

Last July Shell Travel Club members went on a most successful walk around the City of London guided by Julie Chandler (a Blue Badge guide), on the topic "City Blitz".

Despite being surrounded by the hustle and bustle of modern day London, Julie painted a picture of war preparation. Children evacuated to the countryside, valuable works of art removed to safe locations, air raid sirens tested, underground stations, Anderson and Morrison shelters made ready and blackout regulations imposed. Air Raid Precautions included Heavy Rescue teams and firefighters soon to be officially termed Civil Defence.

Sir Anthony Eden appealed for men aged between seventeen and sixty five to become local defence volunteers in preparation for possible invasion. Postal workers formed their own units to keep the Royal Mail going. Today most people are reliant on their mobile phones and then what would happen if the internet went down?

On Sunday 3rd September 1939 at 11:15am, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain broadcast to the Nation. Hitler had failed to respond to British demands to leave Poland, "This country is therefore at war with Germany". The period between September 1939 and May 1940 became known as the phoney war. Families seeing little danger, started drifting back from the countryside to their London homes as they perceived no threat to themselves.

As we looked towards St Paul's cathedral, Julie told us that the threat of fire caused by incendiary bombs was very real. What could be done to save the Cathedral if it caught fire? In answer, they reinstated their own personal fire brigade: the St Paul's Watch created originally in 1915. Made up of over three hundred volunteers, their duty to keep watch and put out any fires started by incendiary bombs. St Paul's did receive two direct hits from high explosives, one over the North Transept on the 16th April 1940 and later on the 10th October 1940.

On the 12th September 1940, a 225kg explosive bomb fell close to the West Steps of the Cathedral. It lodged thirty feet down failing to explode. A bomb disposal team under the command of Robert Davies successfully defused the bomb, winched it to the surface, loaded it on a vehicle and drove it out to Hackney Marsh where it was safely detonated creating a hundred foot wide crater. Lieutenant Davies and George Wylie were both awarded the George Cross. If the bomb had exploded, St Paul's Cathedral would not have stood a chance. The fact that this monumental building survived the blitz caused it to become an icon to inspire the determination of the people of London during the war.

Then the Second Great Fire of London commenced on the night of 29 December 1940. Just after 6pm, the Luftwaffe launched a heavy raid with over 130 bombers. Making use of the River Thames as a navigational aid, they concentrated their attack on the square mile of the City, around St Paul's. Incendiary bombs began raining down. Men and women fought gallantly against fires on the streets of

London during the Blitz when the City was struck by bombs on 57 consecutive nights in a sustained campaign of bombing.

The London Underground was used extensively as air raid shelters though even there you were not safe. On the 11 January 1942, the Central line ticket hall at Bank station took a direct hit. The bomb explosion caused the road to collapse into the subways and station concourse killing 56 people.

Eighteen churches were destroyed during the Blitz, including 15 Wren Churches and while some of the destroyed churches were rebuilt, some were not. The church dome of St Stephen Walbrook was badly damaged and most of the surrounding buildings badly damaged or destroyed. St Stephen was rebuilt after the war. St Dunstan in the East on the other hand was turned into gardens of tranquility with surrounding ruins that can be enjoyed today in the twenty first century.

While in the process of clearing bomb damage in Noble street, Roman and medieval defences were uncovered. Today one can see part of original fortifications of the Roman fort as well as 18th and 19th century ruins.

We ended our 'City Blitz' walk by the National Firefighters Memorial close to St Paul's cathedral. Julie had taken us back to the 1940's. She painted a picture of the horrendous bombing, the bravery of the men and women who had fought gallantly and how it has grown to the City we now live in today.

Our thanks go to Frieda Boase (Shell Travel Club) for organising the day visit and Julie Chandler for sharing her expertise and knowledge of the city with us. If you wish to join Shell Travel Club please find us on shelltravelclub@gmail.com