

LONDON'S BURNING or A DAY LONG SUNSET

Some incidents of the 1940s made a bigger impact on the mind of a young child than others and even if that child did not fully understand its implications, nevertheless it continued to intrigue and mystify for many years afterwards.

As far as I was aware, if I stood in the front garden at "Milne Cottage", London Road, Wheatley, Oxford was to my right hand as I emerged from the front door of the house and London was to my left. As far as I was concerned, that was it - plain and simple - and with just 48 miles in between- or that was what the signpost just along the road said.

I knew the Oxford side of the front garden very well but the London side was something different. I could count the number of times I had visited London on the fingers of one hand. It was a different world and it was deemed a rather dangerous area in which to venture in view of the frequent air-raids there. My father's local grocery store catered for most of the London Road residents some of whom had been evacuated from London to Wheatley. Father's friend, Jim Shorter, a train driver and a frequent Paddington station visitor talked of a particular air-raid as he neared the Paddington terminus on one notable occasion. Indeed, Aunt Elizabeth, my grandfather's aunt who had lived at "The Heroes of Alma" Maida Vale, a pub near Lord's cricket ground where her son, Harold Coolie, was Landlord, had recently come to High Wycombe to stay with Mother's sister, May, for the duration of the war. Yes, I was aware that London was a very dangerous place indeed. Rumours abounded in those troubled times and apparently what one did not know for certain, the shop customers would happily imagine and pass on their ideas to anyone who would listen.

I remember one particular occasion when things were more clear-cut and facts came more readily to the fore. It had been overcast almost all day and my father lifted me on to his shoulders as he climbed on to the sandy bank by the gateway to "Milne Cottage" and looked Londonwards. We were joined there by Archie and Emily Harding, our next door neighbours and by "Old Boots", one of our neighbours on the other side of the bank. "Old Boots", as my father called him, had been a London policeman in his younger days before settling into the bungalow next door. They were a quiet couple, he and his wife but father and "Old Boots" never really got on well. Father regarded him as a 'stirrer' and not to be entirely trusted as far as treatment of the neighbours' pets were concerned. However, on this particular occasion, he and father appeared to be on the same side as they stood side by side and stared into the distant sky.

I am not sure what time of the day it was. It could have been dusk but on that point I am not certain. I do remember that the sky had been overcast for a long time with what seemed to be thick grey cloud through which the daylight had not penetrated all day. The Titcheners and Mrs Ikelyn Munt on the other side of the road had also gathered on the pavement opposite and they chatted and shouted comments across the busy A40 road that separated the several sets of observers. From their comments, it would seem that the London docks were on fire. I was not sure exactly what the docks were apart from the fact that they were something to do with ships. Such details tend to pass over the head of a young child as such matters seem unimportant although I did realise from the comments of those around me that fire on this scale must make a big impact on the local community there. Father hoisted me higher on to his shoulders and we looked again into the distance or what we could just about view through the cloud and we

watched as darkness seemed to envelope the scene. The sky had been red for hours like a day-long sunset and although London was some 48 miles distant, there was no mistaking the signs, something very unusual was taking place there. Some said that they could smell smoke although I did not notice that but there was no mistaking that clouds of blackness had blotted out much of the daylight for most of the day. It was a sight I never forgot. I just wish I had been old enough to take it all in and fully understand all its implications. Of course, rumour on this occasion was correct, the London docks had indeed been blasted by enemy bombers.

From this distance in time, there seems something almost immoral in being a spectator of such an event and yet not being actively involved in trying to do something to ease such a situation. But what could we have done? Nothing! Most of the spectators there eventually returned to their homes and I suspect listened to their radios to hear that their worst fears had been confirmed.