

The Kemp Town Estate during the Second World War



East side of Lewes Crescent.
a watercolour by Norman Janes, 1946, once owned by Antony Dale.

No bombs fell here, and no invasion happened but there were plenty of other reasons why people living here would be in no doubt that there was a war on.

Invasion threat

After the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in 1940, an invasion by the Germans was expected at any time. Any part of the South Coast of England where an amphibious assault could be made became a place of potential danger. In Brighton, several institutions had relocated away from the coast for the duration of the war and their buildings turned over to military use. Although Brighton College remained in Eastern Road, its prep school withdrew from 16 Lewes Crescent. St. Mary's School and its halls of residence in Sussex Square closed. Roedean School relocated to the Lake District and St. Dunstan's home for blind airmen relocated to Shropshire for the duration of the war.

Houses vacated by those seeking a safer location were quickly requisitioned for war use. By 1943, the War Department was using 20 or more of the 105 houses on the estate and paid the Enclosures Committee compensation for the loss of garden rates on these houses¹. 25 Sussex Square was requisitioned to re-house men displaced from the Brighton Workhouse as that institution on Elm Grove became, once again, a war hospital.

¹ Dale Antony, The history of the Kemp Town gardens, Brighton. Dale 1964

Had Hitler's invasion plan, Operation Sealion, been enacted, people here would have found themselves in great danger, trapped between an enemy force invading from the sea and enemy paratroopers dropped on the Downs behind the Home defences. Escape for civilians would have been impossible. Access to road and rail travel would have been severely restricted by the overriding needs of the defensive forces to bring in reinforcements to the area and to prevent the enemy from advancing north by road or rail². The presence of two 6" guns at the top of Duke's Mound would have attracted heavy incoming fire from invading forces and their supporting ships, with unimaginable consequences for people trapped here and the houses they sheltered in. The threat of invasion diminished after the Germans began their invasion of Russia in June 1941.

The Military take over

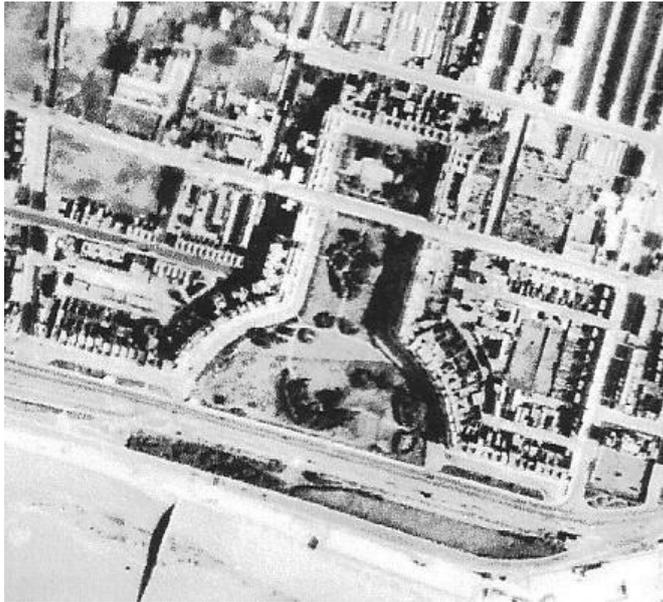
In 1940, the Army had tried to commandeer the whole of the gardens for military use, requiring the two cottages on the esplanade to be closed immediately and the one gardener remaining in residence there to be rehoused. The Gardens Committee managed to persuade the military to reduce its requirements and leave all but the bottom part of the lower gardens in residents' use. Thick coils of barbed wire were laid across the gardens in a line from near to No. 3 Lewes Crescent on the west side to No. 18 in on the east. South of this line was out of bounds to the residents and here the grass grew long over the next five years. The tunnel was bricked up at its seaward end and the whole of the Kemp Town Slopes were made out of bounds to the public, as well as all of the beachfront.

The Admiralty then requisitioned the lawn in front of Arundel Terrace and built on it two brick and concrete shelters with two more in the gardens. The Corporation requisitioned a major part of the top garden in 1941 for the Fire Service. Here a semi-submerged static water tank was built to provide water for fire fighting in the event of a major incendiary raid. After the railings were taken for scrap metal by the Ministry of Supply in 1942, the top gardens were open to all. It is legendary that the metal was never used for the war effort

When later, the railings for the lower gardens were taken, they were immediately replaced with a makeshift barrier using the thin wire netting previously attached to the railings to keep out cats and dogs and now suspended from new timber posts with some barbed wire strung between them. Despite a war going on, the major concern of the Gardens committee, then as now, was keeping the gardens for the exclusive use of residents. For the war years, however, those resident on the Estate included an ever changing population of hundreds of young men and women in military service.

The beaches were mined and the piers closed with gaps dynamited in them to prevent their use for an enemy landing. The sea front was barricaded with sandbags and barbed wire along its length. Machine gun posts were erected

² Individual citizens were told that when the invasion was signalled by the ringing of church bells, they should keep off the roads, to free them for military traffic, and walk towards London wearing bright clothing, so that they would not be shot by mistake as advancing German soldiers. *From Brighton Behind the Front, Queenspark books 1990*



Aerial photo of April 1946, showing the long grass south of a line marking the military area of the South garden. At higher resolution a rectangular chalk scar can be seen in the centre of the North garden marking the site of the fire service's water tank.

at strategic points. Traffic was diverted away from the coast road passing the estate. Hazards and coils of barbed wire placed along the carriageway to protect a gun emplacement on the bastion at the top of Dukes Mound. Here two heavy 6" naval coastal defence guns were installed, with a concrete observation tower built in the south west corner of the gardens to direct fire. Gun crews had standing orders to destroy the Palace Pier and West Pier in the event of invasion to prevent their use as landing stages.



Royal Artillery gunners manning a 6-inch coastal defence gun. November 1939

Whenever these guns were used in practice, residents would be warned to open their windows to prevent them being smashed by the considerable shock waves from the guns firing and the blast wind that followed. In a

memoir of a wartime childhood³ here on the estate, David Knowles recalls that “loud explosions from this gun being used in practice, shook the ground we stood on and cracked some of the windows of the houses nearby that hadn’t been secured with tape or reinforced in some way. After each explosion, if the winds were coming from a southerly direction, clouds of yellow smoke would drift up the Crescent, leaving an acrid taste in your mouth if you happened to be caught unawares and inhaled the pungent fumes.”

The Canadians

With the arrival of Canadian troops, St. Mary’s Hall and its dormitory houses at 2 Sussex Square and 21/22 Sussex Square were used for billeting soldiers, as was 16 Lewes Crescent which had been vacated by Brighton College. The Canadian headquarters was set up at Arundel House at the eastern end of Arundel Terrace.

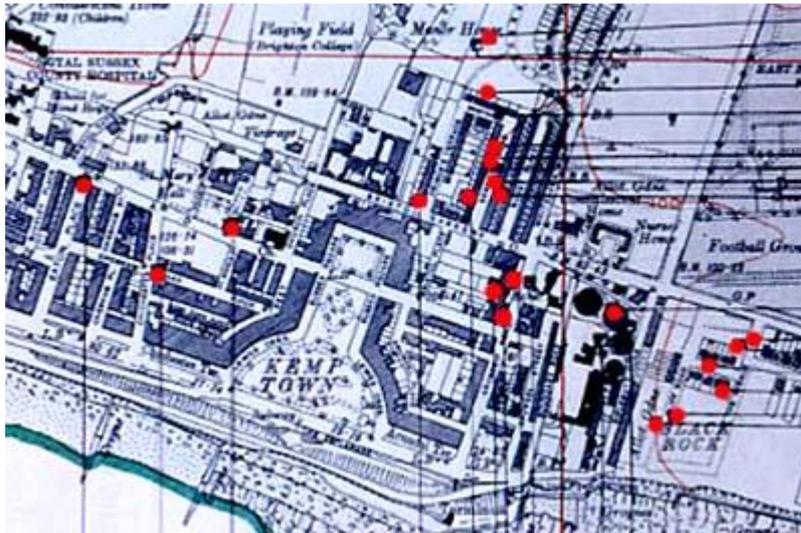
The Canadians, were from the Lake Superior Regiment, based at Thunder Bay, Ontario. They arrived in February 1943 in convoy with a large number of troops and equipment, Bren gun carriers, trucks and tanks. They came, not to defend Brighton, but for training. Brighton was defended by another Canadian infantry brigade. While here, the Superiors had their vehicles parked around the garden railings, using the cover of trees to disguise their presence from aerial reconnaissance. They trained in amphibious landings and tank warfare around Sussex, and subsequently fought through Holland and into Germany. They left Brighton in August 1943 and were succeeded by British troops.

Air raids

Although no bombs fell on the estate, residents were frequently obliged to take shelter in basements and vaults when the air raid sirens went off. There was strict enforcement of the blackout with Air Raid Wardens ensuring that blackout blinds were drawn to conceal all lights from the air or indeed from the sea. Fighter-bombers would speed across the channel from airfields in occupied France and bomb the town in ‘tea-time raids’, shooting up people unlucky enough to be still on the streets. Memoirs of the time describe the night time bombing raids as terrifying, with those sheltering left to imagine what was going on above them from the noise of aircraft directly overhead, the anti-aircraft gunfire and explosions as bombs fell nearby. The gas works was the target.

Bombs fell on the gas works, twice, causing large explosions and fires, and on Marine Gate and on the St. Mary’s Hall building fronting Eastern Road. In February 1944 bombs fell on Princes Terrace and Bennett Road behind Sussex Square, where many lives were lost. Wilson’s Laundry, which stood on the site of the present LIDL supermarket, was bombed twice but quickly brought back into service with the help of Canadian army engineers, for the laundry was providing the army with clean sheets and clothes.

³ Knowles, David, *The Tree Climbers: a childhood in wartime Brighton*, Knowles Publishing 1998



*Wartime bombing map. National Archives
(an incomplete record: bombs also fell in Rock Street and Kemp Town Place.)*

An air-raid on the afternoon of Saturday 14th September 1941 saw twenty high-explosives dropped on Kemp Town, one of them making a direct hit on the Odeon cinema⁴ which was crowded with children. 4 children and 2 adults were killed there. Another of the bombs landed in Rock Street killing a chauffeur who had come to pay the fortnightly newspaper bill at the newsagents at No.4⁵. In the same incident a bomb landed on 8 Kemp Town Place, behind the Rock Inn killing another 3 people and a baby. Estate residents, Mrs. Jane Blackwell, a widow who lived at 10 Sussex Square and Leonard Jones, of 24 Sussex Square were among those who died that day.

On a separate occasion a young woman returning from her job as a cinema usherette in town, was killed by shrapnel as she stepped off the bus in Arundel Road. Again in Arundel Road, two policeman and a schoolteacher were killed when a 1000lb bomb landed in the street, during an air raid on Brighton by 25 aircraft in May 1943. This raid caused widespread damage and casualties around Brighton, including fatalities at Bennett Road, Eaton Place, Chesham Road and Chichester Place near to the estate.

Perhaps attracted by the comings and goings of military personnel at the Canadian Army HQ in Arundel Terrace, a German raider shot up the terrace smashing windows and riddling walls with bullet holes, but thankfully no-one was hurt.

Wartime privations

Away from the dramas of wartime, residents here suffered, as elsewhere, the tedium and privations of war. Despite the sleep lost through night time air raid alerts, people were expected to arrive at work or school as normal the next morning. Many women drawn into the workplace for the first time, were still expected to run households, providing food, laundry and care for their children

⁴ The Odeon cinema stood on the NE corner of St. George's Road and Paston Place.

⁵ Brown, Ken, son of the newsagent in Rock Street, eye witness interviewed by Andrew Doig 2009

and other dependents. Food rationing resulted in lengthy queues for very small rations of basic foods to be bought only from the supplier with whom you had registered. The Standen family at 5 Arundel Terrace whose second floor balcony was used as an army look out post, would see sides of meat being carried into the soldiers' mess below and then endure the tantalising smell of it cooking but were never got a taste of it, despite the extreme rigours of food rationing⁶.

Petrol rationing limited travel by car, and public transport journeys, especially those by railway, were often seriously disrupted by the competing transport needs of the military. The nightly blackout had to be observed on pain of fines or at least being yelled at by air raid wardens who would tour the estate each evening. The town and seafront, once brightly lit, was plunged into complete darkness every night for 6 years. No-one got anywhere near the beach for the duration no matter how good the weather.

HMS Vernon

Buildings vacated by Roedean School and St. Dunstan's out on the cliffs were requisitioned by the Navy for their torpedo and mine training school, HMS Vernon, which had been hastily relocated to Brighton after their Portsmouth base was bombed out. Wrens⁷ attending training at HMS Vernon were housed at the John Howard Convalescent Home, now the Steiner school, and at 7 Arundel Terrace & 22 Lewes Crescent.

From 1941 until the war ended, groups of trainee Wrens would be billeted here for 6 weeks at a time while they completed training at Roedean. During that time hundreds of young women would have stayed here sharing dorms set up in all the rooms not needed for dining or recreation.



Wrens assembling special mines a HMS Vernon
www.royalnavyresearcharchive.org.uk

⁶ Andy Anderson, resident at 5 Arundel Terrace since 1957, was told this story by the Standens. The wartime meat ration was about 540g per person per week.

⁷ See the house history for 7 Arundel Terrace for an account of a Wren's time based here

There were occasional dances for the Wrens and other naval staff from HMS Vernon, held at the dining room of the requisitioned Marine Gate flats, until that building was bombed out.



The good old days!
WRNS on a course at HMS Vernon 1943. From the private collection of Barbara Hopkins, published by mybrightonandhove.org.uk

It is hard to imagine how young women billeted here, dealt with the danger and privations of war, or the freedoms and excitement presented by a world turned upside down by war. Most were away from home, in the company of other young people, for the first time. Many of those who survived the war later spoke of this as the most exciting time of their lives.

There were a lot of Canadian and American troops in the area and the Wrens were often invited to dances and some had steady relationships with foreign troops. David Knowles⁸ and his playmates were encouraged to play in the South gardens least they stumble across 'over amorous' couples courting in the North Gardens, which were then unfenced and open to all. A greater danger, in fact, was the unfenced water tank in which children bathed at first, while the water was clean. Tragically a boy from Whitehawk drowned while playing in the tank.

Muriel James,⁹ a Wren based at 7 Arundel Terrace, recalled that when a Wren became pregnant, she was immediately isolated at Roedean as though contagious. Wrens who became pregnant were allowed to serve until their

⁸ Knowles, David. op cit

⁹ James, Mrs M.J. 'An Account of Life in the Forces. Muriel Joyce Hill WRNS 1942-1946' Imperial War Museum collection

sixth month then a place would be available to them in a Mother & Baby unit run by nuns, unless they were able to go home. Muriel speaks of the shame of illegitimate births. She says, "Few of us had had any sex education from home, from school and certainly not in the service."

The war ends

By Christmas 1944, nearly seven months after the D-day invasion of Normandy, the probability of an enemy invasion was negligible. The barbed wire was removed from the Undercliff Walk and after Christmas lunch Muriel and several others walked along it for the first time. They saw planes of every type going over to join the thousands of bomber raids on Germany and wondered how much longer the war would go on.

Victory in Europe was declared in May 1945. On the morning of 4th August 1945, the remaining WRNS left Brighton for Portsmouth.

Aftermath of War

Britain had been brought close to bankruptcy by the war. Priority was given to export earnings to pay off the debt incurred during the war and the domestic market was controlled to achieve this. There was a shortage of building materials, skilled labour and money. The wartime system of licensing the use of building materials remained in place until November 1954. Food rationing did not end until June 1954. Consumer credit was tightly controlled for decades to come. Little or no maintenance had been carried out on the buildings or gardens of the estate during the war years and recovery afterwards was extremely slow.

The gardens

Extensive damage had been caused to the gardens by military use. The brick and concrete pill boxes and observation towers built in the garden had to be demolished, the bricked up tunnel down to the promenade re-opened and the static water tank in the North Garden removed and lawns restored. The metal railings lost to the war effort needed to be replaced. Part of the south garden was overgrown and unkempt after five years behind the barbed wire that defined the military area.

It should not be taken as a foregone conclusion that the garden railings would be restored and the garden returned to private use. After the war, the communal spirit engendered by the shared privations of war found expression in a new government with a mandate to provide a publicly funded health service open to all, a state system of compulsory insurance to provide sickness and unemployment benefits, universal secondary education and the nationalisation of transport, utilities and other key industries. Local authorities were on a mission to rebuild their war damaged areas and to respond to a housing crisis by building new modern homes. This was a time of civic expansion. It would not have been surprising had the Council taken over the gardens as a public amenity.

After the war, Hove Borough Council consulted the residents of Adelaide Crescent and Brunswick Square to establish whether they wished to retain

their gardens as private or to hand them over to public use. They opted for public access and maintenance from public funds.

The committee of the Kemp Town Enclosures at the time was of a very different view and actively reclaimed the gardens, pursuing the authorities for compensation that would enable them to restore the damaged gardens as private. The compensation claims were settled by 1951. Chain link fencing was gradually extended around the gardens beginning in 1949. It was not until 1975 that the chain link fencing was finally replaced by new mild steel railings.

The houses

At the war's end, houses that had not been redecorated since 1939, or earlier, remained undecorated for years to come. Before the introduction of smokeless zones in the 1950's, buildings became blackened over time by soot from coal fires. Security of tenure and rent controls over a long period meant that rents fell behind the cost of maintaining houses and landlords were generally unwilling or unable to fund repairs to their houses. Conditions deteriorated. With the loss of local housing by bombing, there was an acute shortage and some of the houses on the estate were let as flats or houses in multiple occupation without proper self-containment. Others requisitioned by Brighton Council during the war, to house families made homeless by bombing, remained in Council hands.

It was many years after the war before the gardens and houses received the investment needed to bring them up to present day standards. The street directories show that a great many of the people who had lived here before the war moved away and did not return. A new and more varied community was established after the war, much of it in rented flats, a community long since succeeded by others.

Andrew Doig
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