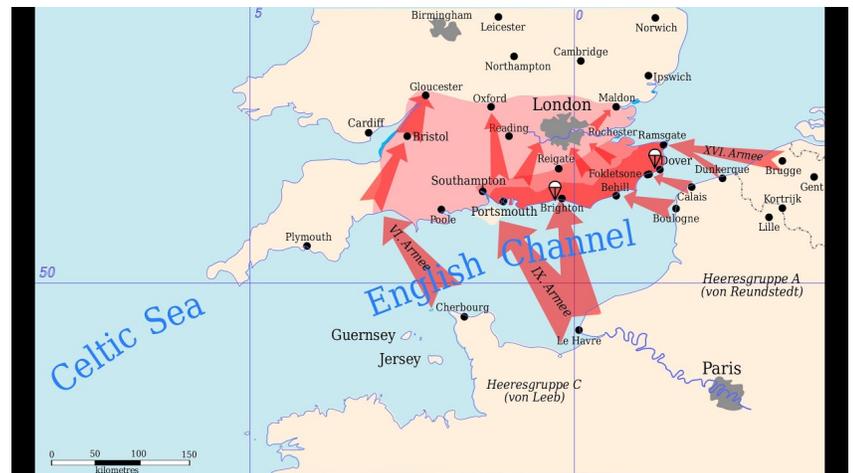


Southampton's Darkest Hour by Andy Skinner

Andy's talk covered the build up to World War II in the 1930s when the move towards more radical nationalist governments in Spain, Italy and Germany prompted an increasing fear of war. Blackout and firefighting exercises were conducted in the city, 10,000 air raid shelters were issued and the Medieval vaults were also prepared for use as emergency shelters. It was recognized that Southampton, like Portsmouth, would be a target with its large docks, the Supermarine factory in Woolston where Spitfires were built and vital rail links, so school children were evacuated from 1939. Andy included letters from children describing their experiences.

Operation Sea Lion, the plan by Hitler to invade Britain, was preceded by a period of intense bombing from June 1940. This was certainly Southampton's Darkest Hour as raids happened every night when enemy planes dropped flares, followed by incendiaries and could involve up to 120 bombers dropping 50 tons of bombs. Andy included a poignant account of a bombing night by an observer where the night of "hell" was finished with determined resolve in a cup of cocoa!



During 1940 480 people died, 575 buildings were destroyed, more than 2000 bombs fell and the vaults and trench shelters took direct hits. The Civic Centre was bombed resulting in the deaths of 15 children who were having an art lesson in the basement. However, the docks and ship building functions

of Harland and Wolff still continued ensuring vessels could be overhauled.



By 1942 Southampton docks began to handle US “lend lease cargoes” of equipment and foodstuffs. Trade then increased dramatically in the build up to D Day. By 1944 the docks (this is Ocean Dock) were full of everything including Mulberry harbour pieces and 120 military vehicles per hour were passing through Southampton.

From 1944 to the end of the war over 3.5 million troops passed through Southampton docks. This photo was taken near Burgess Road in Southampton. A wonderful snapshot of the hectic preparations and the daily mundane!



Andy finished his account with a summary of the effects on Southampton during this period. 631 citizens were killed, 914 buildings were destroyed and afterwards a further 2500 buildings had to be demolished. It tore the heart out of Southampton and resulted in some controversial architecture post war and into the 1960s. The city centre has been completely regenerated with the shopping precinct of Above Bar Street followed by the more recent West Quay development.

The talk kept us all interested and prompted memories of our relatives who experienced this terrible time. Here are two recollections;

Thanks, Mary for organising such an interesting and, at times, very moving talk. Andy is a most engaging speaker and really brings history to life.

My mother in law was living in Woolston in 1939. Her father had taken an engineering job with Vickers there 2 years previously. After the bombing raids, he carried on building Spitfires at Eastleigh Airport. She and her sister, both young teenagers, were evacuated to an aunt's house in Mold in Wales.

Her grandparents, who ran the Byron Arms pub in Portsmouth, evacuated to the country to run the Shoe in Exton. From Jill Palmer

After an excellent talk in the Local History Zoom meeting today, I was reminded of my mother's memories of living in a coastal city and coping with the bombing. She lived in Swansea and as her father was in the Merchant Navy they lived quite near the docks on the eastern side of the town. Like Southampton the city was heavily bombed in the war. Mum worked in an office throughout the war in a reserved occupation based in the centre of Swansea and she used to tell my sister and myself about walking through the rubble of bombed buildings to get to work which was quite a long way. There were no buses running of course so walking was essential. I don't remember her saying much about people being killed but I am sure that there were quite a few civilian casualties.

After some time her parents moved to the West and safer side of Swansea and this was where we used to visit our grandparents when we were children in the 50s and 60s. Our Merchant Navy grandfather (the same person who met Shackleton at the Whaling station) helped to tow one of the Mulberry Harbours into place at Arromanches, the remains of one of these can still be seen in Langstone harbour as well as in France of course. From Kathy Gunn

If you have recollections of your own or from relatives from that time I will be happy to record them on our Local History website.

Mary Reed
Local History 2