



Merton During World War II: Part 1

Merton at War, Gas Masks and Air raid Shelters.

The Outbreak of War:

Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, however Europe had been edging closer to conflict for several years.

The economic depression of the 1930s resulted in widespread discontent, unemployment and hardship. In Italy and Germany this led to political instability and civil unrest. Fascist dictators, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler capitalised on public desperation for economic change and the restoration of national pride to seize power and re-arm.

They sought to increase their territorial dominance through military might. In 1935 Italian forces invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia) forcing Emperor Haile Selassie into exile, including a lengthy period spent in Wimbledon.

Hitler's German army first marched into Austria (1938,) then annexed Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939. Keen to avoid another bloody war, the British Government first adopted a policy of appeasement. However Hitler's refusal to withdraw his forces from Poland, led Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to issue a declaration of war, knowing that Britain also faced a very real threat of invasion.



On 3rd September 1939, people throughout the nation gathered around their radio sets to hear Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announce that Britain was at war with Germany.

Protection from Gas Attack:

After horrific experiences during World War One and rapid developments in aircraft technology, there was a genuine fear of gas attacks on the UK during World War II.

The Government organised the wholesale distribution of gas masks to the British population. Members of the Air Raid Patrol and the Women's Voluntary Service issued thousands of gas masks – up to 67,000 were handed out in Mitcham alone.

Fitting centres were established for sizing and allocating masks. It was important for masks to have an effective seal and also to fit comfortably, if they were to be worn during lengthy air raids.

Military and Civil Defence staff had special service equipment and practiced decontamination drill on sites such as Wimbledon Common.

Merton residents were also required to carry gas masks at all times. Specially designed masks were provided for babies and young children.





Ministry of Home Security posters warned the public to keep their gas masks with them at all times.

OFFICIAL INSTRUCTIONS ISSUED BY THE MINISTRY OF HOME SECURITY

GAS ATTACK




HOW TO PUT ON YOUR GAS MASK

Always keep your gas mask with you - day and night. Learn to put it on quickly. Practise wearing it.

1. Hold your breath.
2. Hold mask in front of face, with thumbs inside straps.
3. Thrust chin well forward into mask, pull straps over head as far as they will go.
4. Run finger round face-piece taking care head-straps are not twisted.

IF THE GAS RATTLES SOUND

1. Hold your breath. Put on mask wherever you are. Close windows.
2. If out of doors, take off hat, put on your mask. Turn up collar.
3. Put on gloves or keep hands in pockets. Take cover in nearest building.

IF YOU GET GASED

BY VAPOUR GAS Keep your gas mask on even if you feel discomfort. If discomfort continues go to First Aid Post.

BY LIQUID or BLISTER GAS

1 Dab, but <i>don't rub</i> the splash with handkerchief. Then destroy handkerchief.	2 Rub No. 2 Ointment well into place. <i>(Buy a tub, jar nose from any chemist). In emergency chemists supply Bleach Cream free.</i>	3 If you can't get Ointment or Cream within 5 minutes wash place with soap and warm water.	4 Take off at once any garment splashed with gas.
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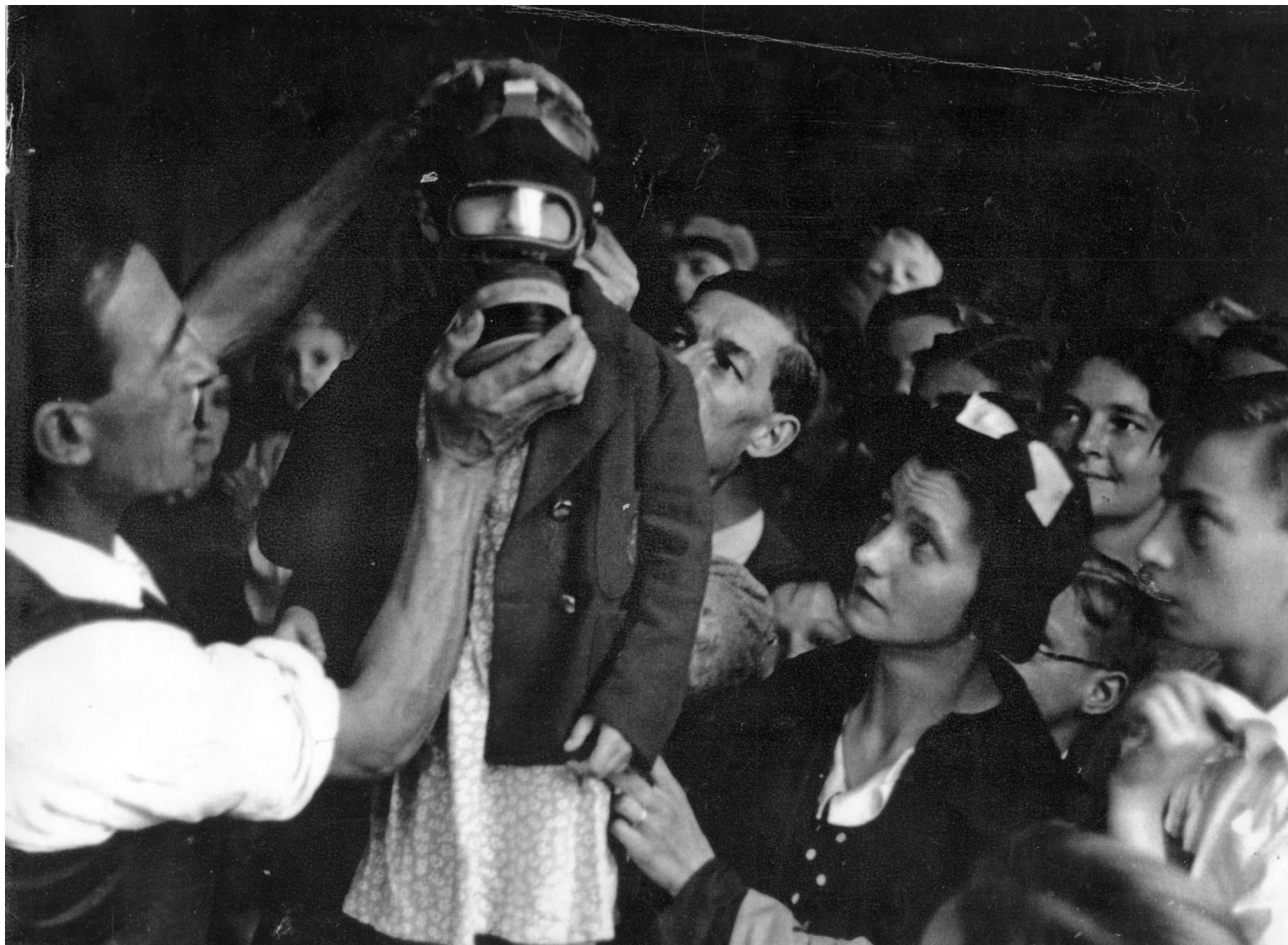


Air Raid wardens distributing gas masks around the streets of Wimbledon.



Trial fitting at a gas mask depot in Wimbledon.

Distribution centres were often staffed by volunteers and members of the Women's Voluntary Service.



Fitting for a child's gas mask at a distribution centre in Wimbledon.



Mickey Mouse gas mask.

This colourful mask with its inflatable nose piece was specially designed for young children, many of whom were unnerved by the heavy, close-fitting adult version.



This local youngster looks surprisingly cheerful, despite being enclosed in a baby's respiratory helmet.



A group of Wimbledon ladies wait to inspect a decontamination centre at Queen's Road School.



Air Raid Patrol members demonstrating the need for vigilance in the event of a poison gas attack, Wimbledon Common, World War II.



Practicing gas mask drill at the Merton and Morden A.R.P headquarters.
For the purpose of this training demonstration, smoke was substituted for gas.

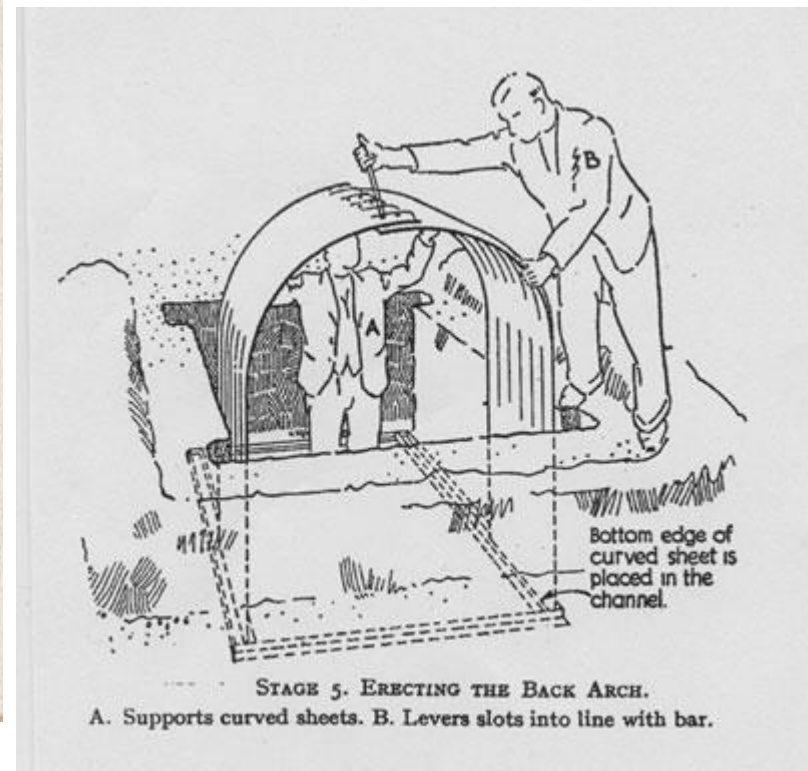
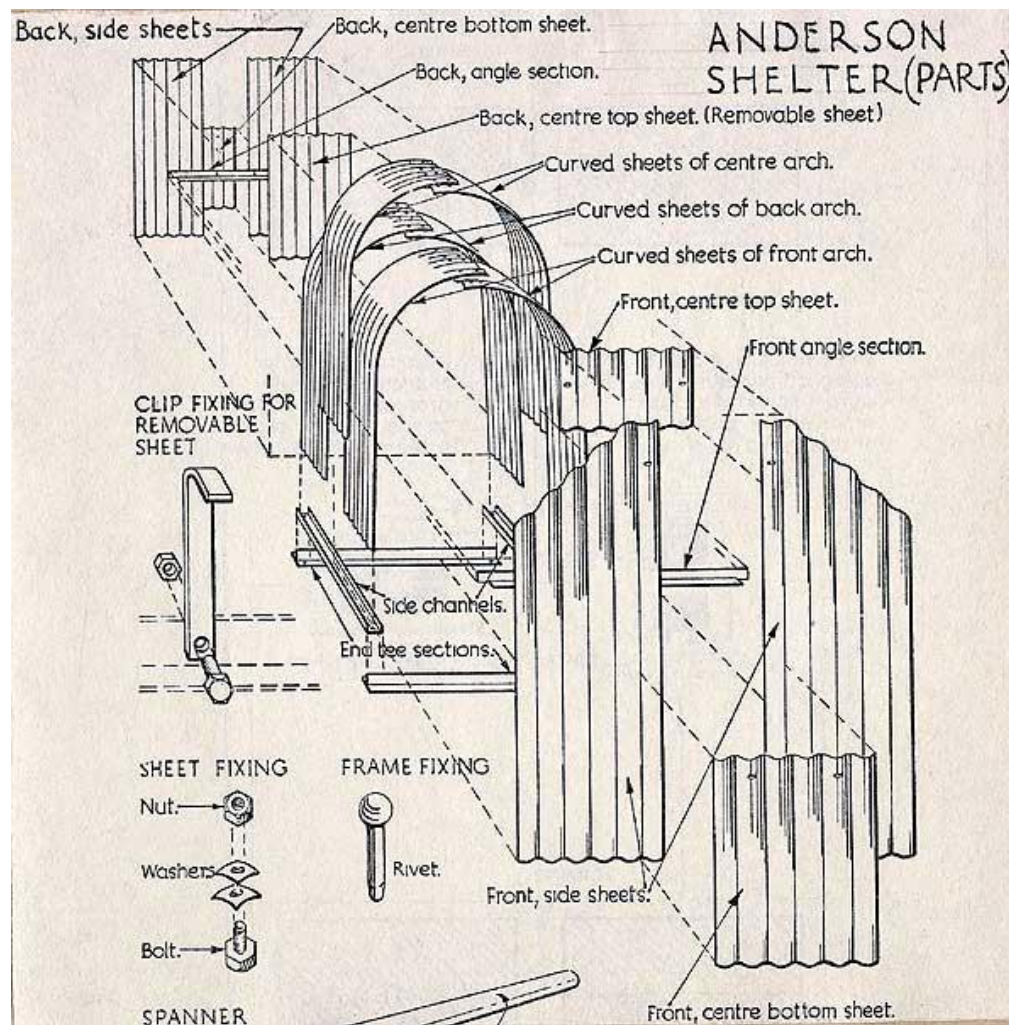
Air Raid Shelters:

After the Zeppelin raids of the 1914-18 war and the development of long range bombers, there were fears of widespread air attacks on the UK during World War II.

As the Government took steps to organise greater protection, guidance was issued to local authorities and the Civil Defence. In Merton, as in other parts of Britain, council lorries distributed corrugated metal sheets to enable households to construct Anderson shelters. After digging a deep hole in their back garden, residents fitted the metal sheets together to create domed structure. This was bolted together and fixed at the ends with steel plates - gaps were filled with rags or papier mache. Earth was then piled over the top to strengthen and disguise the shelter.

Anderson shelters could be cold, damp, and prone to flooding. Some had bunks fitted for use during long raids. They were lit by candles or Hurricane lamps.

Morrison shelters allowed people to shelter indoors and were made from heavy metal plate to protect against falling masonry. Some householders also sheltered under the stairs, sought sanctuary in communal public shelters, or on the deep platforms of local Underground stations.



Diagrams from a Ministry of Home Security booklet designed to instruct the public on how to construct an Anderson shelter.



Neighbours working to construct shelters in their back gardens. Here the dividing wall and mounds of earth are being used to add greater protection from a blast.



Family members gather to try out their new shelter.

During raids many people shared Anderson shelters – welcoming the comfort and reassurance offered by friends and family.



Staff at the John Innes Horticultural Institute, Merton Park, building a shelter in part of their seed testing area. The Institute did vital work to develop food crops during the war and staff have access to four large shelters near their workplace.



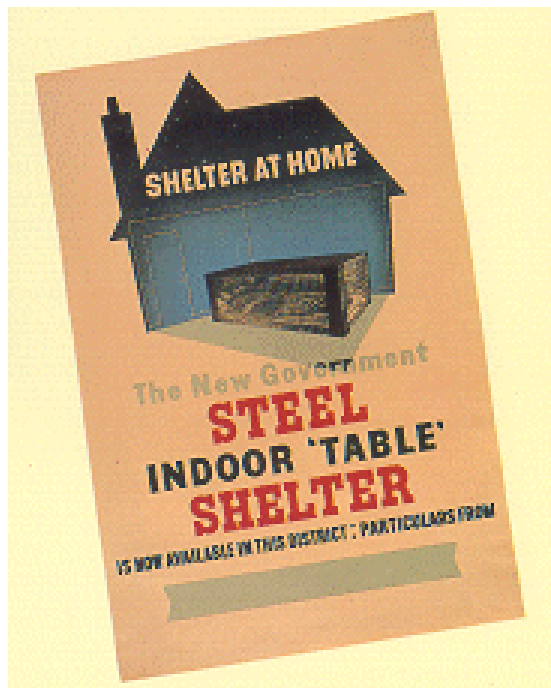
Life in the Anderson shelter.

The basin suspended near the roof is thought to have held a candle to form a simple light. It could also be used to heat food. Hurricane lamps were also popular as their glass surround prevented wind and rain from extinguishing the light.

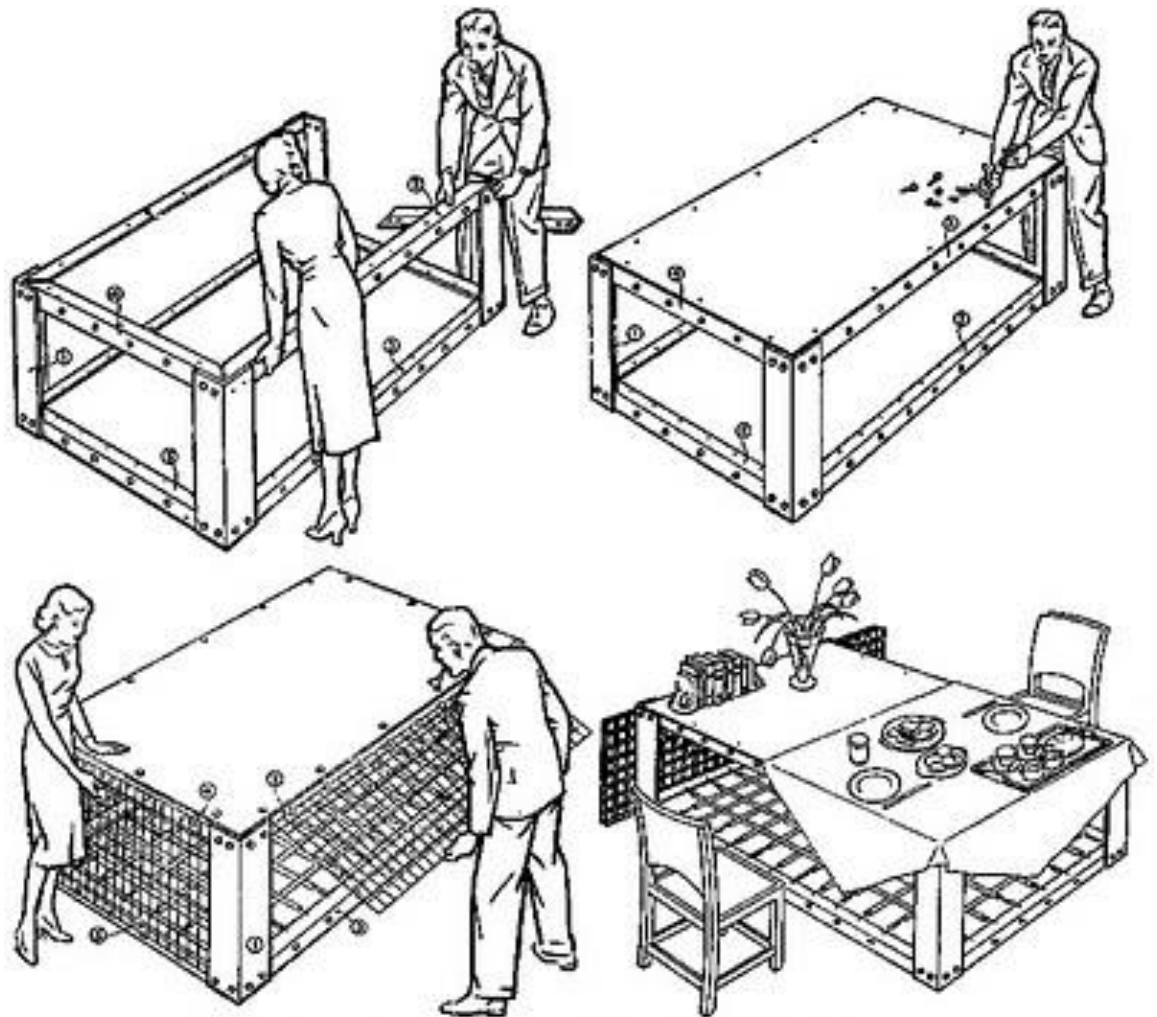




An Anderson shelter could not withstand a direct hit but it did offer protection from blast damage – as shown by this picture. The location is unknown but is thought to have been in the Mitcham or Colliers Wood area.



Ministry of Home Security
guidance on how to
construct an indoor table
shelter – also known as a
Morrison shelter.



How to put up your Morrison "Table" Shelter



Public air raid shelter, Cricket Green, Mitcham.
This type of surface shelter offered basic protection but could not withstand a direct hit, particularly if made from low-grade materials.

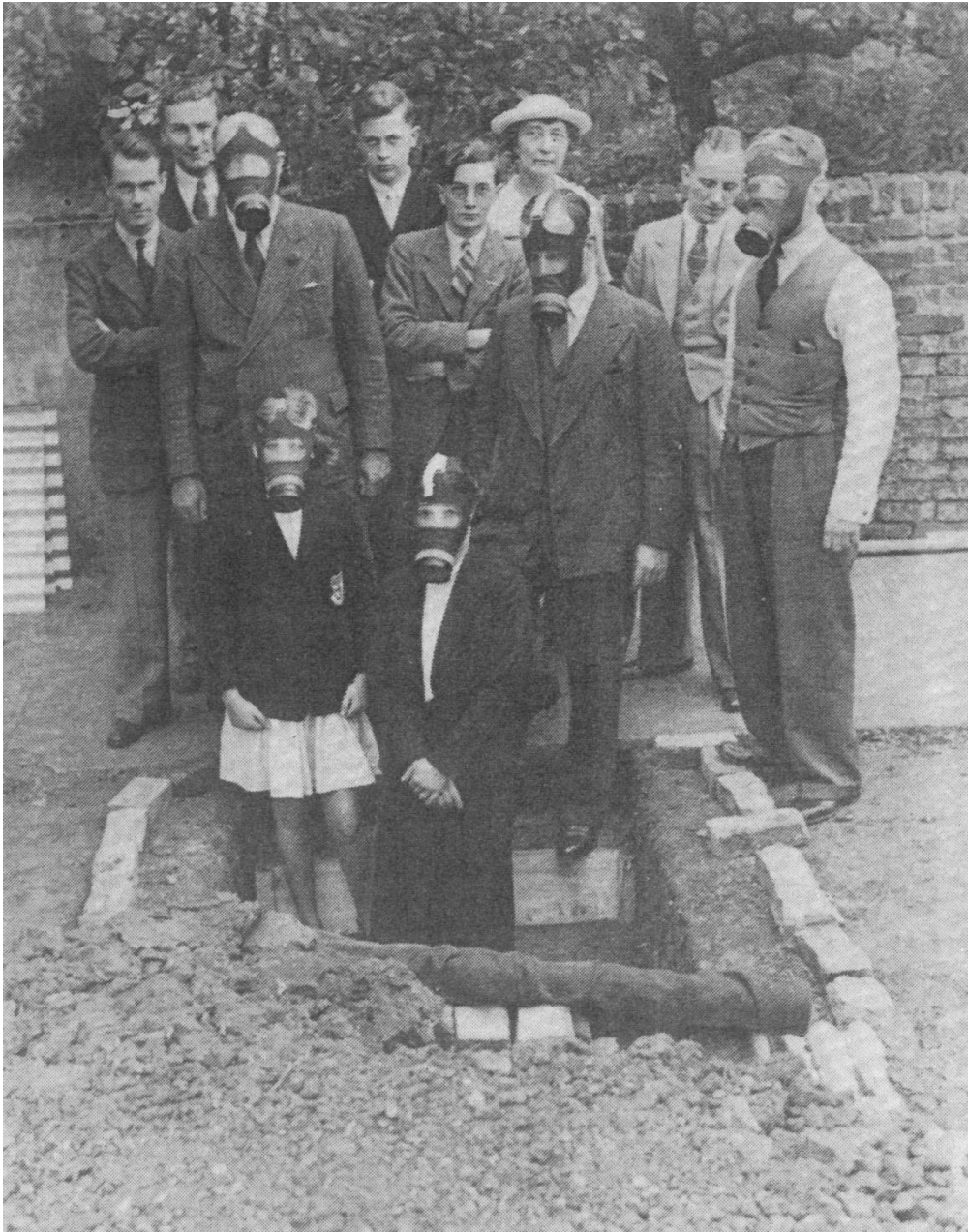


Public shelter, Commonside East, Mitcham



Waiting for the All-Clear...

People spent lengthy periods sheltering from enemy bombers. Some raids lasted many hours and night attacks were particularly trying, due to the fear factor and effects of sleep deprivation.



A family descend the steps into a deep air raid shelter.

As bombing raids became increasingly heavy more people sought the protection of deeper public shelters.



An air raid shelter at the Wimbledon Electricity Works , Durnsford Road.
This was considered to be the finest example of its kind in Surrey.



Bunk beds assembled on the platforms of South Wimbledon Underground Station.

As the wartime raids increased, the Underground offered shelter for many local residents. Shelter passes were issued to prevent dangerous overcrowding and bunk beds allowed more people to sleep along the platforms.