

WASHINGTON AT WAR – THE HOME FRONT

Most of the following information was taken from the **North East War Diary**; a day by day account of activities in the whole east coast region down to Kingston upon Hull, compiled by **Roy Ripley** and **Brian Pears**, many from newspaper reports [North-East Diary 1939 – 1945 \(genuki.uk\)](http://genuki.uk). Entries which mention Washington, or villages in the Washington area, have been extracted and are listed below (*in italics*). We have also included a number of national announcements of interest. The wording and grammar of the entries has not been edited or amended, though some additional events have been added (not in italics).

There are no entries in the diary relating to the Washington area from the beginning of the war on 1 September 1939 to July 1940. Most incidents occurred in 1940 to 1942, with a final flurry in March 1943. Not surprisingly most references are to RAF Usworth, the base of 607 (County Durham) Squadron RaxAF of Hawker Hunter Hurricane fighters.

(The History Society is grateful to www.raggyspelk.co.uk for many of the images used to illustrate this article).



A Hurricane fighter from the Battle of Britain flight landing at Sunderland Airport (Usworth Aerodrome) in the 1960s

15th August 1940 Today was probably the most significant day in the Battle of Britain as far as the north-east is concerned, with RAF Usworth one of the key targets of a saturating German attack on the whole coast, that was successfully beaten back.

A Hurricane Fighter made a forced landing at Low Barmston Farm. Pilot did not sustain injury – RAF Usworth informed.

A detailed description of this raid can be found here: [607 Squadron RAF Usworth - Washington History Society - Washington History Society, Washington](#)

14th September 1940 A Hurricane from 43 Squadron based at Usworth airfield in Durham got caught in his leader's slipstream and made a heavy landing at base. Pilot Officer C K Gray was unable to correct fully owing to arm injuries sustained on 26 August 1940. The aircraft was damaged but repairable. The arm injuries referred to were inflicted during combat over Portsmouth, when the squadron was based.

25th September 1940 A Spitfire from 43 Squadron based at Usworth airfield landed wheels up at Hetton Le Hole following engine failure due to mishandling of a fuel cock. Pilot Officer C E Langdon was unhurt, the aircraft was damaged but repairable.

3rd October 1940 Night. RAF Usworth attacked.

7th October 1940 Washington -Two HEs (high explosive bombs) dropped in fields -no damage.

27th October 1940 A Hurricane from 43 Squadron based at Usworth near Sunderland crashed vertically from height during high altitude aerobatics, the cause unknown but believed to be through oxygen failure. The aircraft crashed at Congburn Dene, Edmondsley, at

10.25. The 21 year old pilot Sergeant L V Toogood was killed, and is buried at Kingston Cemetery, St Mary's Row, Portsmouth.

28th/29th October 1940- 03.30 Six IB's (Incendiary Bombs) dropped between Usworth Station and New Washington Village. All dropped in open fields without damage.

31st October 1940 A Hurricane from 43 Squadron based at Usworth near Sunderland crash landed at Chirnside near Berwick due to engine failure at 10.30. The Pilot B Malinowski was unhurt, the aircraft damaged but repairable.

20th December 1940 A 607 Squadron Hurricane, P3962, crash landed at Usworth (Sergeant Sinclair) -aircraft destroyed.

6th/7th March 1941- 20.30 Fatfield near Birtley. A UXPM (unexploded parachute mine) found in the plantation at Biddick Hall, Fatfield. No damage or casualties.

25th 26th April 1941- 22.08 One HE fell near Usworth Hall causing no damage.

21st to 28th May 1941 Washington **War Weapons Week**

7th/8th September 1941- 22.45 Seven HE's (high explosive bombs) were dropped in fields at Springwell causing damage to an electric grid wire. Two horses were killed and two seriously injured, both of which have since been destroyed. It is possible that the bombs were aimed at the nearby Bombing Decoy site at Springwell.

More detailed information on this raid and on the site can be found in the Washington History Society website article on the **Bombing Decoy Site at**

Springwell. <http://www.washingtonhistorysociety.co.uk/community/washington-history-society-12965/springwell-world-war-ii--decoy-site/>

21st/22nd October 1941- 20.30 Great Usworth. Two HEs (high explosive bombs) dropped -two houses damaged – no injuries. (Again, the bombs may have been aimed at the nearby Bombing Decoy Site).

11th November 1941 Crash of Hurricane P3318 at Waskerley, west of Consett, killing Sergeant William Maughan Mccausland, aged 26, of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

8th Tuesday, 9th December 1941- 22.50 Fatfield. Twelve IBs fell E of Harraton Hall – no damage.

1st January 1942 Whilst on a dog fight exercise Sergeant Robert Graham White Carter of OTU based at Usworth crashed his Hawker Hurricane Mark 1 (V7400) into a field west of Castle Eden Dene, now the 13th fairway. The official record of the crash includes “Dived into the ground from 7000 feet” and “Ground fire after impact”. Sergeant Carter aged 24 of New Malden, Surrey, service number 655269 was buried at Hylton (Castletown) Cemetery near Usworth.

10th February 1942 A Hawker Hurricane of 55 Operational Training Unit based at RAF Usworth, flew into the ground at High Marley Hill. The Pilot Sergeant J Graham of the Royal Canadian Air Force was killed.

14th to 21st March 1942 Washington **Warship Week** when HMS Sarabande was adopted by the town- see [HMS Sarabande - Washington History Society - Washington History Society, Washington](#)

15th/16th April 1942- 00.37 Two HEs (High Explosive bombs) dropped near RAF Usworth.

5th June 1942- 02.50 A suspected UXB is reported to have dropped near Cox Green Railway Station. (Confirmed and disposed of **8.6.42**).

19th February 1943 09.07 Two Anson training aircraft collided 5,000 ft above Boldon, killing all 8 servicemen on board

11th/12th March 1943- 22.00 An AA (Anti-Aircraft) shell struck the Glebe School, Washington, causing damage to the hot water system.

23.20. Three HEs were dropped near Cox Green railway station causing damage to LNER signals and overhead electric grid wires.

12th/13th March 1943 Two IBs (Incendiary Bombs) fell in Usworth Churchyard causing no damage.

14th/15th March 1943 00.06 During the raid 5 AA (Anti-Aircraft) shells fell in the Washington area, one of these exploded in “F Pit” yard, Washington, damaging a coal truck.

22nd/23rd March 1943 An HE UXB (Un-exploded Bomb) fell on a runway at the airfield at Usworth. This was the last attack in the Washington area.

4th April 1943 A rifle grenade exploded killing two members of Washington’s Home Guard, Company Quartermaster **Sergeant Robert Mills** (aged 32) and **Private Lawrence Handyside** (21). **Private Thomas Fisher** (17) died of his wounds on 13 June 1943. These are only known World War Two deaths in the Washington area.



Home Guard graves in Washington Cemetery

19th to 26th June 1943 Washington's **Wings For Victory Week** that looked to raise £50,000 for ten Spitfires.

15th to 21st July 1944 Washington's **Salute the Soldier Week** that looked to raise £70,000.



Washington fund raising weeks 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944

11th September 1944 Most fireguard duties end. The exceptions are in London and parts of the East and South coasts.

17th September 1944 The Blackout ends except in certain coastal areas.

3rd December 1944 Newcastle -Final parade of the Home Guard following the "Stand Down" order.

27th April 1945 It was announced that gas masks held by the public should be preserved until instructions are given for their disposal.

8th May 1945 Proclamation of the end of the war in Europe was read by the Lord Mayor in St Nicholas's Square, Newcastle, followed by bonfires and floodlighting of buildings.

26th August 1945 100,000 crowd watched a Victory Parade in Newcastle.

Enemy air activities reduced considerable after the invasion of Europe by Allied forces on 6th June 1944.

There were no civilian deaths in the Washington area due to enemy action in the diary or recorded by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. It should be remembered however that in nearby towns and cities of strategic importance, such as the ports of Newcastle and Sunderland just a few miles away, civilians were suffering badly. Below is the diary entry of the most deadly raid in the whole war.

23rd /24th May 1943 The last major raid of the war in the North-East caused the highest death toll. In its 35th raid of the war and its 11th of appreciable dimensions, eleven PMs, sixty-seven HEs, nine firepot HEs and about 600 IBs fell on Sunderland causing widespread damage. Eighty-four people died and 221 were injured; among the dead were a group of joiners from Glasgow who were there to repair earlier bomb damage. Many casualties occurred when a PM landed on St George's Square. Three Public Shelters were hit; three died in the Brommarsh Shelter, North Bridge Street, five in Bonners Field Shelter, Monkwearmouth and thirteen in Lodge Terrace Shelter at Hendon. The Isolation Hospital (later Havelock Hospital) was evacuated because of an UXPM. Including those slightly damaged about 5,000 houses were involved in this last attack and, together with the attack of 15/16th May, about 15,000. The morale of the people is reported as excellent.

At the end of the hostilities **959** deaths and **3,665** injured in the Tyne and Wear area were recorded, figures that almost certainly were added to when casualties were correctly recorded at later dates.

Bomb Shelters

Washington residents would have been well aware of the suffering just outside its boundaries. Sheddon Hill at Springwell was used to dispose of un-exploded bombs. Air-raid sirens would have sounded as soon as enemy activity was detected in the area and searchlights scanned the skies. This would herald a rush to air raid shelters. Sleep would have been difficult, due to the sound of bombs and anti-aircraft guns.

Just before the war, the component parts of simple air-raid shelters were issued to 1½ million households, in areas most likely to be attacked, together with instructions for their construction and their location. The main type was the **Anderson Shelter**, (named after its designer, Dr David A Anderson, but often wrongly linked to the Home Secretary who announced the distribution scheme in the autumn of 1938 – John Anderson). A further 2 million shelters were issued during the war. Shelters would usually be erected in gardens, and for maximum effectiveness it was recommended that a 4 feet deep hole should be dug, and the shelter erected in this, and covered with soil. They were designed to accommodate five people, with shelves to be used as seating or for beds.



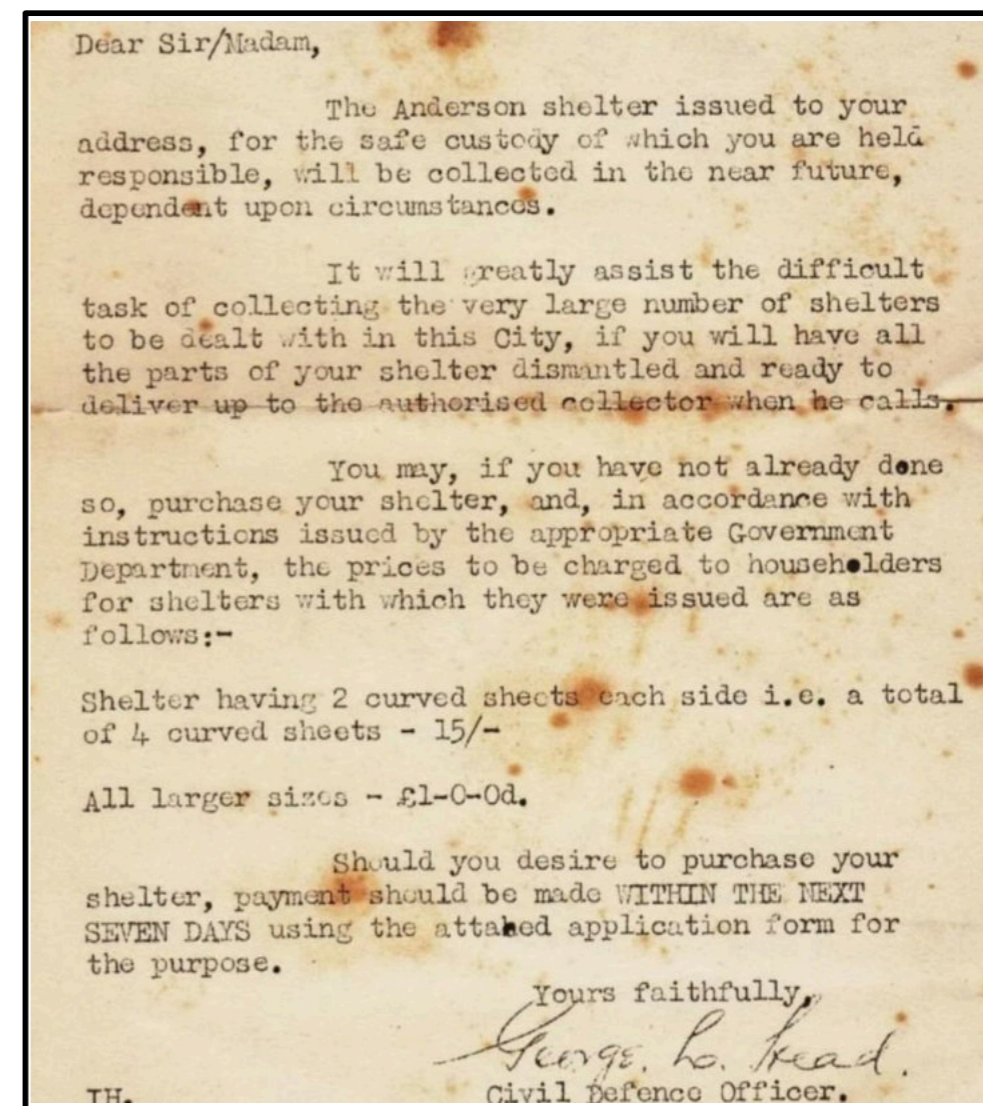
Erecting an Anderson shelter



An indoor Morrison shelter

Where residents were elderly or disabled indoor shelters named **Morrison Shelters**, named after the Minister for Supply, were supplied. These shelters consisted of a table with a steel-reinforced top and wire-mesh sides. In towns and cities, basements and tunnels were often used as communal shelters. In London many residents sheltered in the Underground stations. Conditions in shelters were primitive: they were often cold and damp, and there were no toilet facilities -buckets were used!

At the end of the war Local Authorities collected the shelters, but many were sold to householders for as little as 15 shillings (75p).



An offer of removal or purchase of a shelter

They were later used as garden sheds, but at the Usworth Green “Prefabs” in Washington, the Council used Anderson Shelters as coal houses from 1947, which lasted for the life of the estate (see photo).



As late as 1962 Washington resident Bill Arbuckle used parts of an Anderson Shelter to build a garage for his first car!

Searchlights

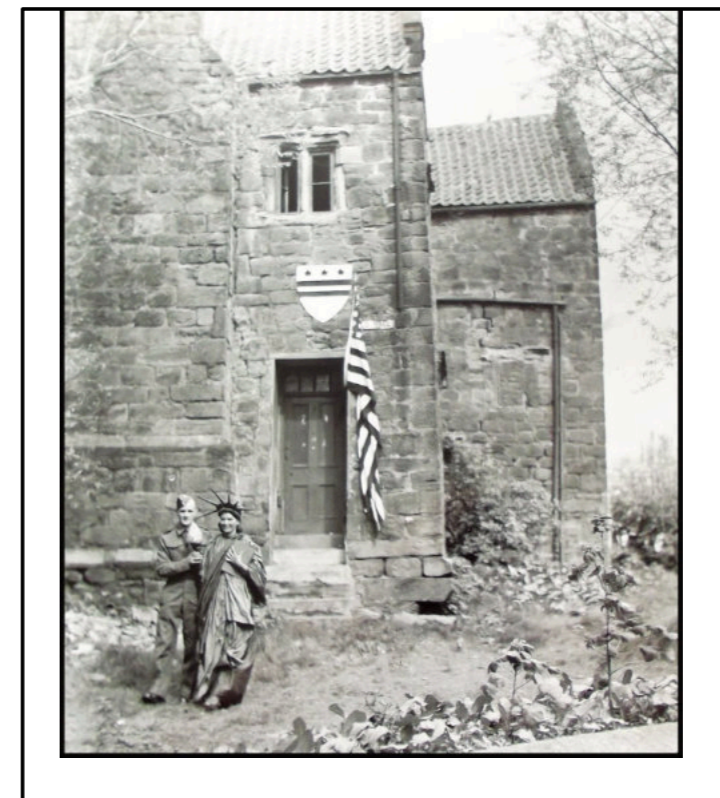
Searchlight sites in the Tyne area were manned by men of the Royal Artillery attached to the Northumberland Fusiliers. The sites were under the control of Fighter Command. Early in 1944 these experienced men were moved to the south coast to assist with the air-defences protecting the troops assembling for the D-Day invasion. The local sites were then taken over by U.S troops from the 225th

Searchlights in and around Washington in February 1944

Battery	Site	Location	Modified British Grid	Approx National Grid
C	-	Urpeth Lodge, Birtley	QZ 725744	NZ238538
C	TT231	Springwell	QZ 775799	NZ288593
C	TT233	Biddick Hall	QZ 796755	NZ309549
C	TT237	Usworth RAF	QZ 831794	NZ344588

North-East Diary 1939-1945 Roy Ripley & Brian Pears

AAA Searchlight Battalion, and may have been the soldiers who posed at the Old Hall as part of the **Salute The Soldier** week in 1944.



Though damage and casualties were comparatively light in Washington itself residents suffered the privations of the conflict, and men from from the town fought and lost their lives in all theatres of the War, and its scars remained for many years.

The History Society is very interested in learning of any other war-related events that could be added to this record. Please contact us at washingtonhistorysoc@gmail.com