

## My Experience in a WWII Air Raid Shelter

When I first was told that a virtually intact WWII air raid shelter had been discovered underneath the new play area development I was very excited - what relics and other interesting features and artefacts might be found down in this underground haven from the past? I very much would have liked the opportunity to visit it myself and was at first disappointed to be told that only specially qualified individuals would be permitted. So you can imagine my excitement when I was told I might have the chance. The weather was bright and sunny on the day and I arrived early, along with those other lucky explorers and stood waiting for my chance whilst the shelter was being checked out for safety and professionally explored. We were then told that we could only go down if we had steel toe-capped boots on and I was at first disappointed as I didn't have a pair, but a very kind lady offered to lend me hers. We then discovered that we would have to wear a harness and various slightly panicked thoughts went through my head – do we have to be winched down the hole? Would the harness fit me (I have put on some weight recently)? Would the winch hold me – Oh God, what if it broke? However, to my relief, I was informed that no, I would not have to be winched down the hole (after all that's what the ladder was there for) and the harness was a precaution only, in case there was a cave-in or some-such catastrophe and I had to be rescued by firemen. So I mentally squashed the little devil inside me who was getting excited at the prospect of being rescued by firemen and stood still while the harness was fitted to me.

Looking down that hole I was a little bit daunted as there seemed to be quite a bit of rubble at the bottom and I was told I would have to climb over rubble in various places. I'm not the fittest person and just couldn't picture myself on all fours climbing piles of rubble. However I decided that I would just have to take it as it came and only do what I was able to. Besides, if I did get stuck, I had the prospect of firemen to look forward to. Having to carry a personal oxygen tank with an attached hood was also worrying but necessary, I was told, in case poisonous gases built up. At this point I was seeing imaginary headline stories in the paper about my untimely death etc and wondered what on earth I thought I was doing but was reassured that my guide was wearing a gas monitor which would give us plenty of warning time, if necessary. Besides, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I was determined not to fore-go it unless I had to.

Getting down the ladder and into the worryingly small hole was awkward – after all, I was fitted out with heavy steel toe-capped boots, a hard-hat, a slightly constricting harness, a large and cumbersome personal oxygen tank and hood, a large camera with its case and spare batteries and a torch. However, to my relief I didn't get stuck and got to the bottom safely. The footing was a bit unsteady - due to the before-mentioned rubble – but not as bad as I had thought and I waited patiently for my guide to point the way. I walked a few feet behind him and he told me I wouldn't need my torch as his was quite bright, which was good as I was having a bit of trouble freeing my camera strap from that of the oxygen canister and didn't think I had enough hands. I finally freed my camera strap and tried to look professional as I quickly started to take snaps of everything and anything (to what I suspect was my guide's bemusement) whilst keeping one eye free to see where we were going in the dark, narrow tunnel.

The tunnel itself brought back vivid memories of my childhood, playing in the damp small tunnels underneath Woodlands Fort in Crownhill and I felt slightly awed to think that I was one of only a handful of people to have walked these tunnels in over 50 years. Thankfully though, unlike those childhood haunts, the floor of this seven-foot high or so arched tunnel was mostly free of rubble and as we walked further along it, I was surprised at how narrow it was. If I'd stuck both my hands out on either side I would probably have touched both glisteningly damp walls. There were no benches I was disappointed to find, the wood having probably been taken after the war but in places the brackets where they had been fixed to the walls could be seen. My guide stopped often to point out to me various interesting features and hand drawn /written graffiti on the walls and I seriously attempted to take photos of each one. I'm not a photographer, which I think I clearly demonstrated to my guide and which is evident from my photography, but I did my best. These included an instruction to live a clean life, instructions not to smoke or spit, an amusing face, a half-naked lady in

a long dress, and various names and dates. The original toilet cubicles were pointed out to me by my guide, which was so narrow I wondered how they could have fit, I certainly wouldn't have. I was a little surprised, thinking of public and toilet loo's today, that there was no graffiti on the toilet walls – after all, some of those who sheltered here obviously had no reservations about decorating the walls. However I mentally put it down to changing times and the youth of today - thereby showing my progression from a young, fun-loving adult to a youth-prejudiced middle-aged mind-set. There were no toilets or evidence of them left in these cubicles - I was later informed when I mentioned this they would have used buckets as there was no plumbing.

Professional signs included direction signs for navy personnel (who were obviously segregated from the public) and No Smoking signs at the original entrances. These had been in-filled with rubble long ago and unless my guide had pointed them out as such, were unrecognisable. I once again showed my complete lack of common sense and asked if the entrances had once had ladders as they looked very small. My guide replied that this would have made it difficult for the elderly and infirm to gain entrance and so there would originally have been steps. The first entrance we came to was also the entrance to the other half of the shelter and to get into that we would have to climb over the rubble. My guide went over first and called encouragingly to me to follow and I swallowed my trepidation and carefully began to climb over – testing each footing carefully first and feeling sorry for the firemen who'd have to rescue me if I got stuck or fell. However the rubble was quite firm and I survived the trek, entering the tunnel of the other half of the shelter. This was identical to the first and I dutifully followed my guide, stopping to photograph what I thought would be interesting to the general public and the Friends. The footing was tricky in places due to rusting corrugated iron sheets and barbed wire on the floor and I got my trousers caught on it once but overall, it was easy going. My guide pointed out to me the light fixtures and electrical wires and I tried to look interested and took some pictures. Every light fixture I saw was rusting and broken with the bulbs long gone. The wires had come away from the wooden planks near the ceilings to which they had once been secured and hung freely in the tunnels between the light fixtures. Occasionally we would come to wooden hatches in the ceiling which I was informed were the original escape hatches. One had weakened, letting into the tunnel some of the rubble which had been piled above it after the war. Periodic open pipes would extend down from the top of the tunnel which may have been the original air pipes.

The return side was less damp than the outward one and went slightly uphill. Otherwise it was identical. I was enjoying myself in these tunnels and was sorry to see the sun-lit ladder up ahead. I did get stuck going up the ladder and had to wriggle my shoulders a bit to get through. But I clambered up to see the crowd of expectant spectators with as much decorum as I could and with relief, mixed with just a tad of disappointment that no firemen had been needed, began to extricate myself from the oxygen tank and harness. Overall my trek through the entire shelter had taken only 15 minutes.

Overall I am very pleased that I have had the opportunity to view this relatively undisturbed shelter and the experience has given me a greater appreciation of what the residents of Devonport, Stoke and surrounding areas must have gone through during the war. The shelter is much smaller and narrower than I thought it would be and I imagine that when full of people, sitting on benches along one wall, it must have been a very claustrophobic and frightening experience. I can only imagine what that experience must have been like, with the droning of bomber planes overhead and the booming of bombs exploding near-by. I know that the park itself suffered direct hits from several bombs during the war and can only shudder at the thought of what that must have been like for those huddled below ground in those shelters. All I can say is that they must have been incredibly brave people and I salute them now with respect.

by  
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