

Bomb dropped on Wheatley on 18 October 1940.

From a memory of C E Jackson published by the Daily Telegraph 10 November 2008 at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/Britain_at_War_Readers__Memorie/3419264/Britain-at-War-Safe-in-an-Oxford-pigsty.html

A dressing gown was hastily put over my nightwear and gathering up our elderly cat who seemed oblivious to Nazi activity, I followed my parents and my newly-born sister who was in a Moses basket, outside and into the garden. The Moses basket was placed on the pigsty wall as my parents helped me to scabble through the fence and into the garden next door and from there to the pigsty which our neighbour had cleared, cleaned and prepared for such an emergency.

Things were obviously beginning to be serious when quite soon afterwards we were joined in the pigsty by the Hardings, our neighbours. Mrs Harding carried a small case presumably of personal papers for safekeeping. Other papers were kept behind the door there. Mrs Harding had her coat thrown over her nightwear and looked as if she was planning to be in situ for a long time. I was urged to try and go to sleep but my main concern was Tinker our cat. Father tried in vain to explain that cats had a good sense of direction and even if he did want off he would probably be waiting on the doorstep for us on our return to the house. In the event, Tinker took his comfort seriously and stayed with us in the pigsty throughout the raid.

The pigsty was deemed “safe” because it did not intrude into the average sky-line of surrounding property and its moss-covered, corrugated, low-roof “melted” into gardens of houses all around. Our particular pigsty had been fitted out with a bench seat inside. A short time later, other neighbours, a couple from a bungalow two doors up from our house, joined us. The new entrants also carried small bags to add to those behind the door and tried to put on a brave face – I suspect now after all these years, to ease my fears.

We could hear aircraft droning overhead and what seemed like numerous “bangs”. Then suddenly I remember a very long bang indeed which assailed our ears. “That’s the council houses!” said Dad. Further bangs followed and mentally we all “wrote off” our friends from the houses across the road. The cat quietly snoozed on and stayed with us throughout the raid. After what seemed like an age, the “all clear” siren wailed out from what I later learnt was Avery’s sawmill.

I cannot be sure of the time as we emerged from our shelter and began to walk back across the garden and into the House “Milne Cottage” on the London Road, Wheatley, Oxford. I remember hearing voices outside in the road (the A40) which was otherwise clear of traffic. It could have been nearing dawn or it could have been the overhead searchlights but it was not completely dark and surprise...surprise the Council houses that we feared had been demolished by the bombing that night, were still standing. Our friends and neighbours had survived the raid after all.

The next morning with dozens of other sightseers, my father took me to see where the bomb had fallen in the Bridge Hotel garden. The police were there in force as we stood and stared at an enormous crater in the ground there. There seemed to be no particular damage apart from this hole and my assumption was that it had not gone off. But in this I could have been mistaken as I could see no damage to the hotel itself. But to a very young child my glance over the site must have been somewhat superficial. I cannot imagine that a crater of that size could possibly have been the only evidence of the bomb. It was not till sixty years later that I learnt that this was not the same bomb that we thought had hit the houses opposite ours. The one that Dad and I had heard on that dreadful evening was the one that came down near the railway line and not the one that had caused the occupants of Archie Harding’s pigsty such anguish. Someone up there had looked kindly on us on that occasion!