

1939- Anderson Shelter

Boy, Aged Nine, Tyneside

The Government didn't *build* shelters for you. Council workmen just came with a lorry and dumped the bins on your front lawn and left you to get on with it.

We didn't think much of the bits, lying out in the rain, gathering rainwater. Just thin bits of corrugated iron.

People felt they'd be safer in their houses, solid bricks and mortar. They said they weren't going out in the middle of the night to bury themselves in a *grave*.

Then my father saw an Anderson Shelter that had received a direct hit; he said there was quite a lot of it left; but the house it had belonged to was just a heap of bricks.

So he and our neighbour Frank Spedding got cracking.

They put me in charge of sorting and counting the bits and pieces, while they dug, but I soon got down into the hole. It had vertical sides, like a grave. Bits of worm kept poking out, then the worm would fall out altogether.

It all smelt *good*, like gardening.

People were calling out to each other, from hole to hole, and handing round tea.

Two foot six down, we came across an earthenware pipe running right across the hole. Mr Spedding, who was a builder, said it was a field-drain, from the time when our houses were fields. He said if we dug through it, all the water in the field when it rained would end up in our shelter. So he and Dad decided to stop digging.

Mr Spedding, being a builder, got all sorts of bits and pieces, and we made that shelter a real home from home.

The floor was made of old maroon front doors, bought for a bob.

The inside walls were painted white, and Mr Spedding threw handfuls of little bits of cork at the wet paint, so they stuck on; he said this would absorb the moisture from our breath, so condensation wouldn't run down the walls in winter.

(Later, picking those bits of cork off the walls stopped me screaming while the bombs were dropping).

Mr Spedding also 'acquired' a lot of sandbags from somewhere, and soaked them in creosote, to stop the wet earth rotting them. I got really hooked on creosote, which I'd never smelt before; I kept on going back to sniff them.

We made the sandbags into a fine wall, all round the shelter, to keep the earth from falling off it. We also used them to make a porch, to keep the rain off the shelter door.

By the time we put the stout wood door on, and Mr Spedding had run electric cable out from the house, we were as snug as a bug in a rug.

With the Electric light and we used to sit in armchairs making toast on the electric fire.

Dad would have liked a picture on the wall, but the walls were curved.

Then the man came from the council. Nothing was right for him:

We couldn't have a wooden door on the shelter; a bomb would turn it into a mass of splinters, and drive them through our flesh as we sat there.

We could only have an old blanket over the door.

We couldn't have electric light, as the bomb might cut the cable and fry us alive, if the cable touched the metal walls.

Worst of all, the shelter should be three foot deep, not two foot six.

Dad told him about the field drain. Dad said he wanted a shelter, not a well for watering the roses. But the man kept on waving his little steel ruler, and saying if we didn't put it three feet down, the council would come and take the shelter away, and we could do without.

We put it down to three feet: I don't think Dad stopped swearing from start to finish.

Slowly, the shelter filled up with water like a swimming-pool.

We did water the roses from it.

We spent the winter raids sheltering in the cupboard under the stairs.