

Highfields in the Blitz

On the night of 19 November 1940 more than 100 German bombers swept over Leicester, causing damage and destruction. Highfields suffered the worst of the blitz. A resident recounts what it was like living through such a difficult time.

'I was coming down Melbourne Road from St Peter's Church. I'd just been to see about putting my banns in and I heard these planes – no sirens – not for a start ... and then I saw flares coming down and ran like hell home. We were underneath the stairs all night that night and for two nights. We had an Anderson shelter, but I preferred the stairs! I was walking to work, worked in Soar Lane in the hosiery, and I can remember seeing the bus in Sparkenhoe Street, in the bomb crater. Saxby Street and Highfield Street got it very bad. They had one in Diseworth Street which was one side of Donnington Street and one in Worthington Street. We were in the middle and missed it!



The bombs were actually for Coventry. The Freeman, Hardy and Willis factory on the corner of Rutland Street and Humberstone Lane was on fire when the bombers came over so the bombs were dropped just before the sirens went off. We just didn't expect it.

I went to put the banns in because Joe was expected to come home. Where I worked at Catlows, 1940, 1941, they said they didn't know when he would be home. He should have been home at Christmas 1941 and every time the door went the girls would shout: 'He's here, he's here!'. Of course he never was until this particular morning in the middle of June. They said: 'He's here' and there he was! We were married on the Saturday and he had to go back on the Monday. He was in the Navy down at Portsmouth ... no, probably Liverpool, because he was on the Atlantic and Russian convoys on corvettes.

I was fetched into the munitions as they used to call it and for a start I went to Bridge Road, to Brays and then I was transferred to Old Dalby to work in the Army Ordnance Depot, learning engineering and then came from there and finished up at Mellor Bromleys on St Saviour's Road. Worked on nights there right through the war. You didn't know whether it was Saturday or Monday because we used to work seven days a week ... and when I was cycling home in the blackout I used to get my bike stuck in the tramlines along East Park Road!

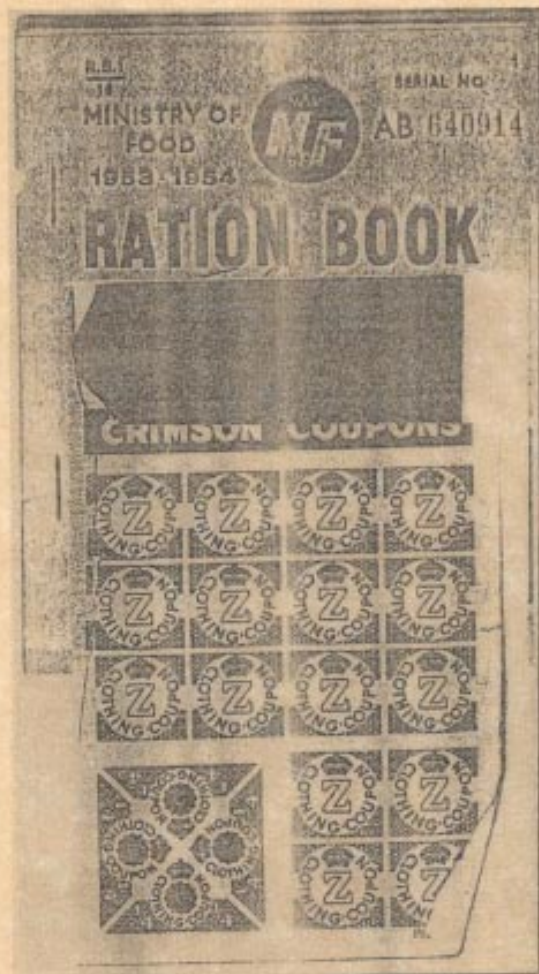
I was on the milling, a milling machine operator, a skilled job. You used to have what was called a setter and one of the fellows used to set your machine because you used to have to work to a thousandth of an inch. We were making war stuff, a lot of it was for the navy.

The scene of devastation at the corner of Highfields Street and Tichbourne Street.

Towards the end I was doing my own setting and everything. I think my highest wage, including bonus, was £5 a week and that was more or less at the end, 1944, '45. Originally, it was about £2.50. I gave it up after the war. I'd had enough. I think it was the worry, with my husband being away.

He got shanghai'd. He'd been in the Far East in the Navy for five years, nearly six years when it happened. It appears that he got knocked on the head when he came out of a cafe over in Panama and the shore patrol found him slumped against a wall. They took him in the brig on board the nearest ship. They dragged the dock and found a body with Joe's money belt on it. Of course, they informed all his shipmates and the lads had a collection for me.

When Joe came round he was on the brig on board another ship and it was about three months before he stepped on board his own ship on Christmas Day ... they all thought a ghost had walked back on board! You can imagine what it was like. I had all the worry right from September and I had a card from him just after Christmas: 'Don't worry, I'm all right. Let you know later.' Then, one day, must have been 1960, he had a letter from the Admiralty with his old wallet. Of course, all the money had been taken out. It was all rotted with the sea.



Rationing – you'd just get enough. You'd go into the market and if fruiterers had got tomatoes, for instance, they'd whisper: 'Would you like a tomato?' Same as the little corner shops where you'd get most of your groceries. If they'd something extra, they'd sort of share it out. The sweets were the worst. No sweets if you hadn't got your ration book. There were no luxury foods and I can remember the dried egg – can taste it now! Bananas were mostly for the children and dried bananas -they looked terrible! You could always get apples from other people's gardens. But it never bothered me ... we managed.

Researched and edited by Amanda Gill. Amanda would like to thank the resident who kindly agreed to be interviewed.