

Kennington's Forgotten Tragedy

An account of the air-raid shelter in Kennington Park and the memorial to the victims killed in Lambeth's worst World War II bomb incident.



Rob Pateman

Published by The Friends of Kennington Park



Preparing for war

In the years leading up to the war Germany invested heavily in its army, navy and air force. From 1938, with the German leader's speeches suggesting an invasion of Czechoslovakia, Europe began preparing for war.

The British government ordered the mobilisation of Air Raid Precautions volunteers and local authorities began preparing air raid shelters.

Taking cover

Faced with the prospect of attack from the air, people sought out the best ways to protect themselves.

Many Londoners sheltered in the Underground stations, despite the government's efforts to deter them as they feared having so many people gathered in one place could lead to a large loss of life. They were also concerned that people sheltering in the stations would slow trains down and harm the economy, war effort and morale.

An alternative was the Anderson shelter, a hut made of two curved walls of corrugated steel, bolted to stout rails and buried under 18" of earth in back gardens. However, as only 25% of Londoners had a garden, communal surface shelters were set up, mainly in working class areas.



Designed to protect 50 residents from a single street or block of flats, the shelters were prone to collapse as a shortage of cement weakened their construction.

The trench shelters built in London's parks and open spaces were another form of protection. In Lambeth, trench shelters were erected in Archbishop's, Brockwell, Myatts, Ruskin, Vauxhall and Kennington parks.

The Kennington Park trench

The trench excavated in Kennington Park followed the standard design.

In his memoirs, Reverend John Markham, rector of St Peter's church in Walworth, recalls them as being "planned on a sort of 'ladder' outline. There were two longer trenches joined by four shorter ones at right angles to them, making a closed grid."

Each section of the grid could accommodate up to 50 people. The earth walls were reinforced with sandbags and the corrugated iron roof covered with a layer of soil.

Robert McAlpine & Sons dug out the Kennington Park trenches in 1938. Like all trench shelters they were prone to flooding and subsidence, so the government ordered that they should be lined with thin concrete slabs. In 1939, the contractor A O Laird lined the trenches using local labour for a cost of £9,870.

Kennington Park trench shelters were similar to those at Clapham Common shown below



‘Horrible and smelly’

As trench shelters were intended to be ‘bolt holes’ for people caught out in the open during an air raid, they were only equipped with a few wooden benches and very basic sanitation. When designed, it was anticipated that the average stay would be around 3-4 hours. In reality, people often spent 12 hours crowded into the stinking, waterlogged shelters.

As one witness explains “the public shelter was horrible, smelly. It had a mouldy slab of concrete for a roof. But you couldn’t go anywhere else - the Oval Station was full of barbed wire ... they wouldn’t let you near it.”

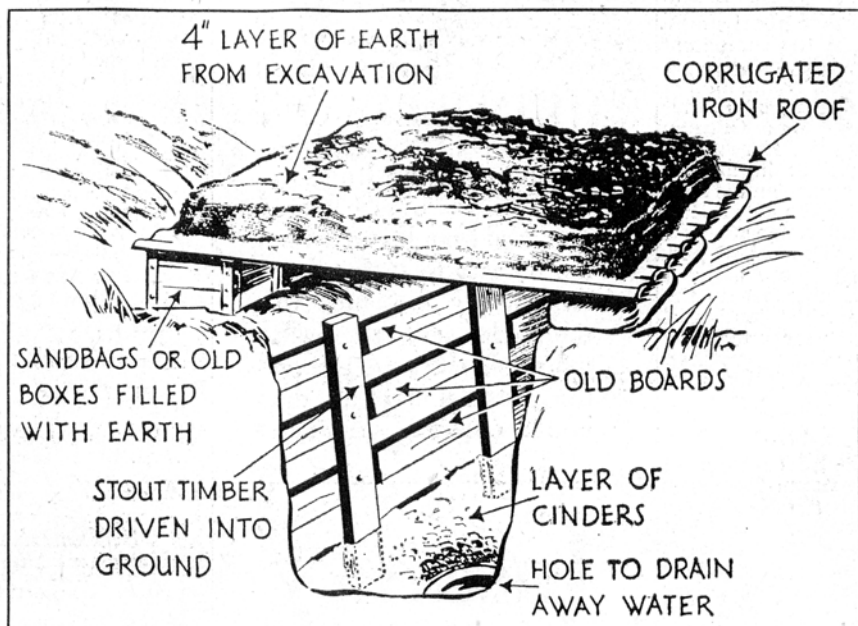
A question of safety

Even before the war started, some officials felt the ladder design was dangerous, declaring that a direct hit would cause a collapse of the whole shelter.

This wasn’t lost on Reverend John Markham who observed “any bomb falling inside the grid between the trenches would create an earth shock wave sufficient to crush the trenches.”

Inside a trench shelter at Clapham Common





Trench shelter construction

A young schoolgirl from Streatham, Maud Dare, remembered "sitting with my mother and father in one of those shelters and while we were there it started shaking. The earth started to come in. My father said 'no more going in there.'"

Trenches built after 1939 followed a zigzag design which could endure the stresses of a direct hit far better than the ladder system. However, the expense and lack of manpower made turning the Kennington Park trench into the zigzag design impractical.

Despite these doubts over their safety, trench shelters were more popular than surface shelters as people felt more protected being underground, even if it was just a few feet.

The Blitz

In August 1940 intermittent air raids on Britain by the Luftwaffe left 1,000 people dead. But the sustained bombing campaign of the Blitz began on 7th September 1940 when around 950 German aircraft attacked London.

It was the first of 57 consecutive nights of bombing that targeted the docks, industry and utilities; inevitably civilian houses and shelters were hit too. By the end of the Blitz, around 30,000 Londoners had been killed and a further 50,000 injured.

A direct hit

At a meeting of Lambeth Council on 15th October the Medical Officer requested £75 for the purchase of a vehicle suitable for removing civilian dead.

His request came too late; two hours after the meeting finished the largest single loss of life at a bomb incident in Lambeth occurred when a 50lb bomb fell on Kennington Park trenches.

The messages to the Air Raid Precautions post, transcribed below, chart the unfolding tragedy:

Tuesday 15th October 1940...

20.05 Express report - casualties at Kennington Park trenches.

20.16 Please send medical aid for casualties in Kennington Park surface shelter.

20.20 Send doctor to Kennington Park trenches. Dr Wilson sent.

20.25 More ambulances wanted. Men with spades. Trenches collapsed.

20.41 Take spades. People buried.

21.16 1 section of trench completely collapsed. 20 casualties out.

21.25 1 ambulance to Oval tube for Kennington trenches.

Wednesday 16th October 1940...

01.25 Estimated at least another 100 under wreckage. 2 dead so far recovered. Estimated it will take a considerable time to clear debris and secure those trapped. Public in remaining portion of trenches fairly calm. 2 further 50lb bombs fallen in park. No casualties.

03.21 Rescue workers have left trenches. They report that nothing further can be done until 06.30 hours when they will return. They also state that everyone remaining in bombed trenches is dead. Police have taken charge of the park and closed entrances.

05.01 Arrived at incident but after surveying the situation gave it up as hopeless until daylight. One man has since been rescued by wardens and police and taken to hospital in police van. All services have returned to depot.

07.00 100 shrouds requested.

08.03 Big lorry wanted to remove bodies.

15.15 Company of guards have now arrived to assist in the digging out of those trapped.

15.15 Position at present: approximately 35 minor casualties got out last night. 20 serious ambulance cases. Today 23 have been brought out. All dead. Remainder trapped - must be assumed as such.

17.22 We are still waiting for van to take bodies to the mortuaries.

The shelters were on Kennington Park's south field

An aerial view of the park clearly shows the grid of the trenches.

The grid on the bottom left section is less distinct indicating the part of the trench that was destroyed.

The memorial is positioned close to the site.



“We couldn’t do anymore”

The full horror of the scene is hard to imagine. A man who helped rescue efforts at a similar incident in Hyde Park reported that “the whole thing was blown to bits. There were heads and arms and legs and feet lying about. The only way you could tell the girls from the men was because of their hair. Their faces were all blown away.”

At the scene in Kennington Park, a 17-year-old boy “helped to dig the bodies out. We put curtains up so that people walking past couldn’t see the pit. Eventually we couldn’t do anymore and we covered the remains with lime.”

No official death toll was announced at the time but the figure is now believed to be 104 fatalities. 48 bodies were recovered and most of them buried in Lambeth Cemetery; the remainder still lie, unidentified, beneath the park.

In November 1940 the damaged trench was filled in but the rest of the trenches remained in use. They were finally demolished in 1947 and the park turfed and reseeded.

A hidden tragedy

The failure of the authorities to give an official death toll led to rumours of a cover-up. This theory has some substance as the minutes from the council meeting after the incident are missing from Lambeth’s archives. However, from July 1940 the War Cabinet had decreed that future casualties had to be described as slight, considerable or heavy, with no actual figures given.

The only press report available is so vague that it’s hard to relate it to the incident in Kennington Park. This could be because it was government policy to suppress anything that might give away the specific location of a bomb incident – just in case it helped the enemy’s navigation in future attacks.

Finally remembered

A memorial to the 1,560 recorded civilians killed in air raids in Lambeth during World War II was unveiled at Lambeth Cemetery in December 1952.

A memorial to the victims of the Kennington Park tragedy was first suggested at a North Lambeth Town Centre Forum in 2002 but the proposal for an online memorial wasn't progressed. A memorial service, initiated by Councillor Marietta Crichton Stuart, took place at St Mark's church on 12th October 2003.

The Friends of Kennington Park resolved to install a permanent memorial in the park in January 2005. The standing stone, funded by Lambeth Special Opportunities Fund, was unveiled on 14th October 2006 by the Mayor of Lambeth, Liz Atkinson.

The memorial is made of Caithness stone quarried near Thurso in the north of Scotland and laid down 247 million years ago. The memorial was designed and created by local sculptor Richard Kindersley who also created the memorial to London's civilian casualties at St Paul's Cathedral, a memorial to Princess Margaret at Windsor Chapel and the Coastal Command memorial in Westminster Abbey.

The stone bears the dedication:

'To commemorate the wartime suffering of the people of Kennington and in particular over 50 men, women and children who were killed on 15th October 1940 when a bomb destroyed an air-raid shelter near this spot. Rest in peace.'

It also bears an inscription from poet, author and historian Maya Angelou:

'History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived but if faced with courage need not be lived again.'



Known Victims

Leonard Arthur Baker
aged 14, Milverton St

William Charles Baker
aged 39, Milverton St

Derrick Banks
aged 2, Bowling Green St

Sylvia Gladys Banks
aged 13, Bowling Green St

Violet Ellen Banks
aged 34, Bowling Green St

William Edward Banks
aged 39, Bowling Green St

Martha Amelia Campbell
aged 41,
Gosling Rd, Brixton

Martha Harriet Campbell
aged 14,
Gosling Rd, Brixton

Ronald Campbell
aged 2, Gosling Rd, Brixton

Rosina Ann Campbell
aged 11 months,
Gosling Rd, Brixton

Thomas Charles Cannon
aged 15,
Kennington Park Rd

Walter Carter
aged 50, Kennington Oval

Ada Gladys Cashion
aged 29, Black Prince Rd

George Cutler
aged 73, Hillingdon St

Julia Mary Dale
aged 59, Ravensdon St

Alice Elizabeth Annie Edwards
aged 57, Ravensdon St

Charles Henry Clump Gebbie
aged 29, Lanarkshire

Irene Florence Godfrey
aged 20, Offley Rd

Patrick Terrence Godfrey
aged 3 months, Offley Rd

Frances Mary Holland
aged 45, Fairbairn Rd

Frederick Charles Holland
aged 40, Fairbairn Rd

Doris Hopkinson
aged 40, Offley Rd

William Frederick Hopkinson
aged 69, Offley Rd

Constance Margaret Jackson
aged 14, Kennington Rd

Amelia Rebecca Josephine Kiff
aged 57, Royal Terrace

Elizabeth Kiff
aged 75, Royal Terrace

Rose Catherine Kiff
aged 41, Royal Terrace

Henry Lovett
aged 9, Gosling Way

Dennis William Ludlow
aged 17, Reedworth St

Eva Maud Ludlow
aged 52, Reedworth St

Donald Macintosh
aged 42, Methley St

Victor Margiotta
aged 39, Great Suffolk St

Ella Lilius Moore
aged 38, Eastcote St

William Frederick Osborne
aged 64, St Agnes Place

William Frederick Victor
Osborne
aged 16, St Agnes Place

Albert Otten
aged 41, Gosling Way

Olive Joan Pottle
aged 14, Newington Butts

Alfred George Poulton
aged 62, South Island Place

John Henry Powell
aged 59, Morat St

Sarah Read
aged 74, Kennington Rd

Alice Louisa Stearn
aged 40, Offley Rd

Louisa Rose Stearn
aged 18, Offley Rd

George Terry
aged 58, Ravensdon St

Sarah Louise Maud Terry
aged 51, Ravensdon St

Lionel David Thomas
aged 16, Braganza St

Samuel Alfred Ward
aged 39, Bermondsey

Frederick Henry White
aged 37, Vassall Rd

Edward Woods
aged 48, Kennington Oval



CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Andrew O'Brien at Lambeth Archives

Thanks to Lambeth Archives and Wandsworth Local History Service for the free use of photography from their archives.

Kathryn Penn-Simkins

Jonathan Meares, Area Parks Officer

PICTURE CREDITS

Front cover image – Lambeth Landmarks collection, Lambeth Archives (by kind permission of Lambeth Archives)

Trench air raid shelters in Clapham Common (by kind permission of Wandsworth Local History Service)

Interior diagram of trench air raid shelter – Lambeth Archive's Ephemera Collection (by kind permission of Lambeth Archives)

Aerial shot of Kennington Park trenches – Google Earth

Photo of standing stone - Richard Kindersley

BIBLIOGRAPHY/SOURCES

Kathleen Blox, *Speak for Yourself: A Mass Observation Anthology 1937-43*

Reverend J G Markham, *Memoirs*, Imperial War Museum collection

Angus Calder, *The People's War*

Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime, Britain 1939-1945*

John Newman & Nilu York, *What to do when the Air Raid Sounds: Life in Lambeth during World War 2*

John Hook, *Nor the Years Condemn – the Air Raids on the London Metropolitan Borough of Lambeth 1940-1945*

Air Raid Precautions Reports, 1940, Lambeth Archives

Lambeth Council minutes, 1938-1947, Lambeth Archives

www.vauxhallandkennington.org.uk/bombing.shtml#kpark

Design by Maycreation Design Consultants.

tel: 020 7840 0609, www.maycreation.co.uk.



Prince Consort Lodge • Kennington Park • Kennington Park Place • London SE11 4AS
T:020 7820 4423 • E:admin@fokp.co.uk • www.fokp.co.uk