

Myrtle Rowe (Mrs M. Payne)

My memories of London 1940-42

It was a scary time. I was 19 years old and had won the Leverhulme scholarship to RADA commencing 1940. The family home was at Parliament Hill Fields and when night raids commenced my parents, my sister and self would crawl into a huge steel box called a Morrison Shelter which was placed under the dining table. Realising that a direct hit would cause two floors above to collapse on us, I used to get up and walk the street with a tin hat on.

We lost all windows and ceilings through blast. We'd light the gas about 4am to boil a kettle for tea but pressure was so low that it was past 9am and still had not boiled.

I'd get to RADA early about 8am and join other students for exercises on the roof. This was instigated by Lizze Piske, our mime and movement teacher, she is sitting in the enclosed photo by Colin who went and started the Scotts Academy with his wife. Standing second left in the back row is the Richard Attenborough who won the same scholarship as myself the following year.

I recall coming home on afternoon via Kentish town tube. No bus in sight, the air raid warning had sounded. I started walking up Highgate Road. An enemy plane suddenly appeared above me and I threw myself in the gutter. At the "all clear" I just got up and went on home.

In the early part of 1940 we were subjected to an enemy plane. The warning would go early evening and this plane would just fly round and round and up and down the London area. The idea being to put everyone's nerves on edge. There was an ACK-ACK sight on Hampstead Heath and when the sirens went these guns sounded as though they were at the bottom of our road.

I remember walking with all our neighbours and friends up to Parliament Hill and watching the fires in the east end. One never knew when a bomb would drop. Later the Nazis sent those awful planes loaded with explosives. They were timed for London and then the engines would just cut out. It happened when I was at Marble Arch one morning. It flew the length of Oxford Street as far as the Dominion Cinema when the engine cut off and it just dropped.

Nevertheless there was a wonderful atmosphere in London during those months. We were all together in these things and I shall never forget it.

On leaving RADA I worked for Emile Littles touring in The Maid of the Mountains and The Barretts of Wimpole Street and saw the havoc of bombing in the provinces and the courage and tenacity of the people there.