

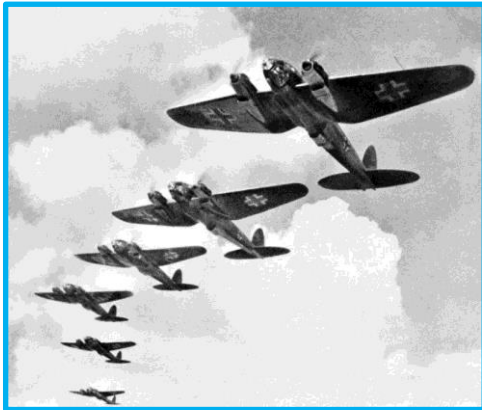


Weston's Blitz

Say the word "Blitz" and people automatically think of London. However, Weston-super-Mare experienced more than its share of death and devastation from German bombers. The passage of time and redevelopment has all but removed evidence of the Blitz and the reasons for it.

Why Weston-super-Mare?

Very early on in the Second World War, Weston was identified by German aircraft as a potential target. German documents show that by April 1939 Weston Airfield was listed as a target.



German Heinkel He 111 bombers in flight, 1940

On 4 September 1939 a Junkers JU 88 reconnaissance aircraft reported seeing five hangars under construction, as well as 39 aircraft parked up one mile east of the airfield. The secret of the aircraft factories, dispersed along the Winterstoke Road, Hutton and Elborough was out. These sites, operated by the Bristol Aircraft Factory, were manufacturing Beaufort and Beaufighter aircraft for squadrons across the whole of the theatre of war. 3,336 Beaufighter aircraft were built in Weston, which was the largest manufacturer of these planes.

Other important targets in the town were the gas plant in Drove Road which supplied hydrogen gas for Barrage Balloons, and the Royal Navy Miscellaneous Weapons development site at HMS Birnbeck.

There were also other classified engineering facilities, a major RAF recruitment centre based on the seafront, and the Trans-Atlantic Cable Terminus in Weston.

A variety of defences were set up to protect these important sites. These included searchlights and anti-aircraft guns positioned around the town. Decoy sites, designed to lure enemy aircraft to drop their bombs away from the intended targets, were set up at Bleadon, Kingston Seymour and on the Mendip Hills.

However none of these deterrents proved effective and no enemy aircraft were definitely destroyed in any attack.

The Blitz

The earliest recorded bombing was in August 1940, when five bombs were dropped on the sands. The pilot recorded his target as "Harbour installations". This was followed later in the month when bombs were dropped in Albert Quadrant and Landemann Circus with no casualties.

On 3 September 1940 Heinkel He 111's targeted Avonmouth docks causing minor damage. They then continued to unload bombs along the Somerset coast, killing three people in Worle.

The following night saw further aircraft shedding bombs along their return route from Bristol, hitting Locking, Loxton and Banwell, where five were killed and 50 injured. Further incidents occurred throughout the last months of 1940, causing minor damage and injuries.

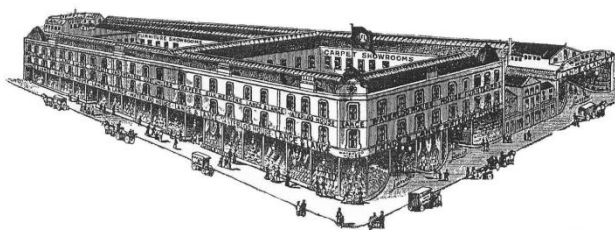
These early raids seem to have been the result of poor navigation, and pilots disposing of their bombs on any opportunistic target, rather than planned attacks. This was soon to change.

On 4 January 1941 a raid on Avonmouth was impeded by poor weather, and approximately 60 bombers continued down the coast over Clevedon and Weston. By the end of a two and a half hour attack, around 20 tonnes of high explosives and 3,000 incendiaries had been dropped. This resulted in 34 killed, 85 injured and 600 buildings damaged or destroyed.

The search and rescue process continued for several days, assisted by reinforcements from Bristol, Taunton, Exeter and even as far as London.

Aircraft incursions continued, and in December 1941, parachute mines were dropped on various rural locations, as well as on the beach, causing considerable damage.

1942 saw the most serious raids of the war in Weston. Often called the Baedeker raids, after a pre-war German guidebook, they were aimed at smaller towns rather than cities.



Lance & Lance department store before the war © Weston-super-Mare Library

27 June 1942 saw the first of two major attacks. It is satisfying to know that Beaufighters, manufactured at Weston and flown by Polish pilots based at Exeter, were amongst those involved in confronting the invading bombers. 53 enemy aircraft dropped 28.6 Tonnes of high explosives and nearly 3,500 incendiaries on Weston that night. Damage was extensive across many areas of the town.



Lance & Lance department store after German bombing © Weston-super-Mare Library

The following night they returned, dropping a similar amount of high explosives and 7,500 incendiaries. These two nights of attacks saw 102 killed and 170 seriously injured. Many were buried in a mass grave in Milton Road Cemetery. Several local landmarks were destroyed during the raids, including Lance & Lance, Weston's largest department store, Fortes famous ice cream parlour and the Tivoli cinema.



Bomb damage at St. Paul's Church © Weston-super-Mare Library

1943 saw no raids at all, and the last raid was in March 1944, when HE and incendiary devices were dropped on the area. This resulted in four fatalities in Hutton and many injuries. On this night there were some claims of success by AA guns when an enemy aircraft crashed near Wedmore. However, the German aircrew disputed the reason for the crash.

The raids on Weston claimed the lives of 148 people in and around Weston, with many more injured and rendered homeless. Some of the dead had been evacuated to Weston from the cities to be safe! Despite this, the raids did not affect aircraft production.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council