

EASTCOTE 1939 - 1941: the Mass Observation diary of Diarist No. 5129

by Philip Toms

Introduction

This article presents glimpses of life in Eastcote between 1939 and 1941 as depicted principally in a Mass Observation diary written by John Smithⁱ, who lived in Pine Gardens. I have tried to give a more rounded picture of what was happening locally by including extracts from the local newspaper, and have noted some nationally important events to provide a time-line for the period. Although there is some narrative to John's diary, what follows is often an impression of the time. Unfortunately there are lengthy gaps in his diary, for there are entries only for the months of October and December 1939, January, March, April, August, October, November and December 1940, and February, March and April 1941.

The Mass Observation movement was started in 1937 by Charles Madge and Tom Harrison. They recruited volunteers to observe what was going on in the country and report back in the form of diary entries. More systematic data was collected through questionnaires on a wide range of subjects - several people in our area completed these. But within the Ruislip, Northwood and Eastcote area only two diarists are recorded. Of these, John's diary is the most comprehensive since the other diarist, who lived in Ladygate Lane, wrote just a few entries in July 1940.

The country's early preparations for war had included the issuing of gas masks, plans to provide free air-raid shelters for homes in cities judged most likely to be bombed, the mobilisation of forces, the calling up of reserves, and the evacuation of children from major cities. In July 1938 the Ruislip-Northwood Urban District Council (RNUDC) undertook a house-to-house census to find out the number and sizes of respirators that would be required by the civilian population. 50000 civilian respirators and 150000 sandbags were ordered in September and 12000 respirators were issued to Wardens

during the same month. Trenches were dug during the Munich crisis and in November 1938 it was suggested that the RNUDC should construct a demonstration splinter-proof underground shelter for five or six people, over which a rockery could be made, on open space land in Broadhurst Gardens, Eastcote.

By January 1939 about 1500 council residents had qualified for the Home Office badge which was given on completion of an ARP course. Courses were held for wardens, first-aid workers, ambulance drivers, auxiliary firemen, and decontamination workers.

Come August 1939 and the Home Office was proposing to deliver ten garden shelters to the RNUDC for exhibition use. Two of them were to be built in Eastcote - one in Field End Road at the junction with Woodlands Avenue, and the other on land near Field End Road and Meadow Way. It is not clear whether these were delivered and the plan might well have been overtaken by events.

September 1939

The outbreak of war on the 3 September 1939 was recorded in the log book of Air Raid Precautions Post E2, located in St Lawrence Drive, Eastcote. At 10:45 Mr Hopkins had called to ensure that the Post had heard an earlier wireless news bulletin and at 11:15 the Prime Minister had broadcast that as from 11am that morning we were at war with Germany. A warning siren was heard at approximately 11:30 and all available wardens returned for duty. The all clear signals were sounded at 12 noon and there had been no incidents to record.

The expected air raids did not occur but those on the home front had to adjust to a more restrictive life. People had to get used to new conditions - on the 9 September Post E2 received a message from their control HQ that the district was showing too much light in the black out and were to instruct all wardens that 'no light means no light at all',

while on the 24th they logged that lights were showing in bungalows backing on to Pinn Fields, that two houses in St Lawrence Drive were persistent offenders, and that also the backs of houses in Rodney Gardens were showing lights.

A National Registration notice sent to all homes was collected on the 29 September by enumerators who issued the identity cards that were to be carried at all times.

People also learnt that coal rationing was to start on the 1 October, that they would have to register with their merchant, and that they would be rationed to 75% of their usual quantity.

October 1939

A national register was completed in advance of food rationing on the 2 October and on the 6th Eastcote House became the Food Control Office for Ruislip-Northwood UDC.

Men aged 20-23 were required to register for National Service on the 21st and on the 28th the first German bomber was shot down over Britain.

John Smith's first diary entry was made on the 10 October. He was 33 years old and an unemployed master decorator. His diary records his daily activities, thoughts, and what he overheard others saying etc. These are sometimes random jottings and at other times more coherent prose. His first entry records that he worked in his garden, saw a Siamese cat in the recreation ground, had a visit from a Red Cross flag seller, and heard Tommy Handley on the radio. He thought that German propaganda was very weak and added 'What is Russia up to?'

During the month he refers to vagaries in the supplies of food and difficulties with getting into the habit of carrying gas masks. While there was no bacon available on the 11th butchers shops were full of meat again on the 26th, yet two days later there was no bacon to be had again. He bought half a pound of scrap fat for rubbing down on the 11th in case butter became scarce and this seemed prudent given that no butter was available on the 28th. He notes several times that he forgot to take his gas mask with him and thought

that other people were similarly lax in carrying them.

On the 24th he applied for unemployment relief and a few days later went to the Labour Exchange [in Harrow?]:

'full house, pay day, no bother or fuss, [just] like queuing up for the cinema ... about 120 men at Unemployment Assistance Board on Friday, they looked well fed and not badly dressed ... had to wait more than two hours for my turn.'

His wife thought she could just about manage on the 27/- a week relief he received.

But the general tone of his entries in October is one of waiting for things to happen:

'Except for the facts that I am out of work, the newspapers and wireless, it is difficult to realise that there is a war on. Joanⁱⁱ still wonders when the war is going to start; even the fact that prices are so much higher has not been strong enough for her. She seems more steady than before the war broke out, which proves subconsciously she has accepted it. ... We are not so careful about the black out now. In spite of this no wardens have been around for three weeks. ... Still forgetting to take gas mask about.'

November / December 1939

In roads that used to be so sweetly select, Eastcotians are now awakened by cock crows. Many people have started keeping chickens. Advertiser 3/11/1939.

John didn't make any entries during November but we find that shopping was still a preoccupation when he returns to his diary in December. Sainsbury's was very full on the 2nd with many women around the bacon counter and the shop assistants were asking if shoppers were registered with them before serving. At the fishmongers on the 16th a well-spoken woman remarked "I'm not having any more of Walls sausages, there's too much bread in them" to which the assistant replied "We eat enough bread now without having it in sausages also". On the 21st he recorded that they had started to eat Stork margarine and that half a pound of butter was not enough now that they were eating more bread.

One loaf a day was their average:

'The poor must eat bread because it is cheaper than most foods.'

In the lead-up to Christmas he thought that there was very little Christmas atmosphere about and he and his wife decided that turkeys were too expensive so they chose chicken for the Christmas meal. After Christmas he noted that Sainsbury's were without cheap eggs and that meat seemed very dear.

John took on a Christmas job at the GPO in Ruislip. He started on the 14th and was employed in sorting and delivering letters. He thought that he had the easiest 'walk' in the district, 'mostly lower middle and middle class houses' but noted that lots of them seemed to be in a bad state of repair. His hours were 4.30 to 9am, 10am to 12.15pm, and 1 to 5pm. His final day was on the 25th and Christmas morning saw him at work by 4am. After finishing mid-morning he went home to the chicken dinner and then went to bed for the afternoon as tiredness got the better of him. He and his wife listened to the wireless all evening. Boxing Day saw an afternoon trip to the pictures (at Eastcote's Ideal cinema?). It was a full house and a picture of the Graf Spee was shown but he noted that there had been no demonstration by the audience.

Air-raid shelters start being mentioned. One of his workmates at the GPO had an air-raid shelter which was three foot under water and had been told by the Council official to bale it out so that it was ready for use in spite of the fact that when it rained it would fill up again.

The 27th found John back at the Labour Exchange to sign on with about 200 other temporary Post Office men. He was told that he had earned too much the previous week to get any money that week from the Unemployment Assistance Board:

'I am about £2-15-0d in pocket after working eleven days. Not much for the long hours and not too congenial work.'

On the final day of the month John was sawing up wood to eke out their remaining coal.

January 1940

On the first of the month 2 million men aged 20-27 were called up. Food rationing began on the 8th and every registered person was allowed 4 ounces (113.4g) of butter or lard, 12 ounces (340.2g) of sugar, 2 eggs, 4 ounces of raw bacon or ham, and 3.5 ounces (99.3g) of cooked bacon or ham per week.

Fining an occupant in The Chase, Eastcote for breaching black out regulations the Chairman said they had been fortunate people not having an air-raid, but they did not know when they were going to have one. People must be careful.

Advertiser 26/1/1940

John started the New Year in a rather despondent mood:

'The first year I have not made resolutions, or thought of making them. The wife missed her New Year's Eve party. Every day is little different to the next. No problems to solve now, just eating, sleeping, reading and odd jobs. The newspapers get scant attention. Only occasionally do I look at the adverts. It will be livelier when trouble starts on the 'home front.'

His mood must have been enhanced a few days later when he queued for over an hour at the Labour Exchange to get his pay. Two policemen were keeping order, for the queue was four deep and fifty yards along the road, in addition to the six queues inside.

But the day after this his spirits were perhaps lifted when he learnt that he could start a temporary job with a building company in Todmorton, Yorkshire the following week. The next Monday saw him leave Euston at 8.30 – there was plenty of fog on the line and not much to see from Manchester to Todmorton. But he observed:

'dark and dismal dwellings, broken down fences and ramshackle shanties'.

His first impression of Manchester was of dirt and dinginess, Todmorton the same.

Whilst in Todmorton he mused that milk propaganda must be working. Seven out of the eight men he was working with had milk with their lunch instead of tea with several of them commenting about it being nourishing.

They got their milk free every day from the local cowman. John also records waking up to the sounds of the shuffling of clogs on the pavement (the local people claimed they prevented rheumatism and corns) and seeing people eating cold tripe (his landlady told him that tripe was seldom cooked in that area).

The men he was working with, many of whom had served in the Great War, all had words to say against the war:

'In spite of what the papers say I've yet to meet anyone who considers the war is justified. The general idea seems to be that our politicians are to blame and that they are making sure their own people will benefit'. Such sentiment is borne out when he notes that a talk on the wireless about War Savings was roundly criticised and that the suggestion that the government would take the workman's surplus money if he didn't save was seen as a threat to liberty.

The month finished with everything covered in deep snow for several days.

February 1940

It was the coldest weather of the century – in Rayners Lane a hundred families have reported frozen or burst pipes in one road alone. Advertiser 2/2/1940

The 'Careless talk costs lives' campaign was launched on the 6th.

John received a couple of letters from his wife while he was away. The first told him that there was plenty of meat about 'but that the prices make one gasp'. The second was to the effect that she had received one hundredweight of coal some five weeks after ordering their usual amount. Previous to this she had been without coal for a month.

John finished his job and travelled home on the 24th but, before he did so, he bought an overcoat 'principally because the prices will go up next autumn and I might not be able to afford one then.' He remarked that the scenery improved as he got further south and noted that there was plenty of coal in the railway sidings.

Back at home they had one of their neighbours in to tea, playing cards and talking. The neighbours were finding it difficult to manage on an average of £3 per week and were trying to let two rooms.

Shopping is again a pre-occupation:

'It is a depressing job while food prices are so high. Fresh veg are scarce, we have dried beans instead. [on the 27th]. No carrots in the shops today. Onions 3d a pound. We have baked beans with our lunch instead of fresh vegetables.' [on the 29th].

The couple went to the cinema to see 'The Stars Look Down' and paid 6d entrance: 'Plenty of people there. Very little clapping when news film of HMS Exeter is shown, least of all for their Majesties'.

The month closed with John lagging pipes in the bathroom. One radiator was leaking and evidently the frost had got to it:

'By the time we have paid for repairs to burst pipes etc. the money we have saved in not buying coal will be gone. It always seems to balance up.'

March 1940

Eastcote suffered badly from a heavy air-raid on Wednesday – but only in theory. Local ARP personnel carried out an extensive exercise in the evening – the first night exercise to be held in Ruislip-Northwood ... amongst other objectives, the station was presumed bombed, together with shops, offices, homes, and even an air-raid shelter. All services participated. – Advertiser 22/3/1940

John was back at Harrow Labour Exchange on the first of the month. He noted that fewer were signing on than previously and whereas seven weeks previously he had had to queue for more than an hour this time it only took fifteen minutes to get to the desk.

Political 'slogans' came to his notice – a swastika written in the dust on a car, a British Fascist emblem stencilled in black paint on the entrance to Barclays Bank in Harrow, 'This war Jewish' written in red paint in a circle with the fascist sign on a Stanmore underground line train, and 'The enemy is in your own country' and other fascist slogans stuck on underground trains.

The Co-op traveller called and was surprised that they hadn't received the coal they ordered eight weeks previously, so they had 2cwt from their neighbour's coal merchant instead.

One Sunday they visited friends in Hounslow and on the way John remarked seeing, through the carriage window, people working on gardens and allotments, noting particularly that the women were wearing trousers. He wondered how many were 'Digging for Victory' as opposed to working for their own satisfaction and the idea of having a supply of fresh vegetables when prices were high and food was scarce.

They went into their friend's air raid shelter. It had a very small entrance and he couldn't imagine how a stout person would be able to get into it. A few days later he overheard a young man saying that there was over three foot of water in his shelter and that he was keeping some pike that his friend had caught in it. Towards the end of the month John seems to have found some decorating work in London and was discussing the merits of air-raid shelters with his workmates. The general opinion was that they afforded no real protection and all the men said that they would rather stay indoors.

Food was a continuing pre-occupation. The announcement of an increased butter ration on the 15th led his wife to comment that she supposed that such a lot was stored up because people couldn't afford to buy it, while another friend thought that the authorities were afraid of it going bad. Meat was scarce in Sainsbury's and prices very high - 'they are giving back a penny on each coupon.'

On the 18th Sainsbury's put up a notice reading:

'Owing to meat rationing (on a value basis) we are forced to raise our prices to the official list. As we do not wish to penalise our customers we are offering for the present a cash and carry system, penny per coupon, or tuppence a week.'

Five days later his wife spent more than an hour in the meat queue.

John's diary entry for the 20th begins;

'Very little happens these days. I feel very tired at night. Perhaps the nervous strain of the war is telling on me.'

He may have been feeling a bit brighter the following Sunday, Easter Sunday, for he describes an almost idyllic picture for the time:

'An eventful day in the garden.

Daffodils are in bloom, a thrush is building a nest in the cycle shed, and the hawks have returned to the nest in the ash tree at the bottom of the garden. They fly round the tree several times before the female alights on the nest. No notice is taken of other birds on the tree, perhaps their hunger has been satisfied earlier!

We walk in the fields and find a coltsfoot in full bloom, our first spring flower. Several nests are being built in the hedges by the sports ground. The fields where the allotments are is full of men and women working.

The 'Dig for Victory' campaign seems to be in full swing. We plant our vegetable seeds and put in lot of young plants bought from Woolworths.

A day well spent. I feel better for being in the garden all day. War seems far away and the mind is free from all worry.'

April 1940

John heard his first spy story at the beginning of the month. An acquaintance asked if he knew there was a spy in his road:

'Someone evidently gave him the 'wire' because when the police came round he had gone but the tea was still hot in the cup. She expressed surprise when I told her I hadn't heard about it and said "I shouldn't have told you, we aren't supposed to tell secrets."'

A few days later he visited an upper middle class home in the W14 district to estimate for work:

'All their mirrors are covered with brown paper: the husband won't let it be taken off but his wife laughs about it. There is a large summerhouse in the garden which has been completely covered with sandbags and a tarpaulin.'

On the 9th he was in Shepherds Bush listening to news of the invasion of Denmark and Norway outside Stone's wireless shop: 'About a hundred men were there; only one comment by a barrowman - 'the bastards'. The crowd dispersed quietly as the news ended. Everyone looked serious. Policeman made no attempt to move us on although the pavement was blocked.'

The prevailing mood swung two days later when eight enemy ships were reported sunk: 'Woman, upper middle class, excitedly "Have you heard this morning's news. We are striking back at last." Everyone I meet is jubilant that something is happening. Ships are being blown to pieces and men with them. How long must this go on? I feel sick about it. Must this brutality continue, and how long will decent people condone it? The wireless plays martial music to celebrate.'

May, June and July 1940

John didn't send in any entries for these three months. May saw Churchill became Prime Minister, Eden set up the Local Defence Volunteers (later renamed the Home Guard) and the evacuation of Dunkirk. Churchill delivered his "This was their finest hour" speech - "I expect the Battle of Britain is about to begin" - on 18th June.

Two hundred Eastcote families are now wiser and more confident thanks to the efforts of three local wardens. The families formed the audience at Pinner County School when they learnt something of the elementary steps towards safety in an air-raid... - Advertiser 21/6/1940

The Government announcement to the effect that all Anderson shelters already delivered should be properly erected and covered with earth by June 11th has stimulated many people into activity. In many cases the reason given for failure to erect shelters has been that the experience of neighbours has shown that the shelters become waterlogged. In these cases the advice has been given that the shelter should nevertheless be erected, that during the reasonably good summer weather it ought to be capable of being put to good use, and that in the meantime the Council are perfecting their scheme for the making them waterproof in anticipation of the winter season... - Advertiser 28/6/1940

August 1940

The Battle of Britain commenced in earnest on 13th August.

Defence Units first war experience: on Monday evening the seventh air raid warning in three days... lasted six hours. The raids brought the civil defence units into actual action for the first time during the war, and they were magnificent... - Advertiser 30/8/1940

John wrote only two entries in August. He recorded that he was working on his air-raid shelter on the 13th and that a neighbour had promised to help with it but didn't turn up. It clearly wasn't finished, for two days later there was an air raid warning at 7:15 - "Wife, sailor brother-in-law, his wife and two children go to air raid shelter in next garden. I go to get neighbour's wife and children but grandma thought they should stay under the stairs as she was afraid it was wrong to take them all across the road after the warning had sounded... No panic whatever. Wife plays I Spy with boy whilst brother-in-law and self stand in entrance..."

September, October, 1940

John didn't make diary entries for this period, that of the Battle of Britain which officially ended on 31 October.

Many East Enders have now become, temporarily, Eastcotians. [About forty] Residents of the bombed areas in London's dockland have been transferred to this district and billeted with local residents. - Advertiser 13/9/1940

Eastcote is at last to have a siren of its own. This week workmen have been busy in the shopping centre in Field End Road digging holes in the pavement by the police box on the south side in which the foundations of the supporting pylon will be set... - Advertiser 18/10/1940

November 1940

Coventry was bombed on the 14 November.

One of the district's largest shelters, that behind Devon Parade, which is capable of holding six hundred people, is not now fit for all-night use owing to leakage of water... Other shelters in the district, too, have become useless in so far as nightly sleeping is concerned, but all have been

reported to the Council and measures are to be taken for their improvement.
Advertiser 22/11/1940

John's diary is preoccupied with air raids during the latter part of the month:

'A fairly quiet night. We are sleeping in the house now, our Anderson Shelter is full of water. I have strengthened our recess with wood as an indoor shelter... No air raids today, although planes have been going up at intervals.' [19 November]

'Although planes were over during the evening raid they did not sound ominous enough to send us scuttling under the stairs. Perhaps a good fire and comfortable chairs give us greater sense of security!' [22 November]

'Worked on strengthening recess as shelter for two hours.' [23 November]

'A night without a raid. We go to bed expecting a warning. Neighbour said he kept waking and listening for guns.' [26 November]

'We see the exhaust of an enemy plane in the sky, then firing begins and the sirens sound. A little girl comes into tea. She is very nervy and cannot keep still. The siren goes, and in a very short time she is anxious to go home. Three children play in the street, one calls "shrapnel is falling, take cover" and they all rush to the porch of a house. Then two help the smallest child along. He is supposed to be hurt. The eldest two are five years old and youngest three.' [28 November]

'Work during the afternoon digging an air-raid shelter. Lots of people are having shelters built, although there are surface shelters in the street.' [30 November]

December 1940

The Eastcote Hurricane Fund has sold 10,000 of the little aluminium fighter badges at 2d each. Their sale has raised over £80 towards the current £270 so far collected. – Advertiser 13/12/1940

November 21st was the anniversary of the formation of the Red Cross Supply Department which is working at The Grange, Eastcote. Although affiliated to the British Red Cross Society "The Grange" depot is entirely self-supporting, relying on the generosity of its members and friends for its supplies. It has over

thirty members meeting three days a week. During its year of work the depot has produced approximately 1,300 many tailed bandages, 5,000 swabs, and a hundred surgeons' masks. – Advertiser 13/12/1940

It was a bad start to the month for John:

He asked his foreman about an increase in his wages only to be told that he was going to be stood off the next day. So the next week he signed on at the Labour Exchange again, noting that now there was only a trickle of claimants – war was a 'doubtful blessing' in this respect. But just before Christmas about fifty men were drawing the dole at Harrow Labour Exchange and on this later visit he was interviewed for the government training scheme – 'no inducement or real explanation of the scheme. No wonder the men came out laughing and swearing at the scheme. I do the questioning and the only job I'm interested in has a long waiting list. It is difficult to get a satisfactory answer from the clerk, so I walk out.'

Air raids continue to be a major preoccupation. On the 6th John noted that they slept upstairs on their own bed for the first time since the bombing raids started, much to the surprise of their neighbours who were continuing to sleep on the floor downstairs. It was a bad night on the 9th: 'We sleep upstairs in our own bed, but were disturbed by bombs and anti-aircraft fire. Once the house shook and the bedroom door burst open. My wife heard the bomb screaming through the air: she woke me up by falling against me as the bomb landed. I was too comfortable to move the mattress downstairs and soon fell asleep again.'

John does not often record the damage caused by air raids but in mid-month he describes walking through some gardens where a bomb had fallen. Dozens of houses had been damaged and an Anderson shelter was leaning lopsidedly out of the ground. Even brussel sprouts were blasted, looking like miniature palm trees with just a few leaves left on top. 'It is surprising how coolly one can survey the damage'.

'A few months ago it shocked me to see bombed houses [but] now it seems the natural order of things.'

It was the strangest Christmas that he could remember and there seemed to be little festive spirit about although many were saying that they had to make the best of bad times and 'give the kiddies a good time'.

On the 29th John records that there were 'terrible fires in London. The sky is like an Autumn sunset, so bright is the glare from the flames. The wife is depressed by the thoughts of what people are suffering in town...

But they still had a New Year's Eve party – the first since they were married. 'We dance until 12, then toast the new year. We talk about forgetting the old year, and hoping for the best in the new [one].'

January 1941

The response to the appeal for fire wardens in this district has, so far, produced good results, but more people are needed if the area is to be thoroughly safeguarded. ... One post on the north of Field End Road has fifty stirrup pumps to 300 houses – 1 in 6. Quantities of sand have been sent to each post and residents may have some of it if they care to collect it themselves.

Advertiser 17/1/1941

Wardens of Post E.7 have frequent recourse to an excellent book which they themselves compiled. In it is contained information concerning every house and its occupants in the area covered by the post – where they sleep, the names of relatives, where keys may be found, if the house is vacant, and so forth. – Advertiser 24/1/1941

There are no diary entries for January. On the 11th Lime Grove and Myrtle Avenue, Eastcote suffered high explosive damage: six houses required demolition with another six being severely damaged. 80 more received slight damage and gas, water, electric cables and water sewers were damaged.

February 1941

Women aged 16 – 49 had to register as 'mobile' if they had no children living at home.

February saw John and his wife putting up three lodgers, firstly someone referred to as the Old Man and, secondly, two air force men.

The Old Man clearly held different political opinions to John and there are several references to arguments between them e.g. 'Another political discussion ... to him the British are the salt of the earth... I preach internationalism to him but it is difficult for him to swallow it. His views are so conservative, only the British are worth considering in his estimation. His motto is Britain first, right or wrong.'

The two air force men came to stay towards the end of the month. 'Although they have only been in service two months they have assimilated the discipline and asked whether we would mind them going home on their leave nights. Both live in the London area. They appear to think we have a certain amount of control over their movements but we soon put them at their ease.'

Supplies of food continued to be erratic. 'Shopping in Eastcote. One shop has no bacon while next door the window to a grocers is full. No razor blades in Woolworths. More meat about this week.' [1 February]

'Something new in the fishmongers, vegetable sausages, 9d per pound. A queer yellowish colour. Must be the swedes in them.' [3 February]

'If the price of bacon goes up much more we will have to do without it.' [19 February]

'Milkman warns wife that an inspector is coming round about rations. Lots of people are getting more than they should.' [21 February].

John records a surprising difference in people's attitudes in consecutive entries mid-month. On the 10th he stated that although many people let things slide with their houses when war started it was now evident that many were taking a pride in the homes again e.g. two neighbours had recently bought new curtains and another lady had asked her landlord about doing up her house. Contrast this to overhearing someone observe that her neighbour had asked if she

had packed her bags because of the invasion – she had half a dozen cases filled with clothes and said you must be prepared.

Shortly after, John was fixing up his shed as a store-room for his decorating material:

‘I’m working for myself again, but wonder how long I shall be allowed to. It is difficult to make an effort to establish my business again. Everything is so indefinite.’ Self-employment didn’t last long, however, for on the 22nd he signed on at the Labour Exchange again. He went to a job as foreman painter but when he got there found it was actually putting windows into bombed houses. He didn’t stay long.

Gardening continued throughout the month. He planted broad beans, early peas, leeks and parsnips and noted that men were getting busy on their allotments. On Sunday the 23rd the hawks arrived back in the ash tree at the end of the garden. There were three of them and evidently one of the previous year’s brood had returned with its parents.

March 1941

Plans were announced to conscript 20 and 21 year old women for jobs in industry and the auxiliary forces.

Work has now begun on the erection of air-raid shelters in the grounds of St. Laurence Church which will be used in connection with the community centre for which the Parish Hall is scheduled. The shelters (of the ordinary brick surface type) will go up just behind the fence on the Bridle Road frontage and a big branch of the gnarled willow tree there will have to be lopped to make room for them. – Advertiser 28/3/1941

2nd March: ‘Our neighbour goes to see the bombed houses. Nearly 200 houses were damaged, seven people killed and 150 injured. Who knows but tomorrow we may be dead. Perhaps Friday’s bombing has caused our attack of nerves. We have both been awkward about things [and] even our neighbours seem more tetchy.’

10th March: ‘We talk to an antique dealer. It appears that Americans are taking advantage of the war to buy up antiques while prices are low. The dealer has a list of orders and is

sending several hundred pounds worth of furniture each week.’

17th March: ‘People are talking about the invasion. Perhaps the present is rather dull and so people are using their imagination about what might happen in the future.’

Meanwhile, putting up the Air Force boys was wearing a bit thin: ‘[They] don’t realise that certain foods are scarce. They spread jam lavishly until it is gone and are then disappointed when there is none for tea. We keep their sugar in separate tins as we have used a pound more each week than the rations. Taffy doesn’t ask for more sugar for his tea, so he makes a show by stirring persistently. If evacuees behave like he does one can understand how trouble starts. We make them welcome but they gradually take advantage. I’m sure they wouldn’t act as they do in their own homes. The wife will be glad when they leave. The food problem allied with extra work is a great worry.’ And leave they did. They were transferred to night work so were asked to get other lodgings. John was left with a niggle: ‘We were told that the allowance was 25/- each, but we were paid 24/- for one and 23/- for the other.’

The previous month John had subscribed to fire-watchers to buy helmets and oilskins and by March he had become closely involved in this activityⁱⁱⁱ:

19th March: ‘Fire watching last night for two hours. The Council won’t allow surface shelters to be used by fire-watchers so we walk about all the time. Nothing happened except for a little firing.’

23rd March: ‘We are given a shed to store fire-watching appliances in. About twelve men help to move [it] nearer the road. There seems to be more fire-watchers in our street than in any other I know of. The tin hats and other fire-fighting appliances have been bought by subscription without help from the local council. The owners of the estate (about 120 rented houses) subscribed £2-2-0d. Even water tanks are being fitted on wheels for use with stirrup pumps.’

At the close of the month John went to Southend via Liverpool Street station. 'The damage in the East End is terrible. I feel shocked by it. There are many really devastated areas where nothing is being done to repair or demolish bombed houses. Factories are also untouched.' The return journey – Southend to Eastcote – took four hours.

April 1941

John attended Willesden Green for a medical on the 15th: 'Three out of the four men I sit with want to be called up. Good thing the weather was mild, otherwise one would freeze while waiting for the doctors. The treatment is quite good and the doctors considerate. No information why I was

rejected, although several people thought I would be. I feel elated at the decision, now I know where I stand.'

We are left with one last, enigmatic, entry written on the 22nd April in which John recalled a conversation in a shop. A customer was telling the manageress that she was asking for trouble doing her shop up and that it was sure to be bombed as a result. The manageress grumbled about the war but was sure it would all come out right some day "when we wipe Jerry out." John must have made a remark at this stage because he records that the manageress was surprised at his pessimistic view about Britain's ability to win the war. Prophetically, the last words in John's diary are of the manageress replying: "Oh, but we *can't* lose."

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex for permission to use extracts from the diary and for their assistance while I was researching it. Copyright © Mass Observation Archive November 2010

The Mass Observation diaries, questionnaires etc. have been digitised and I was able to work through the diary at the British Library.

Other sources

Middlesex Advertiser & County Gazette [held at LBH local studies library]

RNUDC Fire Brigade and ARP minutes [held at LBH local studies library]

Ruislip-Northwood Air Raid damage/precautions file 1940-45 [held at LBH local studies library]

Log book of Air Raid Precautions Post E2, which was located in St Lawrence Drive, Eastcote [held by RNELHS]

The Home Front: Ruislip, Northwood and Eastcote in wartime [RNELHS, 2007]

Eastcote from village to suburb: a short social history 1900-1945, by Ron Edwards [Hillingdon Borough Libraries, 1987]

Ruislip-Northwood – the development of an urban district 1904-1965 [RNUDC, 1965]

ⁱ Not his real name: the Mass Observation Archive request that real names and addresses are not used.

ⁱⁱ Not her real name

ⁱⁱⁱ There was a Wardens' Post – a sunken steel shelter – on the island feature in Pine Gardens