'cause the raid went. [Doreen said] "I better go". I said, "Alright then". I left her there because I only lived through Hollybush Gardens in St Jude's Road. And I never knew no more about it till the next morning, 'cause we was in the shelter as well. But apparently they heard a noise, and I'm still not sure which part they was crushed in. I take it it must have been the first part, because they said they was all crushed on the stairs.

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### Babette Clark (11)

No, it's one night I can really remember. I don't know why, but I can remember it. The warning went about eight o'clock, just after eight o'clock. Sounded like that. Mum said, "Right," gave a funny little nervous cough, and said, "Right". My sister and I used to look at each other and go, "She's gonna tell us to get the bundles," and she did, and off we trekked. We got round to the Aberdeen pub and a bus had just left which my mum wasn't at all happy. Few cuss words. And all of a sudden another one came trundling along. Realise now, if we'd gone on that first bus, we'd have been killed. We would've been right in it. We got the other bus, got down to the tube. There was a queue of people and you've gotta realise, it was absolutely pitch black 'cause of the blackout. It was raining, it was a horrible cold damp night so you couldn't even get any light from the moon. Which was a good thing. 'Cause if it was a bomber's moon you'd have had the planes over. And we were all just queuing up to go in, and everyone talking to each other, and searchlights went up although there was no planes. But I can remember the searchlights. Going up and crossing and all that. And then all of a sudden there was terrible noise. I can still hear it like, like hundreds of rockets going up in the air. It was awful, the noise. Really loud. It went right through your ears. And as it went they whistled like some of the bombs used to when they came down.

That was when people started pushing, and of course by this time the queue had got quite long because they had given out in the cinemas

that there was a raid on, whoever wanted to go used to go, if not they stayed there. So of course they turned out, and that was when the pushing started. [...] 'Cause all you had was a little doorway into it where a policeman used to stand, but he wasn't there for some reason that night. And you just had this little tiny blue light. So I mean, there was no light, and even down the stairs, you kind of knew where you were going. And unbeknown to us, this poor woman carrying a baby or a child had tripped at the bottom, had pulled another man with her, and everybody was all going on top of her, and that was her finished. They were evidently piled high right to the ceiling on this landing, all the way back up the stairs. I can remember hanging on to my sister's coat, and we got near enough to the top of the stairs, and I can remember falling over, I don't know what it was, but I tripped over something.

And Jean pulled me up, which was good of her, 'cause you know what it's like, elder sister and younger sister, you don't get on. I know somebody, must've been an air-raid warden, pulled Jean out. 'Cause I can remember her saying, "I've got my sister here, I've got my sister here."

We were sent over to the Salmon and Ball, there was a shelter. Funny place, shelter right underneath the railway arch. We got over there, was a lot of people that we knew. I hadn't been long out of hospital having me appendix out, and Jean sat me down and said, you sit there. She evidently was going round asking if anyone had seen our mum, 'cause we didn't know what had happened to her, where she'd gone. The air-raid warden said to my sister – I didn't find this out until, crikey, I'm not sure she was dead when I found this out through my niece – they made her go in that room and said, "She might be in there," and it was all dead bodies that Jean had to go in and look at. They had nowhere to put all the bodies that they were bringing out.

Thank God Mum wasn't there, she'd been pulled out and taken over to the church. How we all got together, I don't know. But suddenly, we was with our mum, and Mum saying, "Come on, we're going home." I think we lost our bundles, which Mum was quite upset about. We got home, walked home. Early hours of the morning. I can vaguely remember looking across at where the tube was, and there was all the people lying on the pavement. And I said to my mum, "Hey Mum, look, they're all gonna get wet," I assumed they were all tired. But they were bodies that they had brought out and laid them there. 'Cause the ambulances couldn't take them away quickly enough to the different morgues.

We got near enough home and happened to see a policeman who lived a few doors up the road said, “You’ve been up there in the tube,” he said, “Go indoors, I’ll come with you, my wife will make you a cup of tea.” ’Cause he was going back on duty out there. Evidently on the way up he saw my dad. As I say, my dad had been a civilian driver for the Navy. I don’t know where his depot was, but it had come through on the – however they communicated with them. And of course Dad thought, they were down there, so of course he dropped everything and he came to the tube and he was helping to bring the dead out. Looking for us. And that was how eventually he came wandering home, saw this policeman, he said, “I can’t find them.” “Oh, don’t worry, Mr Nichols, they’re indoors having a cup of tea.” In Dad came. Big hugs and kisses and tears. I was only eleven and my dad was a big man, very tall, very big. He was like a gentle giant. What I couldn’t get over was my dad crying. My big dad crying. What’s my dad crying for? I realise now why.

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### **Charlotte Spicer (13)**

We got there – my oldest sister, she took my two sisters, and she’d not long had a baby; John, his name is. How old would John be? About a year, I should think; about a year old. There used to be a picture palace, where the museum is, and it was called The Museum, the picture palace. She’d taken my two sisters and the baby into the pictures to see a picture. While they were in there the siren went, and they stopped, and everyone came out. [...] Anyway, she thought to herself, “Oh, we’ll go down into the tube until it finishes.” She wanted to go home. That’s how they got to the tube, and there were all these people pushing. As they were going down, Ada and Gladys got pushed away from her. She was holding John. All of a sudden, she was – well, through, you know. She hadn’t gone down steps; you had to turn, go down, and turn.

Anyway, someone – a young lad, or something – was shouting out, “Don’t go down there. Don’t go down there.” Anyway, someone she knew was going down there. He said, “Edie, don’t go down there. I’ll take you round to my mum.” His mum was in a brick shelter round the corner out in the road. She said, “My two sisters have gone down.” He said, “I’ll go and get them.” He took her round to his mum, with the baby, and when he got back, he couldn’t find Ada and Gladys. Then, he came to the shelter to where Mum was, and I was. He said, “People are being pushed down into the tube. It seems pretty bad down there.” My brother went; my brother came in, and he said, “You’d better go and find your sisters.” He went

to the tube, and there were all these people lying out along where the railings were, in bags. They'd got out, and they'd died. Anyway, he was a bit panicky. He was looking for my sisters, and then one of the police officers said, "Try the hospital. They might have been taken to the hospital." He went to London Hospital, and he found them in there. Glad and Ada; they seemed all right, but they weren't, if you know what I mean. Glad, with her lungs, and Ada was in a bit of a state. I think it was about three weeks, they stayed in London Hospital, and then they convalesced them in another, country hospital for three weeks.

It was Tony and Joanie that got killed; my mother-in-law's daughter and son; children.

Yes; it was Mum, with Tony and Joanie, I was going to say. She'd say, "Oh, my Joanie." Or something happy. "My Tony." But she never really spoke about it. I think she [suffered] all the rest of her life, didn't she, Del? Very painful for the whole family, it was, losing Tony and Joanie.

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### **Doris King (20)**

The sirens was going, it was a noisy night. And we went down. And Dad was going to take me down, and he were going on to Shadwell to do his night fire-watching. And, we got to the tube, we crossed over. There was, the sky was full of searchlights, and I think they were trying to either get the railway station or the tube, well it was unfinished tube. It had workmen there. But anyway, me and Dad went down, and, when we... It didn't seem a lot of people around. I can't remember what, if it was about eight o'clock at night. It were dark. And as you looked down Green Street, and there's cars was coming up, you could just see people with their legs, the lights used to... And then, just opposite the entrance of the tube, there was about, a little group of five or six people talking. Apart from that, it was very quiet.

But when you, you got in, there was one blue bulb, it could hardly, barely give any light, you know. And as we went, there was a little bit of a space and then the stairs, and as we went down Dad says, "Go on then." And we started to go down, and as I looked over there was a lady with a baby in her arms, I could see the white shawl, but I couldn't tell you what her face or that was like. She seemed as though she were going down and sort of, I don't know if they had a handrail there, but they were going down, and on the opposite side there seemed an older man with a cap on. So they were both leaning against the wall, I think to guide 'em. And me and Dad, we just, there was quite an opening, and me and Dad just

passed 'em. We went down the flight of stairs, and then there was a bit of a landing, and there was about four or five stairs.

And then you come... And there was lights all on, where the escalator, one was there but it wasn't moving. It was right in the middle of being built sort of thing. And when we got down, Dad was passing the time of day and what it was like, and saying, "It's a bad night tonight." And you could really feel sort of, a shaky feeling of the planes right overhead, and searchlights. And there was a bit of a... we used to call them pom-pom guns. And there was a bit of a... they were noisy, they were really noisy. And Dad said, "Come on, let's get down there." And when we got to the bottom of the little flight of stairs there was a warden with his helmet on and that, and he said, "What's it like up there mate?" So he said, "Oh," he said, "it's bad." He said, "It's really heavy." [...] And we stood there for about a minute talking, and then all of a sudden the warden looked round, and he said, "And what's going on there?" So Dad, Dad went to step to go up these couple or three stairs, and he said, "No mate, don't, don't go up," he said, "there's trouble up there. Take the girl down."

So Dad took me down, and we went down, and then there was another warden to open the gate, big, big [flood] gates they were, or doors. And, when I got in there, the whole of the platform was, just the odd people on them, claiming their spot to sleep. There would be schoolchildren and, there was a lot to come down. And, Dad said to me goodnight, and of course, the guard, he closed the door.

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### **Eric Linden (16)**

The night of this thing, my father [an air-raid warden] had gone out to the cinema, not in Green Street but the crossroads, and across there was an old cinema there called Smarts, which was anything but smart. He went there because... I don't think it was the film, but because it was within a few yards of where his mother and father had a shop, which meant they could go to the cinema, come out of the cinema, pop in and see 'em, come home. Which would be his norm. On this occasion he went to the cinema and didn't come home. After a while, I started to get a bit worried. Particularly when the warning had gone off. Maybe he's gone to my grandmother. Maybe he's gone somewhere else. But if the warning's gone he's probably gone back to the post, wherever the post was.

So I walked down to... almost out to the tube station, which was about quarter, half a mile away. From there it would have been another quarter mile to the cinema. I was gonna go in and see if he'd stayed in the cinema



**Policeman on duty at the Bethnal Green shelter. The two larger gates to the right are closed. On the night of the disaster no official was on duty at the entrance gates. Photo: Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives**



which was unlike him, people tended to come out, a few did stay, they kept the show running for the few that stayed. Most people on a warning would come out and head for the shelters. He wasn't in the cinema. I had a good look around.

I didn't want to worry my grandmother. I was fairly sure if a warning has gone he's gone back. I came back, and when I got back I could see something was going on. I started poking around and nosing around and found out what was going on. Had no idea my father was down there, didn't think he would be down there. Later tried to work out how he'd gotten down there. I assume what had happened – he came out of the cinema and the buses had a habit, if there was a raid on they would stop and pick people up all the way along the line. He must have gotten the bus back to the tube, intended to go to his post, got caught up seeing something was going on, either went to help or just got caught up in it. Obviously remains a mystery what happened.

I can remember very much being told to go away rather rudely. And I thought if they want me to go away there's gotta be a reason, so I stayed. Fortunately the guy that I spoke to... I said I was looking for my father. He said if he's down there, forget it. That's when I realised something was going on and then pieced it all out. Went and found out what had happened, no idea how many were there except there was a lot.

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### **Henrietta Keeper (15)**

My dad got us there [bunks under the arches behind the Salmon and Ball], so we went there on this particular night, we went up there at 5 o'clock...

There was me mum, me and me... I don't know where my sister Marie was, but I think she'd gone round her friend's somewhere [...] and Dolly Warrington, Marie's mate [...] They used to run down there [to Bethnal Green Underground shelter]. Her mum was down there. She used to go down there. And we used to go in there, away from the bombs. [She said] "Oh come with me, my mum's gonna be worried about me". So I said, "No, you go with your mum and I'll keep with mine." And no warning had gone yet, there wasn't a warning. I do know that bit for sure. And so she said, "Oh, come on, and she's gonna be worried about me." I said, "You go down there, go on." And all of a sudden there was a great big bang, no one knew where it come from. Honestly, it was really loud and it frightened everyone. So all of a sudden I saw people frightened, I was frightened. That's why I didn't want to go with her after, I said no. That's why I wanted to keep with my mum. Holdin' my mum's arm. Really frightening. So all

of a sudden I saw people all running really over the tube, from Roman Road, Cambridge Heath Road, and the rest up to Whitechapel. And I was standing there with my dad and I saw that.

[...] All of a sudden I looked up Bethnal Green Road, it was full of buses, all stopped. The whole lot. The buses was all up there, they got everyone to do a ring right over were that side, right round our side underneath the arch against the Salmon and Ball pub, and all hold hands. No one couldn't go by and that's what the police done. And all of a sudden she said to me, she was getting so frightened. I said, "I love my mum, I don't want to leave her," 'cause it frightened me as well. I was scared 'cause it was so loud. Anyway she said, "Oh come on", so and then she got hold of me skirt and said, "Come on", pulled me skirt. I was getting fed up with it so I said, "All right", I got up, I said, "Come on then", I took two steps and I heard that ack-ack gun going and everybody's... "No," I said, "I can't go". I got hold of me mum's arm again, I said no. "You go over there," I said, "look". She wanted to go there, 'cause she was so frightened, she wanted to be with her mum. She was worried her mum was worried about her. So she went. And two days later we found out she died in there. And I could have gone with her and I didn't. I'm so grateful. [My daughter] said she wouldn't have been here if. I mean. I cry sometimes.

They identified Doris, Dolly Warrington, by a ring what her mother bought her for her birthday. So that's the only way she could know. So when I go down that tube, I go all cold, I really do.

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### Hilda Rolfe (14)

Well, my friend called for me to go to the pictures and I didn't want to go. And my mum said, "Who's that at the door?" and I said, "Rosie". So [Mum] called [Rosie] back again for me to go to the pictures. I didn't want to go. Anyway, we went to the pictures and while we were watching pictures it came on screen, alert and all that, you know. And my mum said, "I'll stand [waiting] at the top of the [tube station] stairs." I said, "I haven't been down there before. I only came home [from evacuation] yesterday." And we were all down there and there was havoc, lorries and all sorts of things going on. If my mum had gone down the stairs earlier... and someone called out bomb, and that's when they all pushed down the stairs. Called out "bomb".

I walked about all night looking for her. [...] She was standing at the top... if my friend hadn't... if my mother hadn't called downstairs, you know, "She's coming", she would've been alive cause she wouldn't have been standing at the tube station, would she? She got pushed down there.



Anti-aircraft searchlights.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Children evacuees on route to Devon.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

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### Joan Foster (5)

There were [a lot of children evacuated]. Ruth was. But as I say we weren't because my sister was seven (wasn't she, when she was killed), and I was five. But that's what I did want to say, that I think my mum really never forgave herself because we used to... I think it's called Great Lees outside Chelmsford, [stay with] with my nan and granddad. She used to spend the week up in Bethnal Green, come and get us... well that weekend she came down, but she brought us home for some reason, because there hadn't been many, you know the Blitz had finished by then so there weren't many air raids and she brought us home that weekend, and that was the weekend that my sister got killed. Don't think she ever really forgave... herself, but it was always on her mind I think that... she didn't always bring us home, but that weekend she did. And that was the weekend she was killed, with my cousin [Iris] who was 17, which was Pete Perryment's sister, 'cause his mum and my mum were sisters.

No, we didn't go into the shelter, because Babs, Iris and Pete, ran on in front because the air raid was going and the guns were going in the park. They ran on and, by the side, you know where Bethnal Green station is, by the side there's some flats. Well, because everybody was saying, "Oh, the bombs are coming", Pete, and Iris and Babs ran on and we went into the flats, we dived into the flats. Like my mum and her sister and I think it was Alfie, her other son, we dived into the flats. So it was only, what can you say, I don't know, by the grace of God, I don't know. But because Babs and Iris and Pete got shoved in that doorway, see people tend to think it was open like it is now, but it was just a doorway 'cause the station was being built. And that's where they all got, you know, got crushed in there, because people panicked, tried to get in.

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### Rose Foote (21)

This particular day when I entered the tube it was very dull. The stairs were very wide. Very wide. No rail down the middle, which I think if a rail had been there it wouldn't have been so much people killed. And course I went down. Funny enough my mother always said, "There's gonna be an accident here." She predicted this accident, because it was so dark, the stairs. Anyway, I went down the stairs, got to the escalator and I'm walking down and I'm looking back, there was nobody following me. Nobody at all.

I thought, well, the all-clear's gone. So course I went – I finished going down the stairs to see my mother and stayed with her. And then all of a

sudden there was policemen, firemen and wardens rushing through the tube. So I said to my mother, "There's something wrong." So she said, "Why?" I said, "Well, there's everybody rushing around. I said I'm going to the top to find out what the trouble is. I went to the top, they said, "You can't go out." I said, "Why not?" "No, you can't go out, you go back." So I had to go back with mother. And then I went up again and I still couldn't get out. And nobody knew what was happening. This was the saddest part. Nobody knew what was happening. So we were there till 5 o'clock the next morning, and then they let us up... And of course when I got to the stairs, my father and my sister were waiting there. They knew what had happened, see.

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### **Stanley Watkinson (8)**

On the night that the accident happened went down there from the cinema, from the Museum Picture House, and Mrs Barr came out behind us with her daughter, and my mum was young and I was young and we ran 'cause we could see the flashes of the guns. No bombs, just flashing of the guns. And we ran so I reckon it took us about three minutes, that's all. 'Cause it's only a few hundred yards from the cinema to the tube. We got down there, and then when we got down, within a few minutes nobody else came down. Not even a few minutes, a few seconds I suppose. No time at all.

[Mrs Barr] she was sitting in front of us at the cinema, they got caught in it. We ran, a few hundred yards, and we went down, must have been among the last ten or twenty people down there I think. They walked, and they got caught in it. She had a broken arm, the lady. She was an elderly woman, about seventy I suppose, she lived the next street to us, and her daughter. And the daughter was killed in it. Because they walked, and we ran. And if we'd walked along with 'em, we might likely have been in the middle of it as well.

We lived in one street and there was a little alley way between our street and the next one which was Hershey Place, and she lived in the first house there. Her daughter's name was Lottie. Well, Charlotte, I think, but we knew her as Lottie. They said afterwards when they went to see her at the mortuary, she had a heel mark of a man's foot on her throat. She must have been underneath and somebody on top or God knows what. And that was it. Lots and lots of people, people you knew or knew of. People you saw. No real close friends apart from this woman and daughter that was actually in it.

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### Ray Lechmere (9)

I was nine and a half at that time. My brother Ronnie... he was two years older than myself, then there was Leslie, I think our ages mainly went up mainly in two years, Leslie was about 13, 13 or 14, then there was Maisy, she was as I say, just turned 17, I should imagine at that time. [...] We got near the bottom when there was a lot of shouting and screaming, people was rushing and pushing, I think we got pushed up against a wall, there was a wall there we got shoved and a lot of people was jammed there who couldn't move. As I remember after that, people pulling us out getting us out, getting us out away from the wall pulling us around the corner. People was asking if you was alright, how you were. I think there was a first-aid place, where this smell was I always remember it, this carbolic smell, it was really bad, it wasn't like hospitals today when you walk into them you get a decent sort of smell, it was a very old, more like a toilet smell, carbolic. It was the first-aid people, that asked you if you were alright, ask you how you were, and then we was sent off... sent down to the bottom of the station where the people were, where the beds were.

And Maisy somehow had picked up a baby from somebody or got a baby, she was telling us about it afterwards. I don't know, probably somebody took it from her at the top at the first-aid station or somewhere round there [...] I remember the screaming, people shouting saying get down, but as I say, Maisy when she came down, she was telling us that somebody, that she'd been given this baby, or picked up a baby from somebody, whether it was a woman that went down on the steps, and Maisy had picked up the child from that woman I think, I don't know – at that time I think we were down the bottom, because I remember Maisy came down and she was telling us about, she still had the baby, she was handed in by the first-aid place...

## **WITNESS EVIDENCE SUBMITTED TO THE DUNNE ENQUIRY**

The witness statements were considered sensitive enough to be kept secret until 2019, but they have been released early and can now be viewed at the Public Record Office in Kew. The following is a summary of the witness statements made to Mr Laurence Dunne, who conducted the official enquiry into the disaster between 11 and 17 March 1943.

### **THE MAKINGS OF A DISASTER**

In many witness accounts, the poor lighting above the 19 steps that led down into the shelter was described as a significant contributing factor in the calamity. There were also complaints about the way the shelter was run – particularly the shortage of wardens and police on duty that night, which meant that no public officials witnessed events as they unfolded.

### **WARDENS AT WORK**

Chief Shelter Warden Mr Percival Bridger said that as soon as he was alerted to the incident, he phoned the police, requesting immediate assistance in holding people back from the entrance, to reduce the pressure. Some wardens at the bottom of the steps were crying in desperation when they could not pull people out.

Part-time warden Sydney Bryant heard screaming and ran immediately to the wall of entangled bodies at the bottom of the steps. It took brute force for him and auxiliary warden Richard Cotter to extricate seven or eight babies. People tore at his arms to try to be released, and he put his head under someone's chest to save a baby – he managed to force it out. He also witnessed a woman and two men come down over the pile of bodies: they had forced themselves out of the mass and rolled down over it. Mr Cotter said that the pile of bodies had formed in a matter of seconds.

## **THE SCENE FROM BELOW**

Walter Steadman had got down the 19 steps without trouble and turned to wait for his wife and children. He saw a woman, holding a child by the hand, fall; a man fell on top of her, and then everyone else fell like a pack of cards. He and the wardens shouted to people to go back. One man tried to, but was engulfed. Mr Steadman was unable to pull anyone out, but gave some water to a woman whose head was over the bottom step.

## **AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE**

Mabel Reeve was at the top of the 19 steps with her husband, who was carrying their baby daughter, when she was carried most of the way down the stairs by the pressure from behind. She remained upright, with her arms free, and cried out: “You must get me out before the pressure gets too tight!” She was pulled out, leaving her shoes behind, and tried to release her husband, who was near the bottom and shouting: “Get Jenny out, get Jenny out!” The baby was pulled out and given to Mabel, who was made to go down to the shelter. Her husband survived, but she lost two sisters and her mother.

Mrs Mary Barber and her five children had had to wait outside the shelter because of the huge crowd. When the rocket guns started firing, people surged forward, and within seconds she and her children had been carried downstairs – without their feet even touching the steps. Mrs Barber was carried to the fourth step from the landing, her eldest daughter to the bottom step, with her head on the landing and her legs on the stairs. Just before that, Mrs Barber had seen a woman ahead of her trip and fall, and a man fall on top of her – that was the beginning of the crush. All her children survived with her, but they were among the last to be rescued, at 11.40pm.

## ONE WOMAN'S RESCUE EFFORTS

Mrs Eliza Jones left the Museum Cinema as soon as she heard the alert, and got to the entrance and down the 19 steps safely to the landing. She saw an elderly lady trip and fall down from the third or fourth step onto the landing. Some children and a little boy at the lady's side seemed to fall at the same time. Mrs Jones grabbed the boy, rushed to the lady, held her hand and tried to pull her out, but she was trapped by others. "Never mind, Ma, lie there, you'll be all right presently", Mrs Jones said. The lady could not reply, but gripped her hand. A man a few steps up had turned round and was shouting up the stairs: "Don't push! Go back!", then "Oh, my back, oh, my head!"

Mrs Jones supported him for 10 minutes, until her strength gave out. The little boy kept saying: "Oh, my poor Dad!" and Mrs Jones replied, "All right, sonny, Daddy will be all right in a minute". But the crush from above worsened. She grabbed the fire-brigade phone on the landing and phoned for help, not knowing if she even got through. Later, she was relieved to see the lady who had fallen walking from the first-aid post.

## THE JOHNSON TRAGEDY

Mr George Johnson reached the entrance seven minutes after the alert, along with his wife and five children. When his wife was four steps down and he was two steps behind, the rocket guns went off and the pushing started. Someone from the landing shone a bright torch up at them, and Mr Johnson shouted to switch it off. There was a scream: "Murder, you've killed my baby, you've broken my arm!" A man in a tin helmet dived over them as if into water.

Johnson called for his wife and children, whom he could not see; he then became stunned by a knock from someone and lost his footing.

He managed to get one arm free and was able to turn a little. He could see police at the top pulling people back, and they managed to pull him out. Not realising that his youngest daughter (Ellen, aged six) was already dead, he wrapped his coat around her and went to the first-aid post across the road, later followed by his wife. The next morning, they learnt that another daughter had died in the accident (Ivy, aged 14). One side of her face had been completely crushed by a boot.

### **LEFT A SINGLE PARENT**

Mr Isaac Myers left home as soon as he heard the alert, carrying his baby boy. His wife followed with their other son, and he never saw the two of them alive again. On arrival at the entrance, there was a huge explosion of rocket guns. He was pushed down to about the sixth step from the top. He held the baby high. He was trapped for about 35 minutes, with his legs and ribs hurting, wedged in by people who appeared to have fainted, but who were, in fact, dead. Once released, he managed to walk back up the steps with his unhurt baby. Two days later, he asked a welfare officer for advice on how to look after a child on his own. He resented her reply: “You can leave him to Dr Barnado’s Homes”.

### **THE LAWSON TRAGEDY**

Mr William Lawson entered the shelter with his wife in an orderly manner. He was carrying their 3-year-old girl and held their 7-year-old boy by the hand. They were about five steps from the bottom when everything stopped. He tried in vain to lift the toddler out of the worsening crush. Rocket guns went off and girls started to scream; then people were passing out, their heads flopping back and to one side. His toddler was trying to breathe – he could just about see her face – and could feel his boy’s head pushed against his hip. “Please pull them away, my baby is dying!” he cried. But the wardens below didn’t seem to know what to do, except to shine their torches.

Then he knew his baby had died. Hardly able to breathe himself, he saw that his wife's head had fallen back. As the pressure was eased by people being pulled out from above, the standing dead flopped over. He threw his baby to a policeman and, after a struggle, managed to hand his boy to someone. He saw his wife, who had only fainted, fall to the floor, and, managing to extricate his legs, got hold of her and got her outside, walking on people as he went. In vain, he tried to revive his children with artificial respiration.

### **A DOCTOR'S PERSPECTIVE**

Dr Ralph Summers, who attended the scene at 9.15pm, separated the living from the dead on the pavement, in order to get them to hospital as soon as possible. Some injured people, particularly children, were freed from quite far down the pile. Their positions on the staircase – sheltered, perhaps, by the tread of the stairs – might have been their salvation.

The few postmortems that were carried out later, showed that there were no fractured ribs; the pressure had probably been gradual and equal all round. There were many bruises, but there was very little blood, except sometimes from people's mouths due to compressed lungs.

*Rockets*

Many survivors and witnesses mentioned that they heard a frightening and unfamiliar firing noise, made by what they later realised were anti-aircraft rockets. The unexpected sound led to some people thinking that it might have been some kind of bomb landing.

## THE ANTI-AIRCRAFT ROCKET BATTERY IN VICTORIA PARK

**It seems reasonable to assume that, along with the arrival of the buses, the noise had a part to play in speeding up the rate of people wishing to get into the shelter in a short space of time, and the Dunne Report listed “an imperfect knowledge of the nature and appearance of various anti-aircraft devices now in use” as a contributory cause of the disaster.**

There was an anti-aircraft post in Victoria Park, which is not far from Bethnal Green Underground Station. In 1943 the rocket battery was manned by 128 Battery of the 6th (Mixed) Z Royal Artillery Regiment of 37 Brigade. The National Archives hold diaries of individual batteries, including 129 Battery at Shooter’s Hill in South London but, alas, there is no diary for 128 Battery. However, the Brigade war diary does confirm that several salvos were fired from the anti-aircraft rocket battery (known as a Z battery) in Victoria Park between 8:10pm and 10:10pm that night. This corresponds to the timing of the accident, as well as the descriptions of witnesses and the accounts of some of those who gave evidence at the Dunne enquiry. For example, Police Superintendent Hill told the enquiry that three women had described to him how “the motion of the crowd [going into the shelter] was perceptively accelerated by a sudden very loud rocket gun” that “went off with a loud report...left a red trail in the sky and caused considerable alarm.”

### TESTING TECHNOLOGY?

The salvo of anti-aircraft rockets fired that night was a relatively new technology. A BBC documentary, *Homeground: Disaster at the Tube* broadcast in 2003, suggested that the army was testing them for the first time that evening, unbeknown to local people. The only direct evidence they had was an interview with Alec Allen who described himself as a “cocoa boy” for workers in a nearby paint factory. He said he did some fire watching at the factory in the evening for extra money and that by “whoever was in charge [at the factory] that particular night, he had been informed that the battery of guns on Victoria Park were going to have a test firing”. Alec said he was expecting it and watched 40 or 50 rockets

go off almost instantaneously: “The sound was horrendous”. However, Z-battery veterans interviewed for the same documentary seemed sceptical that such a test firing would happen in central London or that just one factory would have been informed.

There is no evidence in the relevant war diaries to suggest that testing was being carried out or even that the Z batteries were being used for the first time in Victoria Park. The technology was well established – they were tested in Cardiff as far back as 1940; in 1942 2.4 million rockets were being produced. By 1943 Z batteries were scattered all over the country, including Victoria Park and Blackheath. Records show that Victoria Park was approved for a Z-battery site, amongst 12 others, back in July 1941. The Blackheath war diary notes that rockets were fired at hostile aircraft plotted from the East Coast that night. Although there was no raid directly on Bethnal Green, a bomb did fall in Ricardo Street in Poplar, less than two miles away. War-diary entries also confirm that there was widespread anti-aircraft fire across East London that night with batteries also in action on Wanstead Flats in West Ham, in Pursloe Park in Barking and in Dagenham. It seems most likely that the 128 battery in Victoria Park was simply responding to a genuine, London-wide alert of a high-level Luftwaffe bombing campaign.



Z battery firing (location unknown).  
Photo: Imperial War Museum

## AN ALARMING NOISE

But many of the survivors and witnesses we spoke to were very clear that the noise they heard that evening did not sound like ordinary anti-aircraft fire and it raised anxiety. It is also important to remember that the major Blitzkrieg campaign was over by the end of May 1941, and air raids were uncommon enough for children to return from evacuation. Since then the newer Z-rocket batteries had been installed and the noise was different to the anti-aircraft guns that would have been familiar to Londoners who experienced the Blitz. As one eye witness, Iris Nightingale, put it: “Nobody had heard the gun before. We were all used to the bang, bang of the... anti-aircraft gun, but this was a different noise. And somebody said, ‘Ooh, the Gerries are here!’ and everybody panicked, you see.”

Z-battery rockets were fired en masse in salvos, and were very noisy. General Frederic Pile of Anti-Aircraft Command, interviewed in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1944, described how the rockets went off with “a roar and a swish” like “an express train passing through a station”; then you saw “a blinding orange flash followed by myriads of red points reaching towards the sky... and, a second later, the familiar devil’s tattoo in the heavens [could] be heard.”

## FALLING CASES

The missiles fired by the rockets were large and heavy – they consisted of a warhead, which was set to explode at a pre-determined height, and steel tubes about 4ft long, which contained the propellant and returned to earth after the explosion. It is not difficult to imagine the damage that these tubes could cause as they fell, particularly in built-up areas and, as they plummeted to earth, they might have added to the impression that bombing was in progress.

There might also have been a similar problem with unexploded rockets falling to the ground. Bob Saxon, a member of the Home Guard unit who manned the anti-aircraft post in Victoria Park, was on his way to work on the evening of the disaster, but got waylaid and ended up helping with the rescue effort at the underground station. He remembers hearing a single rocket make a particularly strange sound. He explained how the rockets had to be set to reach a specific height, and has suggested that one rocket in the salvo might not have been primed properly. “It just went up and it sorta come down like a big drain pipe, didn’t explode ‘cause it wasn’t primed. And it came down like a big drain pipe ‘woohhaah’ like that.” Could this have been the unfamiliar noise that so many witnesses mention?

## SHOULD A WARNING HAVE BEEN GIVEN?

There is no doubt the noise of the Z battery played a role, and this is acknowledged in the Dunne report. Dunne did not investigate the issue of whether rockets were being tested or malfunctioned, focusing instead on the accident itself. Some believe more weight should have been given to the noise as a cause of the overcrowding on the steps, and that if a test had been planned, some notice should have been given to the local population that a new weapon was going to be used.

Given the passage of time and the limitations of the archival evidence available, it is still impossible to get a definitive picture. Perhaps it is possible that in the spring of 1943 they were used for the first time in Victoria Park, or fired in larger numbers than before, but there is no documentary evidence to prove it and no direct evidence to suggest a test was in progress. On the latter question all we have is a memory of a conversation with a factory manager (perhaps the manager had been aware of the rocket battery and, expecting a raid, knew it would be used that night). A test also seems unlikely as a real air raid was in progress on 3 March, 1943; there were many Z batteries in London and the weapon was already well tested.

The noise of the firing of the salvos was astonishing at close range and would have been particularly upsetting to children who had recently returned from evacuation. The unfamiliar noise of falling rocket cases (or a malfunctioning rocket) raining down soon after the noise of the salvo fire might have contributed to the impression that bombing was in progress.

Even if it wasn't a test, shouldn't the anti-aircraft unit at Victoria Park have informed the local population that the weapon was going to be in use? It is easy to judge after knowing the consequences, but we must remember that it was considered important to keep information about new anti-aircraft defences as secret as possible. For example, the first newsreel footage of Z batteries was only allowed to be shown to the public late in 1944. And when the salvo was installed, officers might reasonably have assumed that firing them after an air-raid alert would mean that local people would be out of danger. However, should something have been announced, however vague? Was firing rocket salvos just 10 minutes after the air raid alert ill-judged? Dunne does not criticise the unit in any way or make any recommendations in this regard; as the air raid was demonstrably genuine he must have regarded the Home Guard, manning the Z battery that night, as being beyond reproach.



Anti-aircraft or 'Z' battery manned by the Home Guard on Merseyside, 6 July 1942.  
Photo: Imperial War Museum

*Witnessing the Aftermath*

**Immediately after the crush rescue workers, policeman and volunteers were involved in the complex task of trying to pull people out - alive and dead. Those that had lost their lives were moved away from the steps to the pavement and the nearby church. Their bodies were then taken to nearby hospitals and in the following days relatives had the distressing task of trying to track down and identify the bodies of their missing loved ones. Many of those who were involved or witnessed this work were deeply affected by the experience.**

## WITNESSING THE AFTERMATH OF THE DISASTER

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### Bob Saxon (16)

I was gonna get told off being late for duty. But it all started off with this non-exploding rocket that went up, didn't have nowhere to go, and came down in a spiral and a siren and everybody thought that it was a new kind of weapon, because Hitler was coming out with some very clever stuff.

I walking down there with this bundle [provisions his family had left behind], I could see in the distance, not much because it was dark, I could see and hear a bit of a row going on and all of a sudden, one rocket went off.

Now that wasn't in anger, it wasn't even primed, this rocket. Because it will not explode if it's not primed for height, right? [... And the captain] says: "Right, fire" and he pulls the lever and about 24 rockets go off. But this one was on its own. And I believe it was just left on there. It was you know, because it wasn't primed for height. It just went up and it sorta come down like a big drain pipe, didn't explode 'cause it wasn't primed. And it came down like a big drain pipe "woohhaaah" like that. And everyone was getting ready to go, you know, getting down the tube. And there was panic, and then some dipstick, he said, shouted out, "The bombs, they're dropping, they're dropping 'em", but they wasn't. They wasn't even with us. They were miles away, I listened and they were miles away. Past Liverpool Street Station, miles past.

[...] They thought it was a new bomb because it was doing all this sort of thing but when I came across it, the, the, the furore, the row there, there were three fellas holding hands sorta keeping the crowd in a bunch, "Get down the stairs, get down the stairs". Well, sorry to say, no one wants to know this but the truth is there was no central rail, handrail. None at all, and them steps were badly made steps, they got a kind of a funny old lip and it goes down and if you catch your feet in there or anything like that, like basically you go walk like this you, you go down. But with all this going on, they panicked. Now can you imagine a mother, with a little girl holding her hand, with a little baby, young people, there were quite a few like that. And there they are, they gotta go down and balance themselves on these damn steps and that's what happened. They, they never had a chance. Down they went and I came across it just then, and about half a minute afterwards it sort of quietened up a bit. And the copper, the



Bob Saxon

policeman, was standing outside and he said, “They want some help, they want some help here”...

It still bitters me to think that if we knew then what we know now about resuscitation, half of them people would still be alive. They would’ve been, because it’s only two minutes... and as I say one of them was spitting and all of a sudden went. She was waiting for someone to give her a good bang on her chest. But anyway, that’s gone and done with.

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### Eric Linden (16)

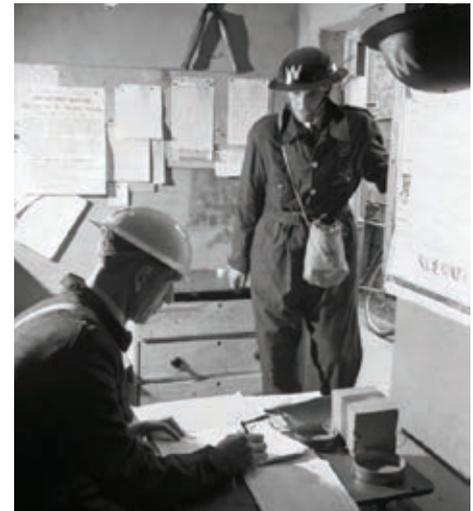
Don’t remember ambulances, do remember some people picking up bodies and putting them on buses to drive them away. Policemen I can’t remember. It was just... I remember some soldiers were around. Everybody was just trying to help the best way they could. I don’t even remember if a crowd had gathered or not to be honest. I imagine there must have been people.

I think [the public were helping out as well]. As much as they could. You can’t get many people through an opening like that, even to go and help. The difficulty was you couldn’t get in. There were a few people who managed to get in, and they were pulling people out. There was no question of getting people out from the bottom. There were people in the station who were pulling them from the bottom as well. Which I imagine was happening, but from the top you couldn’t get in. Maybe one or two people who got in, who just pulled on legs or arms or anything. Not a nice night.

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### Henrietta Keeper (15)

All of a sudden, have you ever heard of ARP men? They are not the police but they had big yellow lorries going rrrrrrrrum, a noise. And they had tin hats and they were more like police. And anyone who’s bombed and got buried alive, they were rescuers. They used to get ’em out and save their lives. They all come out and all of a sudden we were standing there and I went forward without telling me mum and dad, to the corner. We was under the arch. And then the pub this side, and Cambridge Heath side, right. So I went there and I saw all the ARP men coming out with all stretchers. And on ’em was dead people. Little boys. Great big sailor. I know a family who lived on the back of Old Bethnal Green Road in my mum’s buildings. Me mum used to live there. And that man, that young sailor, great big tall fit, he was home on leave, he died. He couldn’t even



ARP Wardens responding to calls for emergency rescue services. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

save himself. And they was bringing them all up. And all of a sudden, they laid them all outside [...] The ARP men was all carrying the stretchers and putting them all down Cambridge Heath Road side of the pub. Loads of them. And then this side all here a little bit up to the arch. And I don't like to say it but it made me feel sick. It was terrible to see, but every one of them had all their insides out, and they all come like that. Like a pinky, whitey, sticky substance. [...] Yes, out of their mouth.

[...] I asked my mum what it was, and she said their inside was all come out. They was crushed. I definitely saw that on every one, men, dear little six-year-old little boy, and someone else, a little girl, a mum. Who's on that list, all that names. I definitely see that. And that's the God's truth.

And my dad come up to me. He looking 'cause I gone forward 'cause I'm a little bit like Miss Marple, I'm a bit inquisitive, I'm like that now. Sorry. (Laughs.) My dad come and got hold of me and said, "No that's not for your eyes. Come away from it." And we forget all about going there, but I don't know if it was a day after or the next day, we found out [Dolly] died. And it was terrible. And I'm so lucky that I didn't go with her. Something made me stop, something made me say no. I wish I'd have said to her, keep with us. But she didn't want to stay with us. She said, "No, my mum's going to be worried about me." So she had to go. So that was it.



Iris Nightingale

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### **Iris Nightingale (20)**

But I was scared stiff, 'cause when I got out of the [bus], where all the people that were helping, all I could see was ambulances, all lined up. There must have been about 8 or 10 of them, all lined up along the road waiting for the dead bodies. That scared the life out of me and I got home as quick as I could. Then I said to my mum, "Something terrible has happened at Bethnal Green," and she shrugged her shoulders, she said, "Oh, well we're alright".

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### **Stanley Watkinson (8)**

And then everybody was saying, they must have shut the gates up there, didn't know what had happened. Lastly it was thought that there had been an accident like there was, and in about five or ten minutes they came down, man came along and said, "Can we have some assistance, there's been an accident upstairs." For men to come up and that was to move the bodies. And they started bringing them... I remember them bringing bodies down, but I only remember one in particular which was a boy I knew, who came from Globe Road. And I never knew his name but

I knew him from looking. It was a bit gory. Two men came carrying him, they were supporting his shoulders. His face was mauve, I remember it now. It wasn't red or anything, just purple almost. They took him down. When that one came down... they moved everybody out of the way then, you couldn't see. 'Cause it was really gory.

## RESCUE WORK

### Margaret McKay (6 months)

*Margaret was the youngest survivor at only 6 months old.*

*She was rescued by P.C. Thomas Penn (see photo).*

That's Thomas Penn. He was the off-duty policeman. And he happened to be going to visit somebody with his family, and he passed at the time the tragedy happened. So what he did, his poor wife was heavily pregnant, she stood over the other side of the road in the cold with a little six-year-old boy, and Thomas went down in the tube, I think three or four times, to get people out. And he got me out because mum was holding me aloft. And he said, pass me your baby. She passed me, and they passed me out, up until outside.

*Her mother (Ellen Ridgway) died in the disaster.*

*In 2013 Margaret had a surprise encounter with P.C. Penn's daughter, Doreen. It was an emotional moment for both women and a link to a shared past.*

They took me to the other side of the hotel and shooed everybody away and I thought, "What's this all about? You said we were all gonna sit and chat..." And all of a sudden as I looked up, this lady walked in. She's walked up to me 'cause we're sitting at this table, and she said, "Hello Margaret". And I thought, who's this lady? And so she said, "My name's Doreen and I'm Thomas Penn's daughter." When her mum was heavily pregnant in 1943, she was born at the end of March. So it was Penn's daughter, and she lives in France. They'd brought her over from France to do this filming, and I knew nothing about it. But she told me that her dad went down several times to help people out, but she said he didn't talk about it a lot, which if you speak to other survivors, they'll say their families never spoke about it a lot.



Ellen Ridgway with baby daughter Margaret



Margaret McKay née Ridgway

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### **Barbara Bittle (4)**

*Barbara tells of her father's involvement in the disaster.*

As far as I know he was a police sergeant at the time. He was made a police sergeant a few months before. And he used to cycle to Bethnal Green from Leytonstone on his bike every day to work, which we think took about an hour, through the bombing. On that particular day he started at 10pm at night. Obviously he was part of organising and helping clear the bodies from the steps.

My brother actually remembers our dad coming home [the next] morning and telling... talking about all the bodies laying out on the road as far as you could see, he described it. And the impact it had on dad. But as I was only four I wasn't aware on the actual day or around that time. I learned through my mother more about it and what happened as I was growing up. Dad didn't actually speak about it much.

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### **Bob Saxon (16 )**

As I was walking up the path we'd made to get the injured to the ambulances that were lining up, there were one woman that knew me, that was running around up there, and she recognised me and said, "Bobby! Your family came out of the crunch and went over to the crypt, in the church." I started to weep a bit but I couldn't weep because you don't, do you. But they were all saved. All because my dad said, "I can't afford to stand in a crunch like that, come out, let's go across to the crypt."

They went over to the crypt. They were already in this crunch of a queue to go down the steps, and my dad pulled them out and said, "We're going over to the crypt." And that's what they did. But this woman told me, and it was a feeling of relief that I was at least doing something... I mean, we had a lot of work there with all the injured people. And we had to make, you know, provisions for everybody.

## **THAT NIGHT IN HOSPITAL**

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### **Doris Russell (17)**

*Doris was a trainee nurse at Bethnal Green Hospital*

We still got bombing raids at night. Not like it was in the Blitz of course, but occasionally the siren would go, and there would be planes, and

bombs would be dropped in the area. You would hear them. This was the pattern, this was what we say in the book, that if the air-raid siren went, if you were on day duty and the siren went after you went off duty, you went back down to casualty out-patients department, to help with any casualties that might be brought in. That's how I came to be down there, that particular night. It didn't happen every night, but every now and again there would be.

Yes, that was one of the instances I said, the air-raid warning went. I think then I wasn't on the medical ward, I was on women's surgical, Sister Henley's ward. I had been on there, and I had gone off duty at quarter past eight, and gone into the dining room and had our evening meal. Very soon after that the siren went, and it was a wet night, it was raining. The siren went, and it was the custom really, that if you were able, if the siren went in the vicinity, and you heard planes or activity, you went down to out-patients to help with any casualties that might come in. Sometimes there were casualties and sometimes there wasn't. Perhaps it was just a plane passing over. There was a ward, a C1, apparently before I was there, it was the maternity ward, but they closed it and made it into a ward to receive air-raid casualties. So it was reinforced, all the windows were blocked up. It was reinforced and special beds were put in with heating cradles to warm the bed. So that if casualties had to stay in for treatment, that's where they went, down to ward C1.

We arrived down in the out-patients department and we waited. Suddenly you hear the ambulances coming, you see. They started bringing in stretchers with patients on them. Well, there was couches in out-patients department. A few beds, but not very many beds. As the ambulance personnel kept bringing in the casualties, there just wasn't room and they were putting them on the floor. The ambulance personnel, they said, "We don't understand this, we don't understand this." Because there was no sign of any injury, nobody was crying out with pain or exclaiming or anything. There was no blood, no signs of fractures, because they were all, they had all been suffocated, they were blue cyanosed. It transpired of course that it was a wet night and somebody had slipped on the stairs and they all just... It seems incredible really. They all just fell one on top of the other. They weren't all brought, because I mean we couldn't cope with them all. I think there was 173, but there was a lot. Then nobody could understand at all, why they all should be dead on arrival, as it was called. They were all marked on their sheets, "DOA", dead on arrival, dead on arrival. We had a mortuary attached to the hospital, but I mean it wasn't all that big, because it was only to be used for patients



ARP Emergency Rescue personnel.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

that died in the hospital, but a number were taken down there. They were mostly women and children. I do remember, it sounds awful really, but on this sort of birth thing, I mean children were piled along there, one on top of the other, for a bit. [...]

People came in to identify and I did go down to the mortuary with one or two, which was a very harrowing experience, to identify relatives. Loose clothing would be all put up in a – you know there would be shoes and coats and things, that we didn't know who they belonged to, a pile of them. Handbags... But I think a lot were also taken to, I think St John's crypt, I think a lot were taken there. [...] I don't remember anybody being brought in that was injured. They were all swollen face, swollen lips and very, very blue, you know, just suffocated.



Dr Joan Martin

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### Dr Joan Martin (27)

*Joan Martin was a junior doctor in the casualty department of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children in Hackney Road*

Yes, actually I was a junior casualty officer and there was a senior casualty officer. And working with me in the daytime normally were two men students from the London Hospital. Then suddenly there was a telephone message, and I think hospitals had to guarantee they would provide beds at once if there was an incident locally. And a phone call came through to the hospital to say that we were to expect 30 “faints” from a tube shelter. And I said to these boys, “That’s a put-up job. They’re trying to see how quickly we get the ward organised.” So with great enthusiasm we took down the cots and put up beds, and the porters and everybody helped ‘cause it wasn’t just us.

It needed to be converted into an adult ward. And we hadn’t really finished doing this when one body after another came. They were all wet, and they were a pale lilac in colour, and we simply couldn’t understand what had happened.

They were dead people and they all had their clothes on, so they would’ve just come in from outside, and as I say the colour is a colour I’ll never forget. So we’re in casualty by this time, having left the ward, on the ground floor. One after another these bodies were brought in, and the casualty ward wasn’t very large as it was a children’s hospital. So I said to the two boys, “We must move” – the ambulance men wanted their stretchers and their blankets back. “And we must just roll them off the stretchers and leave them in the consulting room.” At that moment the senior casualty officer, who was a woman, promptly said I didn’t know



Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

what I was doing. And she had hysterics and went off duty, so that was the last we saw of her. Quite ridiculous: as a very junior officer I was left there coping with this situation. Anyhow, eventually of course a certain number of live casualties came through, and one was a little boy with a broken arm and he was about nine. And he told us what had happened. And he said, "We ran to the shelter and people weren't on duty there, I don't even know whether the lights were on. And something happened on the stairs going down, and we were just piled up." And this little boy had actually climbed over the bodies and climbed up to the top. And obviously some ambulance man had caught him and brought him with others to the hospital.

People like schoolboys could, really you might say, fight their way to the top. But the mothers and the young children...you got to think also, March, they had heavy coats on. I remember so well that they had coats, heavy shoes, coats because of the time of year. And so eventually the bodies were put into ambulances, and the church, on top of the station more-or-less, was used as a mortuary, and others, I think probably the London Hospital, and we were too, really. And the thing that made the ambulance men so apparently unreasonable, and I thought of it fortunately fairly quickly, was the fact that of course their wives and children were down that shelter. And so they were absolutely hysterical. So it, it was really a desperately difficult situation.

I was so lucky to have the boy students and having had quite a lot of casualty experience, I found I was sort of running a department. Even Sister was doing what I said. It should never have happened, I shouldn't have been left in that position at all. The next morning when we'd worked all night... somebody – I could never remember who it was – sent for myself and the two students... well, they didn't even say thank you for what you've done, they said, "You can go now, go for twenty-four hours, but you must be back here without fail tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock." And so I then said goodbye to the boys and sadly I never saw them again, because they weren't allowed to come back the next day... they really were invaluable that night, and it was largely as I say moving dead, heavy bodies with their clothing on, with their heavy coats. Anyhow, I think that I then walked – this is breakfast time – until tea time; I walked across London to Hammersmith...

We were told to go and come back the next day, and we were sworn to secrecy. And they said we mustn't tell anybody what happened.

## SEARCHING FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

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### Eric Linden (16)

It was probably a couple of days later [we found out that my father was one of the victims]. And I think the first people to find out were the ARP people 'cause it was one of their own. They passed it, I assume, to my mother, who promptly got in touch with a couple of uncles or something and they went down and identified the body. They wouldn't let me go down. Saying, "Remember him as he was."



Hilda Rolfe

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### Hilda Rolfe (14)

I walked about all night looking for her. My brother was in the Merchant Navy, and he looked for my mum everywhere. And in the end he found her, he came home, my brother, with a bag with my mum's vest and clothing in it and blood and hair all over the vest and stuff. And that was the end of her life. It took us a long while to find out what was and everything.

I was fourteen then. My sister was in the Air Force, my brother was in the Merchant Navy. And they both came home at the time. And there was a big burial for the whole lot of them, and that was the end of my mum. So it was awful.

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### Iris Nightingale (20)

When I went to work next day, the first person I banged into was the man that I got married to eventually. And I said to him, "Ello Pat", 'cause we called him Pat, his name was Patterson see, so he was "Pat" to everybody. I said, "Ooh, 'ello Pat, 'ave you come back to work?" He just looked at me and he said, "We can't find Mum". So we looked around and found her body in St John's Church crypt. She was dead of course. And it just went on from then on. [Coughs.]

Oh, he started crying, and you know, and I said I'll come with you and I went with him. And we both saw the body laying in the crypt. There were dozens of them, all dead, and his mother was there. She was dead, because she'd taken shelter. That's where she lived in Cyprus Street which wasn't very far from the tube... they used to go and shelter down there 'cause they had no air-raid shelter in their house. And she took the youngest one with her, which was Jean. And Jean was rescued by an ARP man.

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### Joan Foster (5)

I think it was Pete's dad, my uncle Alf, that went looking with Alfie, that's Pete's elder brother, they went looking for wherever the bodies were, to try and identify, and they found Babs and Iris. I mean there was a lot, I didn't realise actually that there was a lot of people, quite a lot survived who ended up in hospital anyway. But as that doctor said, they weren't allowed to say anything. They were all told just to keep it quiet, but my uncle did find the two girls.

### THE DAY AFTER

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#### Doris King (20)

And then when, the next morning, a lot of people [in the shelter] were moving at six, half six, going, ready to go home. So I had to go to work. So I went off, and as I were going up the stairs, there was a group of people, children and women, I could hear this woman saying, "Oh yeah, it's a bad night." She said, "There's thirty-odd people died. And they're over at St John's, taken them over to there." And, you know, I couldn't make it out. I had no one to talk to. I was making me way back to the flat. And then my dad was coming home from his night watch, he come home to have a bit to eat and that. But I had already gone to work, because I had to be at work at eight o'clock. Dad went in a little bit later with being up all night. And my dad and I never ever spoke of it. Nobody spoke. [...] But I couldn't believe it [days later] when I read it in the paper, when, it was in the paper about it. 173 died...

Now I've got a question I could ask. If all those people come rushing in from Green Street, where did they come from? And how did my dad go, go to work? And he's never ever mentioned, we never spoke a lot. We had to keep our place when we were younger. I mean children are more forward today. But, I still want to know how, my dad, how did he get out? Unless there was another door that led out of the thing. I often wonder, did he help to move some of them people? [...] And I can't believe my dad never ever says, when he come... when we did meet the next morning, he never spoke a lot, and I wondered if he perhaps was upset over what he'd seen...



Doris King

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### John Barnes (10)



John Barnes

I can remember this particular morning we went to school, St John's School... which was again about three or four minutes walk across Cambridge Heath Road into Peel Grove. And my sisters, my next sisters Hetty and Winnie, they went to St John's School. And this particular morning when the disaster happened, we went via Roman Road to see what had happened on the tube because we'd heard about it, there'd been a catastrophe there. So when we went to school we went that way, to see what the trouble was. All I can remember was seeing an open truck parked right outside the tube, and I can remember seeing the bodies of young children being carried out and put on the open truck. And my sister also saw that, because we stood on the opposite side of the road watching. It was an open truck and they was bringing the bodies out. One of the persons that stuck in my mind that I saw working on the tube and bringing some of the bodies up was Tommy Edwards... who lived in number two Poyser Street. Next door. He lived in number two. I stood there, they was just putting them on the open truck and covering them with the tarpaulin. Where they took them I just don't know. But it was an open truck there that they was putting them on. Terrible.

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### Stanley Watkinson (8)

An accident and that's all it was as far as we knew – even then we didn't know how bad it was until the morning, my mum had to go to work; she used to leave at about six, and she worked round by Mile End Gate. And she said, "I'm gonna be late for work". 'Cause they'd closed it, you couldn't go out, they'd stopped us 'cause of the conditions. So anyway, we came out and when we got to the top three flights of stairs, there was handfuls of people's hair on the stairs, there was only concrete but it wasn't even finished so it was all rough. There was people's hair, there was babies' booties on there, hair clips, that was about the last two flights when you come out. And when we came out, lots of people were waiting about outside there. We ran, and we ran home, and we got indoors. And on the corner of our street there was a baker's. They used to make their own bread there. My mum stopped and we got some rolls, they were still hot. I used to love them hot. We were indoors about ten minutes, an air-raid warning went again. My mum said, "Come", and we ran all the way back up to the tube and went down there again. That was in an hour of us coming out. It happened the night before then. At seven o'clock in the morning. And the

all-clear went fairly quickly after we got down there. When we came out, my mum said, “You go home, have a wash, go to school”. ’Cause she had to go to work. If you was late for work in those days you was for the high jump more or less.

Yeah. I was the centre of attraction [at school], I’d been there when it happened and then come out and saw the state of it. Most of the kids didn’t go down. There was handfuls of hair and baby shoes. Brooches and hair clips and that. And then we heard all the other stories about the buses coming to pick people up and it was the talk, it really was.

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**Babette Clark (11)**

I remember getting dressed and saying to Mum, “Hey Mum, look at this”. I was bruised from my shoulders right down, and so was my sister. So was mum. Anyway. I think I went to school, there was quite a few kids there that weren’t there. Some had been killed that night, others hadn’t gotten to school. They sent me home when they knew that I’d been in it.

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**Ray Lechmere (9)**

Well when I went back to school, I remember going into the class, my mother give me a note at the time to take to the teacher – small, brief, why I’d not been to school, and the teacher just looked at it, threw it on the table, said “right go and sit down”, and I remember my first reaction going into that classroom was three empty chairs, there was the children that didn’t survive that.



## TOWER HAMLETS CEMETERY

In the back streets of Tower Hamlets, the natural world still thrives. It may be hard to believe, but in many inner-city boroughs surrounding the City of London it is still possible to find semi-wild places where you can escape from the noise of the traffic and street markets; where children can play freely and in relative safety; and where you can sit quietly and reflect on London's past.

Tower Hamlets Cemetery is one such place. It's a short walk from Mile End Station, and the entrance, on Southern Grove, is surrounded by the post-war housing estates that transformed the area following the damage caused by the Luftwaffe bombs and rockets. Step through an insignificant-looking gate and you'll find yourself in a green, semi-wild oasis that is – in so many ways – the perfect resting place for more than 30 victims of the Bethnal Green tube station tragedy.

Created in the 1840s, the cemetery quickly became the final resting place of many of the working-class people of the district. By 1889, a staggering 250,000-plus burials had taken place here. Visitors to the cemetery are presented with 29 acres of rambling greenery, much of it left to grow unchecked over the gravestones and memorials. The wilderness is a wildlife-preservation area: birds, shrubs, wild flowers, pond life and towering trees have long flourished here, and the Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery are making every effort to ensure that it stays that way.

Around 30 of the victims of the Bethnal Green tube shelter disaster were laid to rest together in this cemetery, in an area close to the railway line, marking the southern

boundary of the site. Weather and time have taken their toll on most of the graves, but a few can just about be made out. These are some of the inscriptions on the tombstones of those who lost their lives that terrible night:

“In Loving Memory of Our Darlings Sylvia Geary, aged 5 years, Carol Geary aged 6 months who fell asleep on 3rd March 1943. So well loved, not to be forgotten.”

“In Loving Memory of Thomas A. Lechmere, aged 68 years; Florence Lechmere, aged 66 years. Thomas G. Lechmere, aged 43 years. Passed away on 3rd March 1943.”

“In Loving Memory of our beloved daughter Agnes and granddaughter Ruby who were killed in the Tube shelter tragedy on the night of 3rd March 1943.”

“In Loving Memory of my dear wife Rose Elizabeth Price who died on the 3rd March 1943 aged 27 years. Safe in God’s own keeping.”

The quiet, green wilderness of the cemetery, which was closed to further burials in 1966, is a fitting setting for those who died in the horror of the country’s worst civilian disaster of World War II, which took place just a stone’s throw away.



Tower Hamlets Cemetery. Photos: Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust

## LIST OF VICTIMS

Showing the age they were on March 3rd 1943

AARONS, Betty	14	BUTTERFIELD, Charlotte	28
ASSER, Jessie	33	BUTTERFIELD, George	28
BAILEY, Mary	72	CHANDLER, Doreen	14
BAILEY, Rose	41	CHANDLER, Lilian	35
BAKER, George	38	CHAPMAN, Charlotte	25
BAKER, Minnie	14	CHAPMAN, George	23
BASS, Eileen	7	CLATWORTHY, Iris	8
BEAKEN, Eileen	17	CLATWORTHY, Joan	9
BEAKEN, Ethel	53	COLEMAN, Maude	54
BEAKEN, Matilda	44	COLEMAN, Richard	34 (aka Dickie Corbett)
BEGER, Emily	57	COLLETT, Doreen	10
BENDON, Elizabeth	38	COLLETT, Ronald	8
BENNETT, Emma	48	COLLETT, Rose	50
BOSWORTH, Edith	50	COURT, Patricia	23
BOSWORTH, Irene	17	DAY, John	69
BOWLING, Bessie	59	DONGRAY, Annie	22
BOWLING, Eliza	31	ELLAM, Annie	43
BOXER, Annie	25	ELLAM, Frances	20
BROOKS, Henry	10	ELLAM, Pauline	2
BROOKS, Jessie	46	ELLAM, Rosina	17
BROOKSTONE, Israel	67	EMERY, Clara	77
BUTTERFIELD, Alan	3	FLETCHER, Alexander	3

FLETCHER, Elizabeth	28	HOYE, Louisa	44
FORBES, Irene	17	HOYE, Margaret	7
FORBES, Leonora	57	HOYE, Rosina	19
FOWLER, Mary	45	HUTCHINSON, Joan	10
FRENCH, Lilian	29	HUTCHINSON, William	7
GEARY, Carol	5 months	INGLE, Agnes	28
GEARY, Sylvia	6	JOHNS, Peter	7
GROVER, Ethel	48	JOHNSON, Caroline	14
HALES, Joseph	54	JOHNSON, Ellen	6
HALL, Annie	52	JOLLY, Sarah	51
HALL, Edna	13	JONES, Estella	59
HALL, Irene	8	JULIER, Henry	18
HALL, Mary	47	KOROBENICK, Matilda	33
HAMMOND, Rhoda	44	LAND, Barbara	7
HARRIS, Olive	17	LAND, Martha	56
HAWLEY, Leonard	64	LAPHAM, Ronald	15
HAYMAN, Mary	19	LAWSON, Anthony	7
HEWITT, Mary	27	LAWSON, Patricia	3
HIGGINSON, Emily	62	LAZARUS, Maurice	42
HILLIER, Mary	61	LECHMERE, Florence	66
HISCOKE, Ivy	22	LECHMERE, Thomas A	66
HOYE, Lillian	13	LECHMERE, Thomas C	43

The 1943 Bethnal Green Tube Shelter Disaster

LEGGETT, Benjamin	33
LEGGETT, Rose	31
LEGGETT, Roy	7
LEWIS, George	9
LEWIS, Lillie	14
LOFTUS, John	13
LOFTUS, Louisa	15
MAGUIRE, Jean	8
MASON, Charles	50
MATHERS, Ruby	18
MEAD, Eliza	67
MEAD, Florence	35
MEAD, George Jnr	12
MEAD, George Snr	40
MEAD, Kenneth	10
MEAD, Maureen	4
MORRIS, Derek	6
MORRIS, Florence	30
MYERS, Geoffrey	6
MYERS, Sophia	40
NEVILLE, Alfred	45
NEWMAN, Doris	9

NEWMAN, George	45
NEWTON, Sarah	28
NIXON, William	14
PAPWORTH, Rosina	27
PATTERSON, Mary	44
PERRYMENT, Iris	17
POOLE, Sarah	54
PRICE, Rose	27
PUSEY, Emily	48
PUSEY, Henry	51
QUORN, Emily	42
QUORN, Gwendoline	5
QUORN, William	14
RAULINAITIS, Joseph	32
REDWIN, Eileen	7
RELF, Rose Jnr	13
RELF, Rose Snr	41
REYNOLDS, George	72
RIDDELL, Stella	13
RIDGWAY, Ellen	28
ROCHE, Bessie	42
ROCHE, Edmund Jnr	7

ROCHE, Edmund Snr	39	THOMPSON, Kate	63
ROCHE, Joan	10	THORPE, Barbara	22 months
SCEATS, Lilian	15	THORPE, Marie	12
SEABROOK, Barry	2 years 9 months	THORPE, Olive	36
SEABROOK, Sarah	62	TILBURY, Clara	52
SEAR, William	50	TRAYLING, Irene	20
SHARP, Irene	16 months	TRICE, Isabella	39
SHARP, Kenneth	5	TROTTER, Lillian	36
SHEPHERD, Arthur	42	TROTTER, Vera	7
SINNOCK, Lydia	62	VANN, Maud	23
SMITH, Dorothy	11	VANNER, Florence	49
SPEIGHT, Edith	47	WARRINGTON, Doris	16
SPICER, Anthony	9	WELCH, James	52
SPICER, Joan	4	WHITEHEAD, James	69
STEVENS, Mary	54	WILSON, Edna	15
STRETCH, Rosa	41	WOOD, Alfred	63
STRETCH, William Jnr	10	WOOLNOUGH, Elsie	37
STRETCH, William Snr	49	WOOLNOUGH, Olive	12
TARBUCK, George	45	YEWMAN, John	13 months
TARBUCK, Louisa	44		
TAYLOR, James	12		
TAYLOR, Sarah	54		

*Afterwards*

**The disaster had an immediate impact on hundreds of families. Mothers, fathers, sons and daughters - gone. While the authorities hurriedly tried to improve safety measures at similar shelters, survivors began to try to come to terms with what had happened. In contrast to today there was very little in the way of counselling or treatment for the psychological and emotional effect of the traumatic event. Many other families were already dealing with their own grief for those lost in bombing raids or on the battlefields. Witnesses and survivors were often told not to talk about it, for fear of undermining morale and the in turn the war effort. These oral history interviews can give us a unique insight into the longer term, psychological impact of disasters like this.**

## AFTER-EFFECTS ON PEOPLE'S HEALTH

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### Stanley Watkinson (8)

After we got back from there, we went and stayed at my grandmother's flat. The apartment near Globe Road, and I was very ill. Shock it was. I started losing my hair a bit, I was only eight or nine at the time. I wouldn't eat anything at all, and in the end I couldn't walk. I didn't have enough strength to walk. I was at my gran's house, and my dad was in the Army, he was up in the Faroe Islands, up near Iceland. They thought I was gonna... you know, I could end up dying the way it was goin' on. They got him home on compassionate leave. My gran's flat was on the first floor. I remember where the window was, there was like a little window sill inside. I used to sit on there. When I knew he was coming I sat on there nearly all day, but I couldn't walk. If I wanted to get off I had to be carried from there to the toilet, and then carried back. And my dad was supposed to be coming home within two days or three days of the authorities getting in touch with him. And it was about five days 'cause the weather had been so bad there, 'cause they had to come home by boat, they didn't bring anyone home by plane, except if it was a parachutist. He came home by boat and the weather was so bad, and I sat on there all day, and I went asleep in the end on the window ledge, looking out to see him come down the street. And he didn't get home until about seven or eight o'clock, till it was dark. Eight o'clock at night. They woke me up, Dad was here. And I think I got back to normal after this, but I must have weighed about two or three stone, like a bag of bones, like somebody out of, I couldn't – it was just the shock evidently.

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### Ray Lechmere (9)

I only found out years after that the people that went down to help the people to survive the Bethnal Green [disaster] went down into Carlton Square, as it's halfway between Mile End Station and Bethnal Green, and there's a big air vent in the middle of Carlton Square, there's a big green there, there's a big man hole, huge man hole cover, and that opens up and goes down to the station level. And the people went down from there travelled along the line and come up to Bethnal Green and that's the only way they could get into help the people, they couldn't get in from the top because it was so blocked with all the bodies and people, so they was



Ray Lechmere and niece Sue Butler

pulling them out from underneath from the bottom of the station. After I got married my wife, we was talking about it to her grandmother that lived in Carlton Square and she said that she remembers, one person in particular, he was the air-raid warden in Carlton Square, and he was only about 45, 46 at the time, but he never went back to work after that, he was finished, it destroyed him. She said he turned grey, literally turned grey overnight... that's what it did to people.

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**Anna Reid)**

*Anna's great grandmother died on the station steps and her great uncle, who tried to save his mother, was pulled out of the crush. Anna speaks how her Uncle Johnny was affected.*

And my great uncle, Uncle Johnny, and his wife, as a young couple, they were with her. And they couldn't save her. And they got pulled out. And Johnny all these years... He was never the same again. I obviously didn't know him at that age. His granddaughter, they went for a christening, after about four of five people came in, he left. Couldn't stand crowds. [...] every time an air-raid siren went off, he held onto the stairs and shook and wet himself sometimes. He was so nervous. He was quite a nervous lad anyway. But to be with his mum. Oh God, I can't imagine. In a way I wish my nan had been there, cause she was quite a strong woman. Or one of the older brothers had been there, 'cause they were stronger. He was the youngest boy. So although it didn't physically kill him, it did emotionally I think, mentally.

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**Barbara Bittle (4)**

I suppose the next connection was Dad was very ill with colitis a few weeks or months after the disaster and spent a lot of time in St Thomas's. My mother used to leave me with a police wife. She used to go on the tube to Leytonstone to see Dad. And I remember this policeman's wife picking me up, Mum leaving and me screaming my head off. I didn't want to be left by Mum. That sort of reinforces that something happened, I suppose.

I think we recognise that colitis is an emotional disorder. The balance that probably, that's how it came through in him, his experience. He didn't talk about it. It became a physical... I think Mum said as well that he didn't talk much about it. Perhaps he did initially and then that was it.

The other part of colitis was that he died of bowel cancer. I think it's well known that the scarring that colitis causes can create a cancer in the bowel now. So in actual fact it sort of came back when he was sixty and he died from the bowel cancer. I think during the intervening years he buried it a bit. He was that sort of person so I imagine that's what happened. He didn't speak freely about his emotions.

I did actually have counselling for a while and [the counsellor] used to say that she thought that my mother during my early years was depressed from the way I described her. That shocked me, but I think that's right. She didn't feel supported with the neighbours. In fact the neighbour next door, she was quite harsh and Mum used to be in the house on her own during the bombing. I can't remember my dad getting in the shelter and things like that. I presume he was working. I certainly think that affected me.

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### Charlotte Spicer (13)

My youngest sister. She was the one that got crushed in the tube, and damaged all her lungs. She was seven years old, then [...] A police officer got her out, pulled her out, and my other sister, but she suffered all her life with her chest, her lungs. I suppose, being so young, her lungs got damaged. Mum used to have to take her to the London Chest Hospital in Approach Road every week for her chest, and she grew up, she got married, and then it affected her heart. They did a heart bypass, but she was always ill; she was very sickly and that after that. She died when she was 60. She had a blood clot; it went to the main artery towards the heart, and they couldn't do anything, and she died.

[...] my other sister was also in the tube with her. Ada. She suffered all her life with her nerves; she's never ever been in the underground, in the tube train. Never. She'd never go in a lift. She'd sooner walk miles than go in a train or anything like that. She's all right if it's open all the way along, but to go into a tunnel; in a terrible state, she is. She's got very bad nerves now. Very bad nerves. She's 82 next week. Valentine's Day. But she won't speak to anyone about it. [...] She won't speak to anyone, but as I said, they've suffered all their lives, the two of them, really. There's only my sister Ada and I left out of my family.



Charlotte Spicer

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### Dr Joan Martin (27)

Yes, I do [still have nightmares about it]. The thing that is terrible is that the nightmares always take the form of people trampling; I couldn't even bear to lie down for nights, the moment I was lying down I could just see people trampling on people. That was what the nightmare was.

Yes, I have [a fear of crowds now]. I don't readily get involved in a crowd if I can help it, and once or twice on the station, underground station, not Bethnal Green, any underground station that is crowded, I had to get out of the station. I couldn't stay with everybody pushing and shoving to get on a train. On other occasions I've been unable to get in the train and somebody shoved me on, which I was truly grateful. But I do have that reaction. Those are the two things that still exist.

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### Hilda Rolfe (14)

*Hilda Rolfe lost her mother, Sarah Jolly. Hilda was given her effects: a purse containing a single earring and a farthing. At just 14 years old, Hilda was left an orphan.*

My brother and my sister couldn't get out of the forces for some reason... he was in the Merchant Navy. And I used to sit in the flat on my own, when I came home from work and made a fire up and cooked a bit of food. It was a horrible life. [Then] my sister and her husband decided they were gonna get married. [...] So I was tossed out for them to come in to my house. And I had to go and live with a friend of mine who lived in the flats opposite me, I didn't like that at all. I was completely on my own.



Sarah Jolly's purse, single earring and farthing  
Photo: Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust

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### Joan Foster (5)

Yeah, I don't think [my mum] ever went down again. I mean I couldn't go in the tube, and nor could she after that. Because they built Bethnal Green station after, obviously after the war you know, it was finished off.

## LOCKING AWAY THE MEMORIES

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### Babette Clark (11)

Yeah, I definitely got on with me life. I could talk about it to people, you know, if anything ever came up about Bethnal Green when we were living here. People say, “Oh, did you hear anything about the disaster?” And I’d say, “Yeah, I was in it”. And that was it, and push it to one side. My sister, who was sixteen at the time, she would never ever talk about it. Never. And my mum didn’t very much. But apart from that, no, I mean. I told my husband about it. One of those things that had happened in the past.



Babette Clark

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### Charlotte Spicer (13)

Well, [my sisters didn’t talk about it]not really. When I say to her, she says, “Oh, I was all right. I didn’t get sent to a hospital.” But she did. (Laughter.) So I said, “Oh, didn’t you, Ade?” She won’t have it.

[...] My sister Gladys was 7, so she was getting on for 10. [...] I think that’s what she’s done. She’s blocked it out. My sister Gladys – we found afterwards, that her friend Eileen Bass, who lived across the road from us, that she had got killed down there. She’d died, Eileen did. Little Eileen. That was my sister Gladys’ friend. [...] Yes. Really, in a sense, Gladys was lucky; they got her out, although she suffered quite a bit. She was lucky. [...] Eileen Bass, Her family was very close to my family. My elder sister, and all that, they were like my brothers and my sisters. We were all very close. They were always coming over, and we used to go over to Mrs Bass, Mr Bass. It was terrible. [...] No, people didn’t. They didn’t, they didn’t [talk about what happened]. [...] Perhaps it’s because when they spoke about it, it upset them more. You get very emotional when you talk about these things, and think about them, whereas you keep it in your mind, and think about it inwardly.

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### Jacqueline Aston

*Jacqueline’s paternal grandmother and aunt died in the disaster*

I don’t know anything. My father never really spoke about his family. I think there was always this big sadness and he never talked about it. Very, very little did he ever say about his mother or his sister. And of course it

was during the war as well, and his younger sister was evacuated, which is why she wasn't in the disaster.

I think we did some trails about the family tree. I do remember asking Dad about it then. But my dad always laughed about everything and I don't think he ever told me any real facts about anything. The only thing he ever did say, and the only quote I've ever heard from him, was that when he had identified his mum and his sister they were both absolutely perfect. They looked like nothing had happened to them and they were asleep. I thought that was the norm for everybody that died in that disaster but going along to the yearly meetings I found out that wasn't the case, some people couldn't be identified at all. That makes me think they must have been some of the last people to go, therefore higher up the staircase. That is the only thing he ever said to me.

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### **Joan Foster (5)**

Yeah, [they were told] not to speak about it. I know, but it, I don't know. It, it... nobody seemed to talk about it then, it was just a disaster, it happened. And I think maybe because there were so many people in the one place... that everybody was just so sad about what had happened because it was just, woah, what was it 173, more or less in just one area, that I suppose their grief, maybe they didn't talk about it anyway. Or they were told not to, so they didn't.

## **SILENCING THE MEMORIES**

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### **Bob Saxon (16)**

People couldn't go down there because it was covered with bodies. No, but when, there was someone shouting out, "Don't say nothing, keep it quiet, because it's all propoganda for the Germans, don't say nothing". And there were a lotta spies in the place, so, there we are.

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### **Doris Russell, 17**

During the next week, we didn't stay... Hilda and I were sent on holiday, after the next week, because it was drummed into us not to talk about it. "Don't talk about this to anybody, don't talk about this to anybody."

We, I suppose being very young and very junior. We had almost, well five months there then, we got sent home on holiday.

It was the Bethnal Green Corporation [who stated you mustn't talk about this]. I suppose they felt that they were at fault, to a certain extent. It was all kept, you know, very, if you read the book, it was all kept very hush, hush, not to be talked about, and it wasn't... Then when I went back to Bethnal Green, after the holiday, I went straight on to night duty. Where of course you were cut off, to a certain extent, from the rest of civilisation and it just wasn't talked about. It was never sort of mentioned.

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### Eric Linden (16)

*Eric Linden was a young runner for the Daily Mail. When the air-raid sirens sounded that night he went out to look for his father (his account is earlier in this book). He stumbled upon the scene as it was unfolding. He did not realise until later that his father had died on the stairwell. Eric phoned in a report to the newspaper but it never appeared.*

[...] what set it off, was that people were going down the tube. There was one light I think, and I think it was a 25W lamp. To serve the whole of this stair... down and down and down. It was wet because it had been raining. I think it had stopped at that stage. But the stairs were wet and therefore greasy. There was no centre – what do you call it... A long pole all the way down the middle. Nothing like that. Opening was... if you look at that fireplace, it wasn't much wider than that from what I remember.

You've got people not walking down one at a time which would be no problem, but jamming into it. Most times you get away with it. Might tear your clothes or something but you'd get away with it. Not this time. Anyway, I wrote up the story, I rang it into the *Daily Mail*, and they couldn't print it, Government stopped them. They put a ban on it. The *Daily Mail* did send down a reporter and a photographer, so they got some shots. But nothing that decried what the Government was saying, which was that it was the result of an air raid. At one stage they said it was a result of bombs being dropped. There were no bombs dropped. There was no aircraft, there were no searchlights, nothing. This is after the warning had gone. I didn't go out, I looked out the windows, nothing going on. Yet they insisted that this was the reason. They would not tolerate anyone suggesting it was a panic. Because the reasoning was fair enough, that if people were known to have panicked because of bombs, they weren't gonna use tubes anymore, and there'd been enough trouble to be allowed to use the tubes in the first place. This was the one reason that they wouldn't use the tubes



Eric Linden

anymore for fear of being hit by a bomb etc. So they killed the story and they insisted there had been an air raid and they insisted that a bomb had been dropped.

The Government [insisted], Ministry of Propaganda. God knows who, somebody put a veto straight down, and kept it down. What we actually heard, which was one of the reasons why I started running up there, was this terrible noise. I wasn't used to shell fire, but all the people in the East End, they knew what shell fire was. What the anti-aircraft guns sound like. They knew what the bombs sounded like. And no way would they believe that this thing that had gone up, it was a noise that, you can't describe it. It was extremely loud, it was like a whoosh. A venomous whoosh. And it had gone up. We had never heard this. I'd never heard it certainly. None of the people that had lived through the Blitz had heard anything like this, which is what induced the panic. And panic it certainly was. No way would they release any parts of the story. It made front pages of course, but a heavily milked version made front pages.

My story, as I said, never saw the light of day, although I was given a credit, on page three there was a little box: "This boy brought the news." And I thought marvellous, except they spelled my name wrong. I work for this lot and they can't even spell my name. That was the acknowledgement that I had scooped the story, and it was a scoop because as far as I know none of the other reporters were there at the same time as the *Daily Mail* people were. Although obviously they all followed it, and they just as much followed the line laid down. I think it took until the early '60s, 1960, when they finally admitted that there had been no raid etc., and that basically my story was right.

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### **Dr Joan Martin (27)**

Because [my parents] were in the London area, I was thinking – by this time they were in Streatham – I was thinking you see, that they would hear about it on the radio, there wasn't such a thing as television in those days. I rang my mother the next morning, she knew I was doing casualty work and I said, "I've had a dreadful night and nothing has happened to me, I'm perfectly all right, I don't want you to worry." I thought she would, as I say, hear about it on the radio but there was absolute silence. And she never heard, and I never told her, ever.

It was very interesting, why I ever owned up to being there was the fact that I have a very disabled friend, and very much a friend of the family, and I was with him one day, he said, "Do you know, I've heard the most dreadful

story.” And I said, “Yes,” and he said, “I met up with somebody who was involved in Bethnal Green tube disaster. Somebody who escaped.” And I said, “Yes”, and I listened to what he had to say. He said, “Have you ever heard about it?” I said, “Actually, I was there.” He was extremely shocked to think that he’d known me for a long while and never heard anything about it. And so he said that he thought I should own up – by this time the [memorial] services had started. That’s how he’d heard about it. So he said that he thought I should own up and say that I was there and attend the service. And I thought that was the last thing I wanted to do, but in the course of time, by the time the service came round, several months in between, I turned up and of course they were pleased to see me because never have they met up with another medical person, nor have I. Occasionally a nurse, but not a doctor.

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### **Sandra Scotting (born shortly after the war)**

Really, I didn’t know very much about the disaster at all. My mother’s sister, May, lived in our house all my life. May never married, my Aunt May. She was a survivor of the disaster, as my mother was. And they never spoke about it. I suppose most of my older childhood life, I knew that there had been the Bethnal Green tube disaster and I knew that my grandmother and my cousin died, but that’s all. And the fact that they lived in the same house, and they never spoke about it, that was it. It wasn’t until the 50th anniversary when the local Council held the first ever memorial service, I took my mother to that at St John’s Church. And reporters were standing around outside, asking if anybody was a survivor, could anybody tell them about it? And that’s the first time my mother actually spoke about what happened to her, so that was quite a revelation for me.

After telling the journalists what had happened to her, she then did start opening up a bit more and I think in a way that was probably quite cathartic for her to actually speak. In the War nobody had counselling of course, but today you would have a counsellor if you were traumatised by a terrible thing. And of course she talked to journalists who were strangers. And I think talking to strangers was probably just what she really needed to open up about what happened. And different things came out after, that we began to realise, I can tell you that in a minute, but I began to realise more about it. And little silly things, really. I can remember as an adult, my mother saying to me as I was walking down the stairs, “You should hold on to the bannisters you know”. And I used to say,



Sandra Scotting

“I’m grown up now Mum, I’m not a child.” But I find myself now telling people, particularly giving talks to schools, saying to the children, hold on to the bannisters because stairs are still slippery even today.

When my son was little, I was at work and my mum was at home looking after him. And she went to the local toddler’s group or play group in the hall down the corner and she said to the play leader, “Can I stay with my grandson today?” And she said, “yeah, of course you can if you want”. And she said, “only this is the anniversary of when my nephew died and he’s the same age as my grandson. And I just can’t leave him”. That play leader didn’t tell me until after my mother had left here, but it was... you don’t realise how much that must have lived with her. When she said what she experienced every night of her life when she lay down to sleep, she could hear screams and cries, it never left her. [...]

I just think talking to other survivors now, you were told to say nothing to anybody at that time. You were told to keep this secret. And because there was a war on, and people were dying in other circumstances, I think it was stiff upper lip and just get on with life. You didn’t dwell on it. The more you talk to people that were involved, the more they say, but there was no point in saying how awful it was for me because the next day someone down the road had lost their mum or their children in a bomb attack. So everybody knew what everyone was... it was an unsung, unspoken camaraderie with everyone in the area. They all knew that everybody was suffering. One way or another.

*Memorial Service*

The first memorial service dedicated to the disaster was held in 1993 on the 50th anniversary of the disaster at St. John on Bethnal Green Church. It was attended by the Bishop of Stepney and the Mayor of Tower Hamlets, who then unveiled the first memorial plaque above the station entrance. There were no other services for 15 years, until the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust was formed and organised a service on the 65th anniversary in 2008. A memorial service has been held annually at St Johns since then. The service is conducted by Reverend Alan Green, Rector of St John's and a founding trustee of the charity.



*Architect's vision*

The disaster was first memorialised at the site of the disaster some 50 years afterwards, with a small plaque above the entrance steps. After noticing the plaque in 2006, architect Harry Paticas set about designing a much more ambitious and fitting memorial to those that lost their lives that could include the names of those that had been lost. In the following interview he tells about his ideas for the design and explains how publishing his sketches soon led to a charity being set up by survivors to get the memorial built.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH HARRY PATICAS

### Q: What first gave you the idea of creating a memorial to the disaster?

**A:** *Walking down the steps into Bethnal Green Tube Station on my way to work one day in May 2006, I happened to look up and see the plaque above the stairs. It said: "In 1943, 173 men, women and children died on this staircase". It struck me as totally extraordinary that so many people could be trapped, and die, in that space, so I decided to research more about it. I looked up reports in papers, spoke to people in the neighbourhood and heard various stories. About a week later, when I was again going down the steps, the idea to create a memorial struck me in an instant: I would take a cast of the space where the people died and lift it up directly above the stair. I wanted to show the space in its actual physical dimensions, so people could see just how horrific it must have been with 300 people trapped within; by lifting it up above the stair, it would become strikingly visible and at the same time form a canopy. Also, to have the memorial in the place where it actually happened is very rare.*

### Q: So, how did you get started?

**A:** *I sent a 3D visualisation and some text to the East London Advertiser, who published it with the headline "Local architect proposes Stairway to Heaven memorial", which is how the name "Stairway to Heaven" came about. When later I asked the paper if they'd had any written response to the article, at first they hesitated, but on pressing they managed to dig out a short handwritten letter. They faxed it to me and I was just able to make out the name Alf Morris, with his phone number. When I called him he was very pleased to hear from me, and invited me to his home in Hornchurch. On opening his front door, he had tears in his eyes and said, "I've waited 50 years for someone like you to come along."*

### Q: What was it like meeting a survivor of the disaster for the first time?

**A:** *For me it was an incredibly moving moment, to have made this proposal and then to meet a person directly and emotionally connected with the disaster. He loved the design and said: "We've got to make this happen." Soon after, we set up a public meeting in St John's Church hall. About 250 people turned up. As I recounted Alf's story of the disaster, I looked up and saw that maybe half of the people in the room were crying. I then realised that this was one of the very few times that public mourning had been able to take place. In that meeting, there was common agreement that the memorial must happen. In fact, Denise Jones, Leader of the Council, also attended the meeting and said that the Council would support it. It really was quite an amazing moment.*



Memorial plaque installed in 1993 over the steps where the disaster took place. Photo: Sunil060902



Alf Morris



Harry Paticas

**Q: It has been eight years since the first design. What challenges have you faced since then?**

**A:** *It's been a very long road. We've had lots of obstacles and we're still working on legal agreements with the Council. There have been three planning applications; then the economic downturn came, which made fundraising very hard. Also, given the extended timescales, some companies that had promised materials or money withdrew their offers. On the positive side, however, this gave us time to adapt and learn. We visited other memorials with the [Stairway to Heaven Memorial] Trust, so were able to finesse the design without making decisions too quickly.*

*A key shift in the design was when London Underground said that they wouldn't agree to having the memorial overhang the staircase, despite us having full planning approval; we realised that they were deeply concerned about health and safety and also about the negative psychological story in relation to the station. So we had to make a hard decision, with the charity, to look at alternative designs and locations for the memorial.*

*Eventually, we kept the same dimensions of the stair and we shifted it about 3.5m to the side, into Bethnal Green Gardens, and carved out the interior of the stairway. In a way, I think that's the moment when the design actually*

Artists impression of Bethnal Green Disaster Memorial. Photo: Arboreal Architecture



*improved: now you could be underneath the stairway, looking up into a void representing the space where everyone was trapped. At the same time, you could turn around and look down into the stairwell where these people actually died.*

*We decided to cut 173 small light cones into the canopy, all angled towards south and each representing a person that died. The light cones are arranged to convey a sense of compression: at one end they're a bit more dispersed and random, at the other they're much denser and closely packed – this references how the disaster took place on the steps.*

*On the night of the disaster, a single 25-watt light bulb was all the public had to navigate down the stairs into the station – this is echoed by the understated design of one 25-watt LED light, shining up into the hovering stairway.*

*When constructed, the stairway will have a strong urban presence, visible from all the way around the road junction. This will hopefully draw inquisitive people over to investigate; they'll find the historical account of the disaster on the plaque, directly under where the stairway will be.*

**Q: Did you have any problems with the construction of the memorial?**

**A:** *Yes, it's a small but very sensitive and complex project, as it is built right next to (and over) an underground station and has public utilities running through the site. Since moving the memorial into the park, London Underground was very supportive and assisted the design process in establishing foundations over the crown of the westbound tube tunnel.*

*After obtaining plans from the utility companies showing the locations of the buried gas, water and electric services, we were initially concerned that the gas and water mains would conflict with the proposed location of the foundations and plinths. But after digging trial pits, we soon discovered that the gas and water mains were not as indicated on the plans, and, thankfully, were further away from the memorial. Eventually, we received approval from the water and gas companies to part-build over their pipes.*

**Q: Can you talk us through your decisions about the materials?**

**A:** *Our initial proposal for the stairway was a metal-framed structure with a bronze skin – solid bronze would have been impossibly heavy and expensive. When we moved the stairway into the park and opened up the underside, we looked at a range of other materials, including glass, aluminium, concrete and wood. Eventually, we settled on teak timber as it is very durable, and has a high strength-to-weight ratio.*



Architect Harry Paticas with model of Bethnal Green Disaster Memorial. Photo: Arboreal Architecture

*The challenge for us was to find a sustainable source of teak, and, by chance, we came across a company called Timbmet, which had access to teak salvaged from the bed of the Irish Sea. The original teak baulks were on a ship sailing from Burma to Liverpool in 1917 that was torpedoed by a German U-boat in the Irish Sea. After sitting on the ocean floor for 90 years, they have been gradually salvaged and dried out. The “ocean teak” is apparently very popular with yacht owners, and we were lucky to have been donated the teak for the bench by Timbmet. The teak has been certified by the Rainforest Alliance as “rediscovered wood”, and is sustainable by virtue of its reuse. The bench that you can now sit on at the memorial may be up to 400 years old, and is, by coincidence, a connection to both World Wars.*



Model of Bethnal Green Disaster Memorial. Photo: Arboreal Architecture

**Q: Q: So you're keen on sustainable materials?**

**A:** *A: Yes, sustainable design, too. We wanted the darkest possible paving for the memorial and the best sources were from India and China. Because we care about the transport emissions and ethics of mining on the other side of the world, we researched UK sources and ended up selecting a dark stone from Scotland, known as Whinstone. The plinths are a white-polished precast concrete, with small pieces of black aggregate, creating a link to the colour of the paving.*

**Q: Q: Have you had any problems with graffiti or other damage?**

**A:** *A: Very little graffiti has been applied so far, but it's in the public domain and you never know what might happen. I think the local people know enough about the disaster to have respect for the memorial. I once found some graffiti carved into the bench and just sanded it off. Early on, when researching the possibility of graffiti on memorials, I came across a reference on Banksy's website where he stated that “we do not do memorials”.*

*The London Borough of Tower Hamlets did advise us that skateboarding might be a real problem, from recent experience at other memorials. To be on the safe side, we did install some small stainless-steel studs in the ground as a deterrent. A local skateboarder was willing to tell us where the best lines of attack would be for jumping onto the plinths, so we based the layout of the studs on that. The semi-scattered flow was our attempt at integrating the studs into the design – they appear to emanate from the bench and flow around the memorial. People often ask what the studs are for, wondering if there is some symbolism connected to the disaster – they don't immediately think of them as a deterrent, which is good.*

**Q: Q: What did you learn from other memorials?**

**A:** *A: We visited many London memorials with charity trustees, and they felt that some were rather intimidating, when approachable only from the front. We realised that allowing the public to walk around the structure would be a far richer experience.*

*We then had the idea that the personal testimonial plaques could face both ways, and imagined children really interacting with the memorial, perhaps doing research for a school project. The text you often find on memorials can be dry historical accounts, or simply names. In order to build up a fuller sense of what happened in the disaster, we decided to add ages to the names, and include 15 personal testimonials, written as first-hand accounts – these were inspired by the plaques at the Watts memorial in Postman's Park in the City of London.*

*The plaques are bronze, with raised lettering that is easier to clean and also allows the brighter gold colour to be picked out against a dark background. It's very moving when you see somebody's fingers touching the name of one of their loved ones. At the Cenotaph in Whitehall, the trustees noticed that the wreaths were just leant against it at the base, and felt that there should be a better way of securing them. In our design, the memorial plinths resting on the ground incorporate two projecting discs, in the same white concrete, for fitting wreaths on, and two small recesses for bunches of flowers. In the opening ceremony for the memorial, the plinths were entirely covered in wreaths and flowers.*

**Q: Q: How has your involvement in the project affected you?**

**A:** *A: It's been quite a responsibility, with people looking to us to deliver the memorial, but after years of challenging meetings, as well as logistical and technical problems, our confidence grew and we all worked harder to find solutions.*

*Sandra Scotting [Secretary of the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust] and I have had a wonderful working relationship, and the committee has been a bit like family. Now that I live so near to the site, I often check it over for graffiti or rubbish. It is a great privilege to be involved in the project. Each year, together with committee members, we read out some of the names of the dead at the annual memorial service – in a way, this is the emotional high-point of the year. Throughout the project, I've often had a strong feeling of connection to the people who died, and of gratitude, maybe indirectly through the local community – we and the charity made a big effort to make this happen, and hopefully it won't be long before it is completed.*

*Acts of Remembering*

**The Stairway to Heaven memorial was commissioned in honour of those who lost their lives in the disaster as well as their families, the survivors, and the rescue and emergency services personnel who suffered long-term trauma as a result of what they saw on that night in March 1943.**



## REMEMBERING THE VICTIMS

The innovative stairway memorial, located in Bethnal Green Gardens between the underground station entrance and Bethnal Green Library, will be completed in 2015, some 72 years after the event. It carries the names and ages of all 173 victims, who will also be represented by 173 conical light shafts in the roof of the inverted teak “stairway”, through which sunlight will shine. Sixteen small plaques on the main structure tell the story of what happened on that fateful night, with testimonies from survivors, a doctor, police and relatives of the victims, chosen by local school children.

A teak bench has been installed on which people can sit and reflect on this tragic historical event, or simply enjoy the surrounding garden. The planting around the memorial has been carefully considered, and some of the plants chosen have a specific connection to the memorial. You might see the pretty pink-edged leaves of the blue, bell-type flower of the *Polemonium reptans*, for example, known as “Stairway to Heaven”.

A dedication service for the memorial took place on 3 March, 2013, the 70th anniversary of the event, at St John on Bethnal Green Church, which stands directly opposite the memorial. It is also the church where many of the victims’ bodies were taken on the night of the disaster. Father Alan Green, the Rector, led the service, supported by representatives from the Muslim, Buddhist and Jewish faiths. Approximately 600 people, including about 25 survivors, attended the service.

Memorial architect Harry Paticas is pictured by the memorial with Bethnal Green Tube Station to the left and St John on Bethnal Green Church behind. The sustainable teak “stairway” seen at the top of the model he is holding, will house the conical light shafts. The hollowed-out structure evokes the space in which about 300 people were trapped.

The Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust has been raising money to build the memorial for the past eight years. Through sheer hard work and determination, the Trust, whose voluntary members are survivors and from survivor and victim families, have raised the vast majority of the £500,000 needed for the memorial. Most of the remaining survivors are now in their 80s and 90s, and the Trust’s pressing desire is to complete the memorial so those survivors will see it finished in their lifetime.



Some of the survivors at the memorial, 2013. Photo: Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust



Memorial flowers 2013. Photo: diamond geezer

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### **Sandra Scotting**

*[Sandra describes the meeting organised by the architect, Harry Paticas and survivor Alf Morris]*

They did this drawing, this proper drawing. They called a meeting at the church hall. And the room was absolutely packed. It was standing room only. And by the end of that meeting everybody in that room agreed that this is what they need, and practically everybody was in tears. There were lots of survivors there, there was relatives of people that died. And it was a most emotional thing I'd ever been through at the time and that's when I realised more than anything else just how much it still meant to everybody, how much their memories were still alive. And I did say to the architect, "I am working, I have other jobs, I have a family, I haven't got much time but I'm happy to give you a hand if you like. I've set up a charity before and if you need some help with that, because you can't start raising money to build something like that unless you're a charity." Anyway they did get back to me eventually and I said, "I'm quite happy but I haven't got much time", so I did, I set up the charity and it began to take over my life, to the point where I decided I actually was almost doing more of that than my real work at work, so I got to the age where I said, "I'm due to get my pension very soon so I'm going to retire and this will be my one-year, possibly two-year retirement project." That was six years ago. And it's now almost a 24/7 operation. But it'll be wonderful when it's all finished.

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### **Barbara Bittle, 4**

[...] we've tried to attend the service every year. As you know we came across the [Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust] people collecting, first of all my son at the tube station at Bethnal Green and then we later met up with him at Paddington. So it's mainly through them that we've got involved. I get the newsletter every so often.

I was overjoyed. Especially at the beginning, I just thought we were – we saw pictures of it and heard bits about it. Then when Sandra said that it might be that we have a plaque for the emergency services, that delighted people. Then when she actually said that they would put my dad's name on the plaque, Richard Sharrock. So yes, I was overjoyed.

Well, I mean, if it raises the idea that what war was like... the people coming, it was a very busy spot. The situation of the memorial is so close to the disaster. Yeah. It's important that when you go to the service and they read out all the names of the women and children. The fathers came home from work to find just whole families had died, it's terrible.

On the plaque that Dad's got, it talks about Home Guard and think there was a fireman and doctors. And then there's another plaque that's the actual experience of a doctor, isn't there. It's only through the plaque that I really know. I suppose I'm amazed that no relatives of the other policemen have come forward. It's a shame because I'd like to meet them. There must have been huge amount of police involved as well.

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### Charlotte Spicer, 13

Well, I think it's important to remember because it's something terrible that happened there, and families that had people who died, and things like that; just to dismiss it all, I think it's very important, to me, anyway, to see it, even though it's not my immediate family at the time who got killed. But Tony and Joanie, and there was young – Glad's little friend, Eileen. I couldn't think of her name for a minute. I think it's very important to have a remembrance of them. It's like when they do Poppy Day, and all that. I think it's good to stop – because everyone's in such a hurry, these days. Stop and think, and remember, what a terrible thing a war is. For some people, who have never been through a war, or anything, they look at you, "Oh. What's the matter with her?" sort of thing. They don't realise what a terrible, terrible thing it is. Now, when I think back, when my mum was crying, what it was all about with her. You know, why she was crying; because she went through the First World War, didn't she? My father was in that, the First World War.

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### Sandra Scotting

I think right from the beginning I always felt that memorials sometimes, First World War memorials particularly, can't think of another word, seemed dead. They were, I don't know, there wasn't life about them. We don't want just an obelisk or a statue that's got some names on. We want this to be something that is poignant, and I find now that people walk around the memorial and read the plaques and get very emotional and very involved by it. I'm hoping that's in a way brought home in a way exactly how people felt, rather than just a list of names, you can walk along there and read what it was like for the doctor, what it was like for the rescuer, what it was like for a survivor, what it was like for a relative. That was the aim, to make it a bit more than something that was just ordinary... And then, when people started contacting me and saying, "I was a survivor or my relative died" I'd say to them, "well can you give me some information", and as they started bringing this information in, that's when I realised that it's so important if we can to get all of them. Make sure that there is always

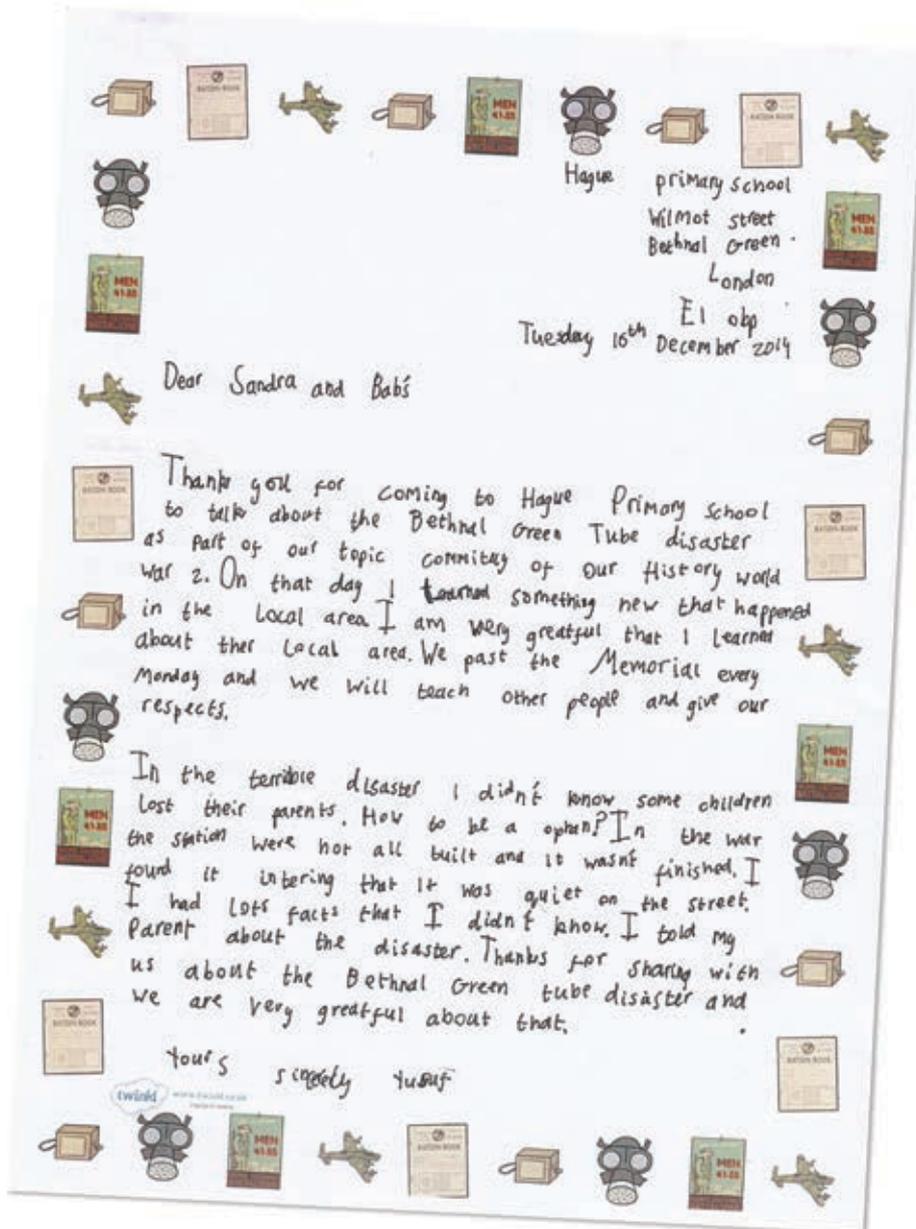


PC Richard Sharrock and wife.  
Photo: Barbara Bittle

that there. We want it to be there for generations to come. We don't want it to be something that's forgotten in fifty years' time or something, it's got to always be there. And the fact that it's now going to be available digitally for anyone to research is amazing. [...]

I've only ever had one person who didn't like it. One person who was a survivor, she didn't like the design of the memorial and she disagreed with it completely and she would have nothing to do with it. Everybody else has either said, "I wasn't quite sure about the design but now I've seen it I like it", there's been quite a lot of that, now they've seen it up and they're really thrilled with it. I don't think I've had one single survivor who didn't want something done to recognise what they'd been through. And last March when we unveiled two thirds of the memorial there were tears, loads and loads of tears from people, so thrilled it had been done. Some people said, you know, when this is finished – our chairman Alf Morris said "when this is finished I can die happily". And I think in a slightly watered-down version a lot of people felt that something was there to show what they'd been through or what their relatives had been through or what they'd had to keep secret for so long, at long last. I've not had, not had anybody really that said anything other than "at long last this has happened." [...]

When we go to schools now, those children in the class I'm giving a talk to, some of them have come from war-torn countries. And when I talk about what happened with the disaster and I try to bring it up to today, look, you may think this happened seventy years ago, but just look at your television screens, all round the world now there is wars going on. And it's the innocent women and children that mostly that get killed, and that's what happened here. It was 60 children, mostly women and children that died in this disaster. But it's still happening today, and I try to say to these children: if one of your fellow pupils in your class has come from a war-torn country, maybe now you will understand a little better what trauma they've gone through. And also in some cases I say to them, if you don't get involved in war, terrorism, fights even, it will mean that your mother and your sister and brother is not going to suffer the fact that you have been injured in the same sort of way as this. It is just as relevant today as it was then. And it doesn't matter who I talk to or what country they may have come from, what nationality their family background is, they all can now relate to this because I try to put it in ordinary terms, if you like, and bring it home to the fact that it's mums and children. I don't know if I'm going so save anybody fighting or whatever, but you just try, and if it means that someone who's come from the war in Syria or something and they're in this classroom and they're listening to what I'm saying, and if their fellow pupils understand what they've been going through, then maybe it's done some good. I don't know, but you have to try, I think.





*Chapter 9*

*Further Information*

Detail: Library in Bethnal Green Tube Shelter.  
Photo Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

The project would not have been possible without our hard working project managers, Dr Amy Tooth Murphy and Dr Nicola Samson along with invaluable and timely support from Sam Dodd. We have a dedicated team of volunteers, who have worked tirelessly and passionately on the project. They are: Susan Allen, Emma Anacoottee, Annicka Anncliff, Andy Bland, Cindy Boga, Amy Cooper, Sarah Dimmitt, Andy Hill, Barbara Humphries, Sharon Kean, Dvora Liberman, Alison Meeds, Heidi Murphy, Sarah O'Mahony, Joy Puritz, Caroline Randall, Byron Silver, Philip Sunshine, Jo Till, David Williams, Rah X.

We would like to thank the Bishopsgate Library for hosting the project; Dr Nicola Samson for her fantastic work on the oral history extracts; Joy Puritz for all her work copy-checking and proof-reading this book; artist Lewis Gibson for creating the Memoryscape audio trail; Barbara Stretch and Lorraine Waterfield at Bethnal Green Library for their long-term commitment to the audio trail, and architect Harry Paticas who has so generously embraced the trail idea. Our thanks also go to history co-ordinator Euan Williams for creating the education resources; John Walleit for designing this book; Jude Tackley and the supporting UEL finance and administration staff; all the venues who agreed to host our travelling exhibition; and of course to the Heritage Lottery Fund, not only for their major financial input but also their helpful staff support. Thanks also to staff at Tower Hamlets Archive, the National Archives, Firepower Museum for their advice and assistance.

Thank-you to Tommy Walsh for the audio trail narration and all the staff and children who helped in the recording: Richard Davies at Morpeth School and pupils Abu Ansar, Sabique Al-Wasi, Joel Eley Ware, Sufian Hussain, Macy McLaren, Rahma Yusuf, Roisin Shanks, Emma Morris, Hodan Ismail, Devki Makwana, Cawo Sharif, David Wigley and Yusuf Tirike. Gillian Ruskin at Globe Primary School and pupils Adil Hussain, Taris Gardiner, Amy Webb, Thomas Dawson, Rezaul Kayyum, Mahirah Begum, Amiira Elmi, Rudy Hudson and Jumima Rahman.

In particular, our thanks go to Sandra Scotting and the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust committee without whom this project would not exist.

There are many other people, too many to name individually, whose expertise, support and thinking have contributed to the success of this project; we would like to thank you all.

Most of all our greatest thanks go to the many survivors, family members, friends, nurses, doctors and rescuers who have shared their stories with us and done so much to help bring this extraordinary Second-World-War disaster into our 21st-century lives.

## SOME REFLECTIONS FROM PROJECT STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

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### **Dr Toby Butler, University of East London, Project Director**

It has been a huge privilege to be entrusted by the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust and the families they represent to work on such a sensitive and important project. I am immensely grateful to the staff and volunteers who gave so much of their time, passion and effort to the work involved. Historians rarely get to meet the protagonists in the events they consider, but oral history interviewing has allowed us to do so. A particular highlight for me has been meeting and recording some of the survivors and family members, and attending the annual memorial service. This has allowed me to appreciate better what an astonishing black hole tragedies like this can suddenly create in families, friendship groups and the wider community. These encounters have been deeply moving experiences that I will never forget.

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### **Dr Amy Tooth Murphy, Project Manager**

To begin with, a confession: when I took on the role of Project Manager for the Bethnal Green Memorial Project I knew very little about the Bethnal Green tube disaster. As a Scottish person living and working in Glasgow, with little previous connection to London, I was unaware of the disaster's place in the history of the city and of the Second World War. As a historian of marginalised people and silenced voices I am all too aware of how history can obscure experiences that jar with the "official story" or "authorised version of events". And so it has been an honour for me to work on a project that aims to redress this gap in our social and cultural history.

This has been an ambitious project from the outset, the emphasis being on engaging with the local community on as many levels, and through as many avenues, as possible. As such it has challenged conventional concepts of academic and university-based projects, by being avowedly and consciously committed to public and community engagement. For me, one of the most enjoyable aspects of this focus was working with our talented, passionate, and dedicated team of volunteers. It was my

pleasure to work with them in conducting oral history interviews, carrying out archival research, creating the project archive, planning and hosting a wide range of events, working with schools and local projects, and generally coming together to deliver this exciting and diverse project. One of the great bonuses for me is that I learned a great deal from the volunteers, whose passion for London history was a constant and common theme. This project simply would not have succeeded without them, and I want to take the opportunity to thank them all for their hard work and, most importantly, their friendship and kindness in welcoming me, a “foreigner”, into their city.

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### **Sam Dodd, Acting Project Manager**

Working on the Bethnal Green Memorial Project was incredibly rewarding. I worked with a dedicated team of volunteers and freelancers on everything from transporting our travelling exhibition across London, to archiving resources, working on the website and the oral history database. I am very proud to have been part of a project that will help memorialise the history of the disaster and give a voice to the incredible community that suffered so much in the aftermath.

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### **Dr Nicola Samson, Project Manager**

Working on the Bethnal Green Memorial Project has been a real honour. Though I only participated in the latter stages, I was delighted to have had that opportunity. The moving and thought-provoking stories of people involved in the tragedy brought alive for me the horrors of the event and its aftermath, and thanks to this project they will continue to do so for generations to come.

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### **Stefan Dickers, Head Archivist at Bishopsgate Institute**

This important and valuable project is long overdue and we are honoured to provide a home for, and access to, these recordings and other collected material, so that future generations can learn about this tragic event. We are also thrilled to be working with the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust and look forward to providing a home for the archive of its continuing inspirational work. The project has gathered a wonderful and committed set of volunteers, who have been crucial to its success, and we have hosted a number of great sessions on archival practice and cataloguing with them at Bishopsgate Library. It has been a joy working with them on a regular basis. I can only congratulate everyone involved in the project on their work, and thank them for the contribution they have made to ensuring that these important stories survive.



### **Joy Puritz**

Having recently written the biography of a friend of mine, Joan Martin, who was involved as a doctor in the disaster, I wanted to take part in the project. I have conducted interviews with survivors, given several talks about the disaster, helped to move around our pop-up exhibition, and done some writing. I have enjoyed making use of the National Archives in Kew, making friends with fellow volunteers, and the whole experience of the project has been very interesting and moving.



### **Philip Sunshine**

I am a local resident hoping to make a difference, and very interested in oral history. I recorded interviews with survivors and others affected by the disaster, and really enjoyed working within a great team of volunteers and staff. The Bethnal Green Tube Disaster is truly an event that should be, and now is, memorialised properly.



### **Jo Till**

I am very interested in the history of the East End and had read about the disaster, so when I heard about the project, I was keen to get involved. I have interviewed survivors and others with memories of the disaster, and have also researched certain aspects of the disaster and written text for the book. I have really enjoyed working on the project – so much so that I started a Masters in History in September 2014.



### **David Williams**

The Bethnal Green project was an opportunity to explore and understand what the tragedy meant to the community; the social fabric of families and lives of individuals. As an oral historian, I have been privileged to listen to those people who were prepared to talk freely and share such painful memories. They have moved on, but for over 50 years, were denied access to the truth. Survivors were able to recall the consequences of what happened on that terrible night. Their words, their emotions and their experiences are what social history is all about.



### **Annicka Ancliff**

I have found working on the Bethnal Green Memorial Project amazing. It has been interesting meeting like-minded people, and the level of collaboration between everyone has been astounding.

I have been given the opportunity to work on a range of projects including events management, research, and coordinating the touring exhibition. I think the work that the project is doing is extraordinary in raising awareness of the memorial and the disaster in general.



### **Barbara Humphries**

I joined the project as I had just retired last summer from the LSE Library, and had been involved in oral-history projects before. What I have enjoyed about the project is having met so many nice people who have been willing to talk openly about a very traumatic experience. I hope that it has helped them in having the opportunity to talk about it.



### **Caroline Randall**

I was keen to be involved with the project because my grandmother, Violet Stocks, was a survivor, and I wanted to learn more about the disaster. I have developed many new skills through my involvement with the project. I now feel confident to carry out and record oral-history interviews, and have found the process very moving and thought-provoking.



### **Sarah O'Mahony**

I volunteered for the project to learn about the Bethnal Green Disaster, to understand what exactly happened. I also wanted to widen my horizons and have new experiences.

## ARCHIVES

The oral history interviews and documentation collected for the Bethnal Green Memorial Project are archived at Bishopsgate Institute Library. The collection comprises an extensive range of materials including interview recordings, photographs, digitalised artefacts, written accounts, newspaper cuttings and letters, as well as the materials gathered by the Stairway to Heaven Trust over the past years. Volunteers are in the process of making as much as possible available at [bgmemorial.org.uk](http://bgmemorial.org.uk)

**Other organisations that also have material relating to the Bethnal Green Shelter Disaster:**

**The British Library**

<http://www.bl.uk/>

**The National Archives (formerly known as the Public Records Office)**

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

**Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust,**

<http://www.stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org/>

**Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives,**

<https://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history>

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## FURTHER READING

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Weep Not, Ye Mourners: The Air Raids on the London Borough of Tower Hamlets 1940-1945; A Chronological Listing of the Fatal Casualties. London: John Hook.

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**Vale, G.F. (1946)**

Bethnal Green's Ordeal 1939-45, and the Part Played by the Civil Defence Services. London: The Council of the Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green.

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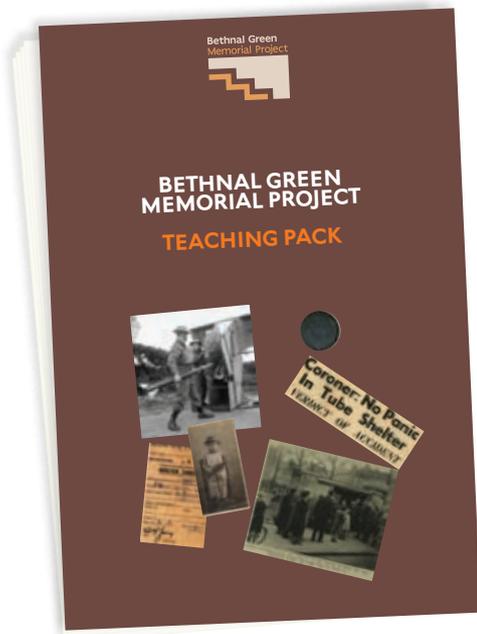
## THE BETHNAL GREEN MEMORIAL PROJECT TEACHING PACK

A free teaching resource pack has been designed to teach children about the Bethnal Green underground shelter disaster of 1943. The pack includes lesson plans, presentations, engaging activities and worksheets designed by a professional school teacher. The resources are primarily intended for children aged between 8 and 12 years old but elements can be adapted for use at any level. The resources can also be easily used by non-school organisations who wish to work with children to learn about this event. After-school clubs, drama groups and community centres are all welcome to adapt them for their own use.

The lesson pack begins by providing children with some context of World War II, the Blitz and how people survived during the bombing campaign in London. It then looks more specifically at what happened on the night of 3 March 1943 and its consequences for the people and the community of Bethnal Green. Finally it leads children into thinking about how the disaster is being remembered today.

This pack and the accompanying downloadable materials provide a range of resources that are linked to each session plan. There are PowerPoint presentations, audio clips, documents and images for the children to study. These resources are available to download from [www.bgmemoial.org.uk](http://www.bgmemoial.org.uk)

We intend that these resources will provide children in the East End of London and all around Britain the chance to learn about this little-known but significant disaster. Do visit the project website and if you have any comments or further educational material to share, do let us know.



**THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN MEMORIAL TRUST HAS WORKED TIRELESSLY TO RAISE FUNDS FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MEMORIAL AND ITS UPKEEP.**

Members of the Trust give talks to schools and community groups. A pop-up exhibition has also been made for the project that can be borrowed for events or temporary exhibition spaces for a small fee to cover transport costs.

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SUPPORT THE TRUST IN HONOURING ALL THOSE AFFECTED BY THE DISASTER, THE CHARITY WOULD WELCOME ALL DONATIONS.**

Cheques: to be made payable to “Stairway to Heaven Memorial” and sent to the Treasurer, 28 Priory Close, Pilgrims Hatch, Brentwood, Essex CM15 9PZ

Mobile phone: text STHM43 £10 to 70070.

Website: <http://www.stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org/>

For donation enquiries: 07722 162 168

For general enquiries: [info@stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org](mailto:info@stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org) or 01474 702513

Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust  
Registered Charity number 1118618



Flowers left by relatives at the memorial.



The Trust organised an Arts Auction in 2013 which raised £3,500 for the memorial. Photo: Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust

## THE BETHNAL GREEN DISASTER MEMORYSCAPE AUDIO MEMORIAL TRAILS

Attached to this book you will find an audio CD containing two 30-minute audio trails (one designed for adults, another for children). You can listen at home, but ideally they should be heard using headphones at the memorial itself, just outside Bethnal Green Underground Station. You can transfer the sound files to an audio player or mobile phone from this CD, or download them directly to your device from [www.bgmemorial.org.uk](http://www.bgmemorial.org.uk)



The hardest part of any artistic process is knowing what to leave out. For this project, a huge number of interviews have been made with a wide range of individuals. Some of them were witnesses of the event itself, some were relatives of those who were there that night, and others have been involved with creating the memorial. I listened to over 30 hours of interviews, and all of them contained remarkable stories and fascinating details told by an incredibly rich array of voices. On top of this, there are many written documents that have fed into the project, from books to letters to newspaper articles. With lots of pieces like this, unused material is discarded. Fortunately, the audio trail is just one part of the project, so all of the interviews are being archived and can be heard in their entirety online at [bgmemorial.org.uk](http://bgmemorial.org.uk). If you get a chance, do have a listen to them as they are wonderful windows into the recent past.

I decided to only include direct memories of witnesses to the disaster, and, for the adult version, to only use those memories that dealt with the events of the night of Wednesday the 3 March, 1943. This helped to reduce the choice of what could be used, but it does mean that we hear nothing of the aftermath, the rather murky blame game, the official disaster enquiry, nor the sterling efforts of many who have brought this tragic story to the public's attention and culminated in the building of the memorial itself.

There are two versions of the audio trail. One is aimed at younger listeners, the other for more general consumption. There is a lot of material that appears in both of the trails and nothing in the adult version that should confuse or upset anyone over the age of around 10. The main differences are that the children's version contains some more general memories of what it was like to be a child around Bethnal Green during

the war, and some description of life down in the shelter. Each trail also has its own narrator, with Tommy Walsh speaking on the adult edition and Emma Morris narrating for the children's edition.

My first challenge with this project was finding a way to allow the listener to move around the space. Having a piece that is focused on one very specific spot does not lend itself to becoming a walk or a trail. My solution to this was to ask listeners to take specific numbers of steps away from the memorial, to listen to some memories and then to return to the memorial. In total, the listener takes 173 steps away, one for each of the victims that died in the disaster.

As the memories that you hear come from those who were involved in the event, the speakers are all of a mature age. Their voices are in themselves fascinating articles, as they document the variety of accents that were spoken in the area. I was interested in how these accents have shifted over time, due to immigration, gentrification and other influences. With this in mind, I recorded local children from Morpeth School and Globe Primary School reading the words of the interviewees. These and several other local schools lost children in the disaster. I have, where possible, tried to match the age of the children with how old the witnesses were in 1943.

Do try and listen to the trails at the memorial, as I believe it makes the experience far richer. For me, what makes the experience particularly interesting is that we are standing in the spot where a momentous event occurred, listening to the memories of those that stood here before us and witnessed that event. There is something strangely charged in that encounter. The space around us is being conjured through memory, and we can begin to superimpose details from the past onto what we can see right now. It is both a private and public experience, a bespoke 30 minutes for right here, right now.

I hope you enjoy them.

Lewis Gibson

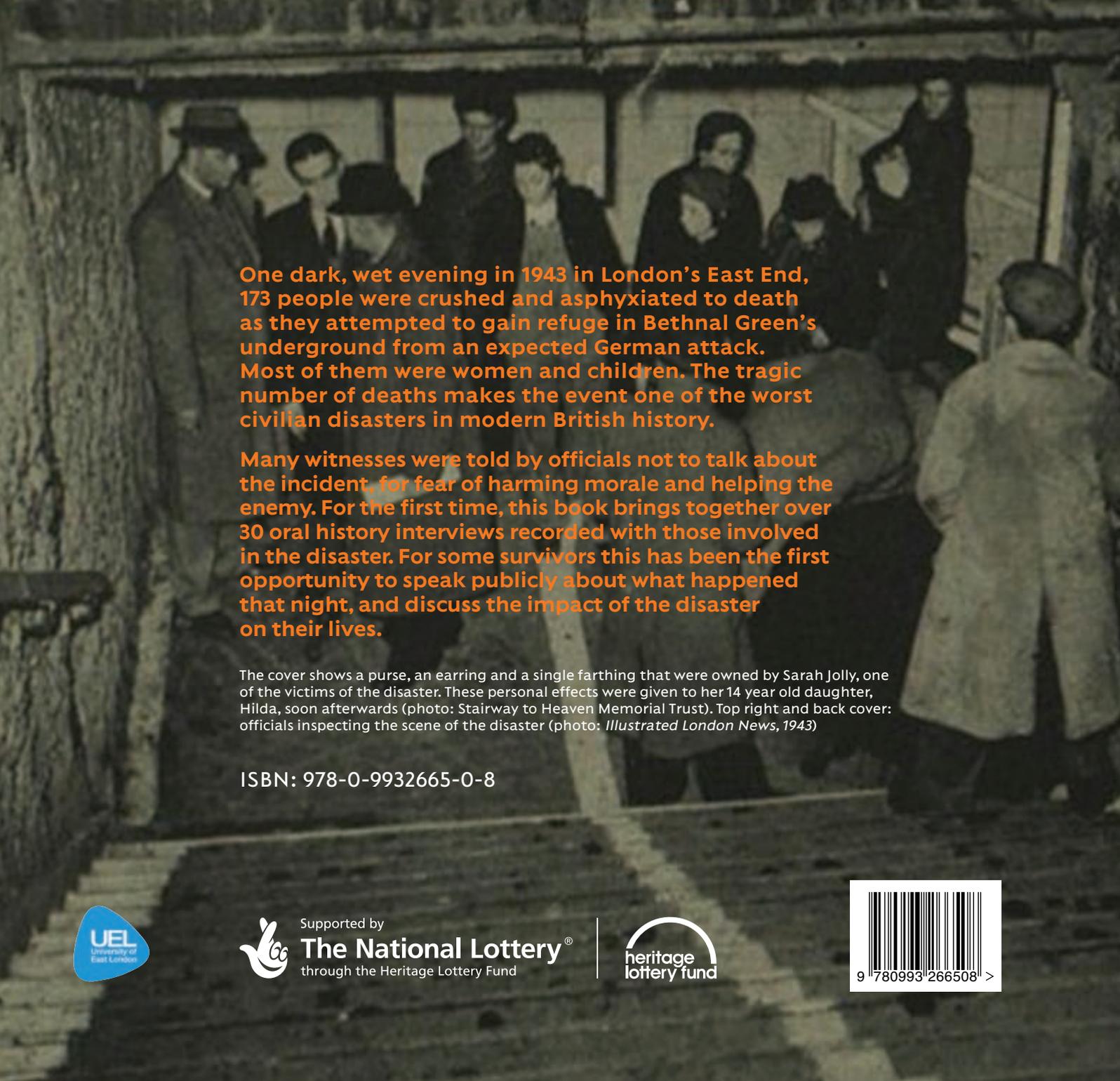
Sound artist and audio-trail designer



Tommy Walsh



Disaster victim Barry Seabrook  
(age 2 years and 9 months on the  
3rd of March 1943)



**One dark, wet evening in 1943 in London's East End, 173 people were crushed and asphyxiated to death as they attempted to gain refuge in Bethnal Green's underground from an expected German attack. Most of them were women and children. The tragic number of deaths makes the event one of the worst civilian disasters in modern British history.**

**Many witnesses were told by officials not to talk about the incident, for fear of harming morale and helping the enemy. For the first time, this book brings together over 30 oral history interviews recorded with those involved in the disaster. For some survivors this has been the first opportunity to speak publicly about what happened that night, and discuss the impact of the disaster on their lives.**

The cover shows a purse, an earring and a single farthing that were owned by Sarah Jolly, one of the victims of the disaster. These personal effects were given to her 14 year old daughter, Hilda, soon afterwards (photo: Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust). Top right and back cover: officials inspecting the scene of the disaster (photo: *Illustrated London News*, 1943)

ISBN: 978-0-9932665-0-8



Supported by  
**The National Lottery**<sup>®</sup>  
through the Heritage Lottery Fund

