

Cover story: 70 years ago, the people of Norwich were under air attack. Now, Steve Snelling is embarking on

Weird as it seems for someone born in the relative peace of the mid-1950s, I can't help feeling I grew up with the war. It was everywhere, its clinging tentacles invading my very consciousness with the remorseless power of General Jumbo's all-conquering toy army.

It filled my comics and spilled over into our games where gnarled sticks became Lee Enfields and the local woods served as our battleground. It stared out at me from the revolving book stands on Yarmouth seafront where garishly-covered pulp fiction paperbacks twirled alongside swirls of saucy postcards. It posed as drama on our flickering black and white TV set where Vic Morrow appeared to be forever winning the war, albeit very slowly.

And it captured my imagination on the big screen, where dams were heroically burst, beaches bravely stormed and hutted prison camps appeared to exist only to be tunnelled out from unless, of course, they were in the jungle and then you built a bridge.

Then there were all the stories. Long before Basil Fawlty famously and irreverently goose-stepped his way into television folklore while urging his guests not to mention the war people did so endlessly and got away with it.

In this, my parents, aunts and uncles and grandparents were no different from anyone else. The war was a constant source of comparison and shared experience to be relentlessly plumbed, from the heroic to the horrific, the humdrum to the grimly humorous.

They remembered food shortages and ration queues. They recounted mini adventures involving plane crashes on Mousehold Heath. And, years before Capt Mainwaring acquired legendary status, they laughed at the memory of grandad's comic misadventures as a less than enthusiastic member of the Home Guard.

Mostly, though, I recall their stories of the air raids, the so-called Blitz that brought the war, in all its random ferocity, to their very doorstep. Even now I can remember tales of nights spent cowering in damp, dank corrugated shelters half buried in the garden and of a frightening dash across a field while a shower of incendiaries rained down.

One story in particular made a deep impression. It was told to me by my father and, though the details are hazy, one scene remains eerily vivid. Describing it from the memory of his own impressionable boyhood, it was of a blazing inferno reflected in a river of fire as it raged along the Wensum waterfront.

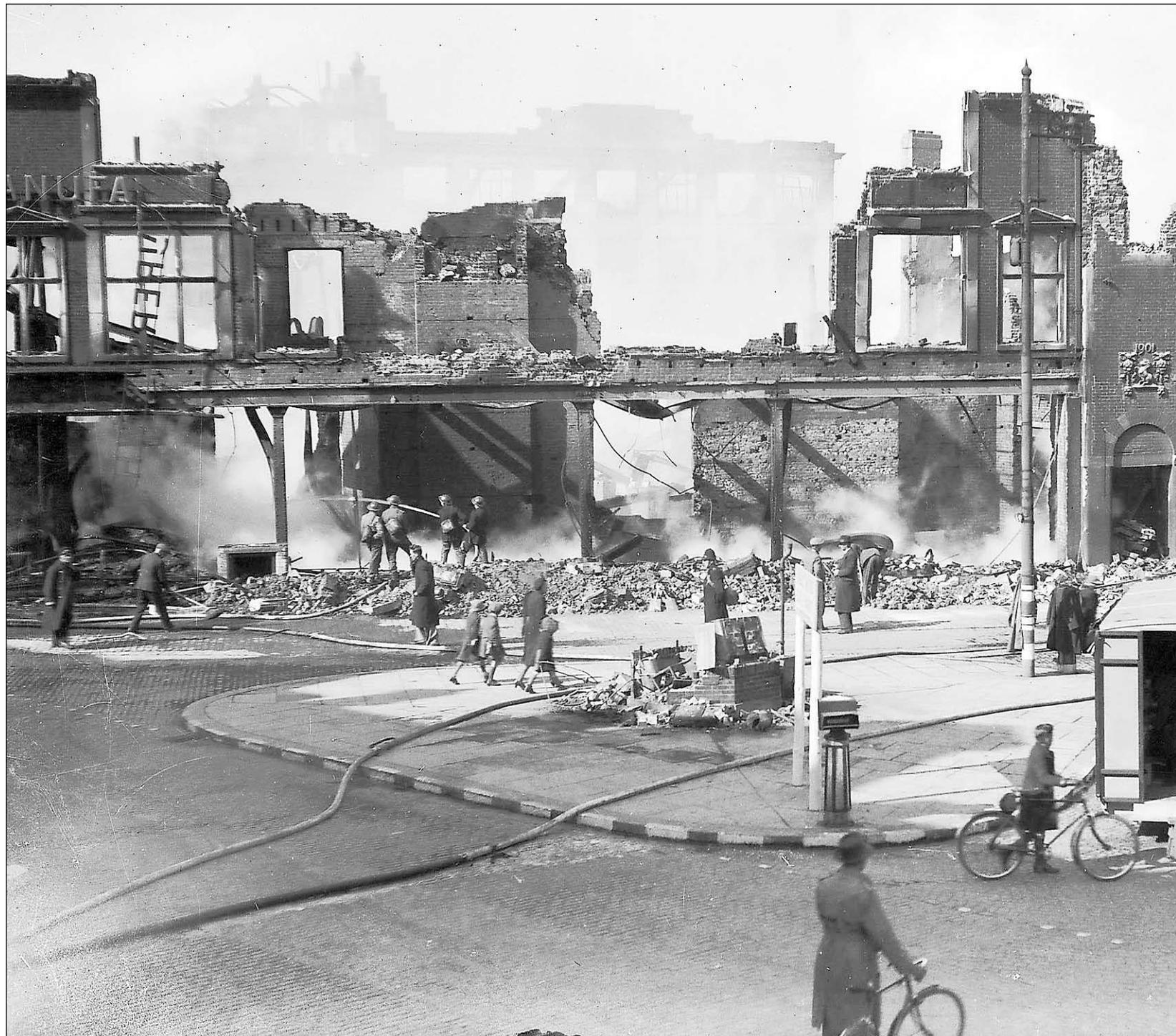
Amid myriad other word-pictures that terrible image has stayed with me and is, I suspect, partly responsible for my latest historical odyssey which represents, in a curious sort of way, a parallel journey back into my own post-war youth as well as my parents' childhood in an attempt to discover the truth behind the half-remembered stories of a wartime ordeal that all but beggars belief.

I have set myself the task of revisiting the myths and trying to unravel the realities of the most intense and destructive cycle of aerial bombardments to befall Norwich during the second world war. Known collectively as the Baedeker raids, they began in April, 1942 and rumbled on into the summer before Hitler's vengeful campaign against Britain's cultural heritage petered out.

In that time, the citizens of Bath, Canterbury, Exeter and York, as well as Norwich, had come to understand something of the grief and suffering shared by cities like London, Birmingham, Coventry and Liverpool. Over the course of two fearful nights, Norwich alone sustained more than 900 casualties, of whom 231 people were killed or died from injuries, and thousands more were rendered temporarily homeless or compelled to return to damaged houses barely fit for human habitation.

Large areas of the city, from its tightly-packed terraced streets to its commercial hub, were laid waste by the bombing attacks, leaving physical as well as psychological scars that would take years to heal and repair.

Even now the evidence is plain to see for those who know where to look. Aside from the bleak, unimaginative post-war architecture that rose from the rubble to disfigure Norwich city centre, there are numerous examples of the enduring Baedeker effect.



Poignant tales of wartime

Walk down any number of streets in the west of the city and you'll stumble across a host of strange in-fills, houses out of keeping with their neighbours, entire rows that bear no relation to the terrace opposite. Chances are these were former bomb sites, unfortunate victims of mischance and the scenes of miraculous escapes or wretched tragedies. These are the visible, still tangible, traces of a 70-year-old conflict brought vividly to life in the writings and recollections of those who witnessed it.

On my desk as I write this article is a diary compiled by a teenage boy who was serving as a Civil Defence messenger during the Baedeker blitz. It paints a haunting picture of scarcely concealed terror.

He writes of "the continual throbbing and droning of aeroplanes... the awful shrieking... the horrible crackling of fires... the rattling as tiles fell... and the smell of burning".

At one point, as he and his family lay "crouching" on the floor of their garden bomb shelter that nearly became their tomb, a bomb exploded dangerously close "with a deafening

Guide to a cultural blitz



Devastation: Westwick Street in ruins.

Launched in direct response to a devastating RAF attack on the historic German city of Lubeck, the retaliatory attacks on England's cultural cities were "terror raids" deliberately designed to shake civilian morale.

The so-called Baedeker blitz took its name from the famous German tourist guide book referred to by Nazi press officer Baron Gustav von Stumm when he erroneously announced: "We shall go all out to bomb every building in Britain marked with three stars in the Baedeker Guide", little realising that the books never awarded any sites more than two stars.

Such mistakes apart, many of the raids, involving relatively small numbers of bombers, proved remarkably accurate and the lack of effective opposition to the initial attacks on Norwich provoked anger and dismay.

a personal odyssey to discover the truth about the city's heaviest raids and wants your help to tell the story



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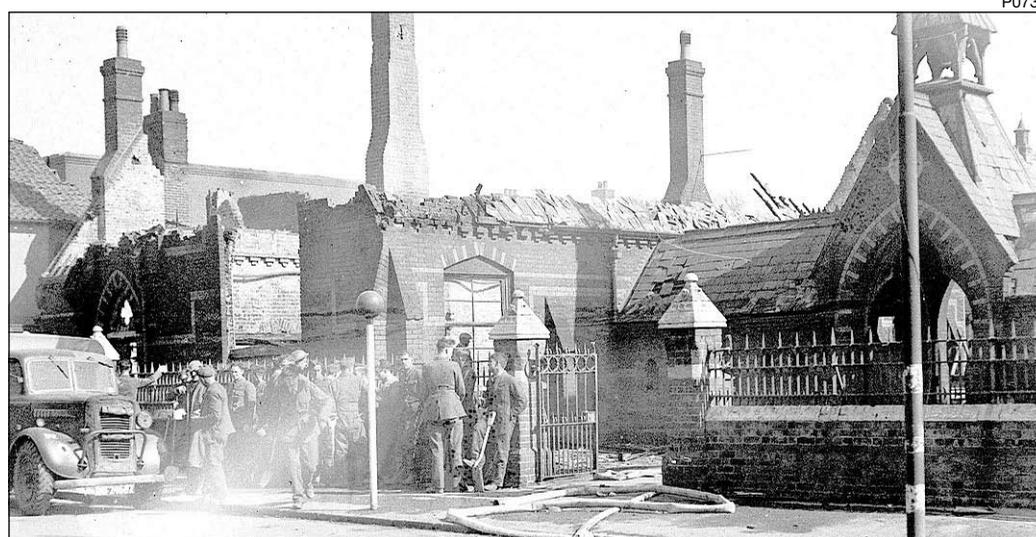


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A city in ruins: 'Keep calm and carry on' seems to be the spirit as the people of Norwich overcame the shock of the Baedeker blitz in April, 1942. In the main picture, people make their way past an Orford Place devastated by the second raid; above, the destruction wrought at City Station, the focus of the first attack on the night of April 27-28; right, the skeletal remains of the Caley's factory; below, cleaning-up operations at Heigham Street school.



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lives, the everyday cost of war is laid bare, itemised in lists of trinkets and treasures, bedlinen and bric-a-brac. They range from the sublimely poignant to the plainly ridiculous. Some claims read like veritable household inventories, with one such example citing a flower pot, flower stand, four cups, two glasses, four dinner plates, two vegetable dishes and a teapot among possessions destroyed.

"I don't quite know now what those things will cost to replace," the same note concludes, "as the cups and vegetable dishes were part of a set".

Such is the minutiae of war and such is the human scale of the extraordinary drama that I am seeking to explore. I cannot pretend that the path on which I am bound is untrodden. Other writers and historians have passed this way, most notably Joan Banger whose groundbreaking chronicle charting all 44 raids on Norwich continues to serve as a guide and inspiration 36 years after it was first published. But much new documentary material, official and unofficial, has appeared since then and I would be lying if I did not admit to harbouring hopes of marking the 70th anniversary of the Baedeker raids with a new account that sheds fresh light on the cold statistics and pass-me-down stories.

To achieve that I shall be spreading my net far and wide. As well as appealing to those of you who lived through those harrowing days to set down your memories, I urge anyone with letters or diaries relating to the raids to get in touch with me so that their accounts can contribute to the overall picture.

At the same time, I shall be ferreting through governmental and private archives, reading official reports and contemporary correspondence and interviewing survivors in an attempt to set their personal experiences within the historical context of an assault from the air that constitutes the greatest threat of destruction Norwich has ever faced and which resulted in scenes of devastation unparalleled in the city's long proud history.

Even now to look at photographs of bomb-shattered streets, ruined churches and smashed factories is to marvel at the endurance and fortitude of all those who came through the city's fiery test.

First world war veteran Ralph Mottram, an award-winning novelist who was among the first to record Norwich's ordeal, likened the carnage wrought on once-peaceful terraces to the disfigurement of Ypres and Armentieres on the Western Front.

"The light of flames flickering through jagged gaps in familiar walls, and reflected in pools of water; the crunch of broken glass and plaster beneath wheels and feet, the roar of conflagration, the shouted orders and warnings were ominously reminiscent," he wrote.

Harder still to imagine, still less to contemplate as a daily reality, is the impact of living under the perpetual threat of imminent extinction, of wearisome nights spent in dread of the air raid siren and the droning danger that might follow.

Almost precisely 70 years ago a solitary German bomber sprayed a hail of bullets along Amphill Street and Unthank Road before scattering 16 bombs on my old school's playing fields and the neighbouring Eaton golf course.

Though nothing on the scale of the later Baedeker raids, this hit-and-run raid of January, 1941 serves as a reminder of the haphazard nature of an indiscriminate war that recognised neither combatant status nor rank or privilege and where survival was merely the luck of the draw.

It's a sobering thought, but how many of us living in and around Norwich today owe our very existence to such wartime strokes of good fortune that ensured bombs fell on one house but not another and levelled such and such a street while miraculously leaving a neighbouring avenue unscathed?

If you have any stories to tell of the Baedeker blitz on Norwich or contemporary accounts to pass on, please get in touch with Steve Snelling at 81, Beechwood Drive, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich, NR7 0LN (telephone 01603 435624), or e-mail him at sjsnelling@sky.com

For more pictures of the Baedeker blitz damage visit www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle

raids that rocked Norwich

Indeed, such was the shock at the destructive nature of the first raid that thousands of people took to trekking out of the city and sleeping in the open countryside, a fact which may have contributed to the far lighter death toll in the second raid but also provoked criticism at the numbers of fire-watchers who had deserted their posts. One report suggests that as many as 40,000 people, roughly a third of the city's entire population, may have quit the city each night at the height of the Baedeker onslaught.

"Whole streets and roads were deserted at nightfall for days and weeks afterwards," observed one who chose to stay. "It was like living in a ghost town." The fear was understandable. During the course of the first two raids on Norwich 14,000 houses were damaged of which 1,200 were officially listed as being wrecked beyond repair.

More destruction followed, but things might have been much worse but for one heavy attack being deflected into countryside south of the city by a decoy site.

In all, the blitz against Norwich spanned four months and, in the greatest irony of all, missed the majority of the outstanding heritage sites which had earned the city its place in the Baedeker Guide. Though historic buildings were destroyed, such ancient treasures as the castle and cathedral survived, though in the case of the latter disaster was only narrowly averted.

Hit by more than 60 incendiaries during the heaviest fire-bomb raid on East Anglia during the entire war, the eight fires which resulted were only prevented from causing significant damage by the swift actions of three fire-watchers who clambered on to the roof with a hose to douse the flames.

roar".

"The shelter shook, dirt fell from the cracks in the roof, some heavy object thudded against the side of the shelter and pieces of earth as big as footballs were dropping all around."

Each time a bomb fell, he feared it was the end. And for some it was. Sheltering in another back garden in another part of the city that same night Mike Bailey emerged to find that his best friend, who lived a few doors away and who he'd been with only a few hours earlier, had been killed when the shelter he had been sharing with his grandparents took a direct hit that blew it out of the ground.

Others remember scrambling from their bomb refuge to find their house destroyed along with all their worldly possessions.

The grievous sense of loss was brought home to me most forcibly by the plaintive pleas for assistance and compensation contained in the hundreds of letters written by victims of the raids to the city council and carefully preserved in the archives of Norfolk Record Office. Here, in these short, pathetic notes of ruined