

The Story of Eastbourne

World War Two Eastbourne

Use this box to explore and uncover the WW2 story of Eastbourne and the surrounding area.

Find a selection of real artefacts used and made by people in Eastbourne as well as suggested learning activities

This box also features digital files including an introduction to Eastbourne during WW2 and Oral History recordings from Eastbourne people telling their WW2 story.



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'Mickey Mouse' Gas Mask



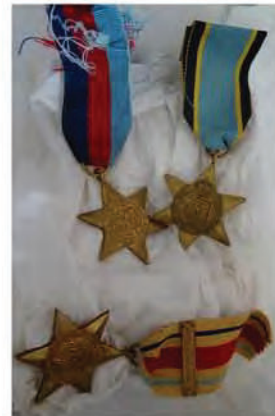
WVS hat



HMS Royal Navy hat



The Burma Star,
The Italy Star



The 1939 -45 Star,
The Air Crew
Europe Star
The Africa Star



The 1939 - 45
Star



Dog tags belonging to C P Pritchard



Adult's Gas Mask

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On Sunday 7th July 1940 at 11:04am, the first of many bombs fell on the town of Eastbourne. Between July 1940 and December 1941, over four hundred bombs were dropped. In the aftermath, ARP wardens would have sprung into action, rescuing survivors, putting out fires and assessing damage.

The Air Raid Precaution service, set up by local councils, was instrumental in preparing people for an air attack by Germany and her allies. The service was open to men and women of all ages and included veterans of World War One. ARP wardens were split into wards and each warden had their own area or street to look after. Their job was primarily to report any bombings and other incidents and respond if need be. This meant that they were often one of the first people on the scene, helping the survivors. A number of comedic stories filtered through the local service including one about a woman whose house had suffered minor bomb damage. The wardens attempted to evacuate her but she refused to leave until she had tidied up the mess with a dustpan and brush. Another, involved a woman frantically searching through the rubble of her home, not for her husband but for her cat!

In January 1939, Eastbourne was classed as a "safe zone" as it was thought preposterous that Hitler would order an attack on a sleepy seaside town. Many children, estimated to be around 16,000, their mothers and teachers were evacuated out of London to Eastbourne. Although some enjoyed being here, many did not and the homes they were billeted to were not happy either. The Billeting Tribunal dealt with all issues relating to evacuees. The children were accused of being verminous and leaving a "legacy of disease, dirt and squalor". London schoolmasters warned against "cowardly libel" as a way of shirking their duty.

Most children were evacuated as a school unit with their teachers and headmasters/mistresses. One of these, Woodmansterne Road School from Stretham came to Eastbourne. Whilst in Eastbourne the headmistress, Miss Jolliffe, collected newspaper articles on evacuees- most of them were not very nice. The stories of alleged mistreatment of the evacuees from Stretham made it all the way to their local paper in London! However, London headteachers rebuked these accusations and said that the children were being very well taken care of.

The most frequent issue brought before the Tribunal seems to be the cost of keeping the children. For the first five weeks of the evacuation scheme, the government paid £20,000 to Eastbourne residents (nearly £787,000 today). Soon after, the government announced that parents would have to pay according to their means. Keeping children was incredibly expensive when you consider government advice that they required a pint of milk a day each and their own bath water each day!

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Alongside the cost of maintenance, rationing hit some households quite hard.

Rationing continued to be a hardship after the war. In July 1946, 2500 people had signed a protest about bread rationing which had been in force for many years previously and clothing items were rationed until the early 1950s.

Shopkeepers were running out of food due to the stockpiling of non-rationed food and constant queues.

Within just over a year of being declared a safe zone, Eastbourne became a defence area. Restrictions were imposed on entering and leaving town, the Eastbourne name was blacked out on signs, vans and advertisements and the military imposed a seafront curfew. Eastbourne Pier was mined and ready to be blown if the enemy tried to land and approximately 3000 local children were evacuated.

Eastbourne had very few defences initially. A station at Beachy Head, manned by the Royal Observer Corps, was responsible for sounding the alarm to warn of incoming planes. The issue with this, however, was that they had to radio a controller in Kent for permission to sound the alarm but they could only do this if more than one plane was present. This meant that by the time the alarm went off, bombs were already dropping. Seeing how much damage was being caused by single bombers and the delay in obtaining permission, they took matters into their own hands and raised the alarm without seeking permission first. By ignoring protocol, they bought the people of Eastbourne a few crucial seconds.

The ROC put pressure on the government to allow a local, quicker alarm system, nicknamed "Cuckoo", and the government relented. It was found that radiolocation was not effective in detecting low-flying aircraft and without the eyes and ears of the ROC on lookout, Eastbourne would be woefully ill prepared for incoming attacks.

In June 1944, unmanned bombs, called Doodlebugs, started flying over Eastbourne. They were named after a small racing car from America, "Doodlebug", as the sound of the bomb mimicked the sound of the car's engine. These Doodlebugs would often crash prematurely on their way to London, including on Eastbourne. Realising that it would be better to deal with the issue before they reached British soil, the government ordered large numbers of anti-aircraft guns to the south coast to destroy them out at sea. Returning RAF pilots would often tip them around and send them back the way they came.

At the end of World War Two, despite the large-scale destruction Eastbourne experienced, the people rebuilt their homes and their lives

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Mickey Mouse Gas Mask

In the lead-up to World War II there were fears that the Germans would attack the UK with poisonous gas, so by 1938 the government had issued respirators to every man, woman and child in the nation. More than 40 million gas masks were issued. In America there was a gas mask for children that looked like Mickey Mouse, with the character's nose and ears and even a picture of him on the gas filter. Walt Disney helped in its design. This object is the British 'Mickey Mouse' gas mask. It did not resemble the cartoon character but it used the red and blue, like the American version and kept the name. It was given to children aged 18 months to 4 years old to allay their fears about wearing a respirator. It was also made lighter than normal masks so it was easier to wear.

Adult's Gas Mask

By September 1939 some 38 million gas masks had been given out to people around Britain. Luckily they were never actually needed. Everyone in Britain was given a gas mask in a cardboard box, to protect them from gas bombs, which could be dropped during air raids. Gas had been used a great deal in the First World War and many soldiers had died or been injured in gas attacks. Mustard gas was the most deadly of all the poisonous chemicals used during World War I. It was almost odourless and took 12 hours to take effect. It was so powerful that only small amounts needed to be added to weapons like high explosive shells to have devastating effects. There was a fear that it would be used against ordinary people at home in Britain. The masks were made from black rubber which could get quite hot and smelly. When you breathed in the air was sucked through the filter to take out the gas. When you breathed out the whole mask was pushed away from your face to let the air out.

WVS Hat

During World War Two, over one million women volunteered their time through the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS). Women played a fundamental role in factories and on farms but also provided social welfare to families, service men and women and helped to promote the war effort. Women's Voluntary Services (WVS) was officially launched in June 1938 and the following November the first uniform of overcoat, hat and badge was issued. Lady Reading organised the design of the uniform and that members were responsible for purchasing it for civil defence duties. By February 1939 the WVS became the Women's Voluntary Services for Civil Defence. These brave wartime women cared for evacuees, worked in knitting parties to make essential items for the forces and salvaged metal to build tanks and weapons. In larger towns and cities where bombing was a threat, they ran mobile canteens to feed the hungry and rest centres during major incidents.

HMS Royal Navy hat

This Wool cap was worn by British Royal navy sailors during WW2 in the Atlantic and European campaigns. The Cap tally was changed to just HMS instead of mentioning which ship the sailor served for security reasons so spies could not tell which type of ship was in port.

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Dog tags belonging to C P Pritchard

All British Army soldiers would have had their name, religion and army number hand stamped on the tag so they could be identified. The CE on these tags is for Church of England. We don't know much about C P Pritchard except he lived in Manchester before moving to Eastbourne and served in the British Army during WW2.

The Burma Star

The Burma Star was awarded for service to the forces of the British Commonwealth, between 11th December, 1941 and 2nd September, 1945. This campaign medal was also awarded for certain specified service in China, Hong Kong, Malaya and Sumatra. The Ribbon is Dark blue overlaid with a central red stripe to represent the Commonwealth Forces and two narrow stripes of bright orange to represent the sun

The Italy Star

This medal was awarded for operational service in Sicily or Italy during the period 11th June 1943 to 8th May 1945. A total of 91,000 medals were issued to Canadians. The Italian Colours are represented on the ribbon, which is white with a central green stripe and red edges.

The 1939 – 45 Star

This star was awarded for service in the Second World War between 3rd September 1939 and 2nd September 1945. It was awarded to anyone who had at least 6 months Service (2 months for Aircrew) The recipient was awarded this star if their service period was terminated by their death or disability due to service. The ribbon has three vertical stripes of dark blue, red and light blue. The dark blue stripe represents the Naval Forces and the Merchant Navy, the red stripe the Armies and the light blue stripe the Air Forces.

The Air Crew Europe Star

This medal was awarded for operational flying from the UK over Europe, between the period 3rd September 1939 to 5th June 1944 (outbreak of war until the start of the D-Day Normandy Invasion). the ribbon is light blue with black edges and yellow stripes, representing continuous service by day and night.

The Africa Star

The Star was awarded for one or more day's service in North Africa between 10th June, 1940 and 12th May, 1943. The ribbon was reputed to have been designed by King George VI. The sand of the desert is represented by pale buff, the Royal Navy (and Merchant Navy), British Army, and Royal Air Force are represented by stripes of dark blue, red, and light blue respectively