THE LIVERPOOL BLITZ, A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

By Jim McKnight

INTRODUCTION

In 2014 Merseyside Police discovered some photographs that had been police records of bomb damage during World War II. This was reported on BBC "News from the North". Fortunately, I hit the record button on our TV in time. A few of the photos were flashed on the screen, and suddenly I was amazed to realise that I remembered one particular scene very well. This was because I was there probably about the same time as the photograph was taken. I was seven years old then. That I should remember the scene so vividly seventy four years later is astonishing. Since then, I have verified that I was correct, and I think now is the time to record my memories of the Liverpool Blitzes.

THE PORT OF LIVERPOOL

It is not always realised that Liverpool was the most heavily bombed area of the country, outside of London, because Merseyside provided the largest port for the war effort. The government was concerned to hide from the Germans just how much damage had been inflicted upon the docks, so reports on the bombing were kept low-key. At one time the dock capacity was halved by bombing, and considering that Merseyside was the main link with America, this put the war effort in jeopardy. Over 90 per cent of imported war materiel came through Merseyside (the rest mainly came through Glasgow). Liverpool housed Western Approaches Command, the naval headquarters for the Battle of the Atlantic. It was responsible for organising the convoys, including the infamous Arctic supply route to Russia. Around 5,000 people were killed in the Merseyside area during the Blitz and a gutted church, St Luke's, remains still as the Luftwaffe left it, as their monument.

The famous waterfront, showing the three Graces in the 1930s The Tunnel Ventilator behind the RH. Port of Liverpool building had yet to be built.

WE MOVE TO HUNTS CROSS AND THE WAR STARTS.

All my family worked for the war effort. I can include an uncle (Cecil Jack), proprietor of the DeBurgh Transport company of Warrington who served the war ministry in organising North West transport and was based in Liverpool. Uncle Wal had been severely wounded in WW1, but worked for the government until the war ended, probably with his brother Cecil Jack. Their sister Aunt Hep (Hepsibah) was a telephone supervisor for the exchange that served the Western Approaches Command. Her husband Uncle George (known as Gerry) worked on marine insurance in the Liver Building and must have been very busy thanks to the U Boats. On my father's side, Uncle Rowland as a merchant seaman had been torpedoed twice in WW1, but now was Stevedores Manager for Furness Withy. Uncle Eric also worked in marine insurance, and my youngest uncle, Jack, was in the army.

Just before the outbreak of war my father left my uncle's transport business because working in Warrington was bad for his asthma. He started work at Rootes Aircraft in Speke, Liverpool, which then manufactured Blenheim bombers, and from 1941 Halifax bombers. In his spare time (!) my father also served in the ARP, Home Guard and Ack-Ack. It was this move that was so significant to our family. We left our gloomy terraced house in Mossley Hill and went to a semi-detached house in the new Garden City of Hunts Cross, less than a mile from Speke Airport, and only yards from several factories and a major railway marshalling yard.

I was only six years old at the time and so, during the move my maternal grandmother took me to Blackpool for a few days, returning me to our new abode in Hunts Cross. I can remember running to meet my sister Jean along an amazing road, Woodend Avenue, four separate lanes in brilliant sunshine that looked so wide compared to any in Mossley Hill. The date was Sunday, 3rd September 1939, "the day war broke out". This meant nothing to Jean and I, we rejoiced in a house in Barford Road that had a garden back and front, and green fields behind. Barford Road was at the edge of the Hunts Cross Garden City, and a narrow green strip that was still being farmed separated us from Edwards Lane, part of the Speke industrial estate. This included a number of "shadow factories" devoted to munitions. Father used to cross the fields through a hole in the fence to go to work; it took all of five minutes.

Me with Granny in Blackpool, 1st September 1939

The following week the new elementary school in Kingthorne Road opened. We were registered as pupils, and the school promptly closed awaiting the construction of air-raid shelters. For some months we were taught through "home teaching", small groups assembled in private houses for very brief lessons. This gave us kids lots of playing time. Looking back, it is amazing how much freedom we had. "Playing out" meant we could go anywhere over a large area, perhaps joining other kids on the building sites that had been abandoned because of the war. It couldn't happen now.


Hunts Cross in 1955, photo from a Speke – Belfast flight. (BEA Pionair)

Red blob our house in Barford Road

Red area – Rootes factory no. 2 in Edwards lane.

Areas in green- Unbuilt in1939-45

Yellow – Kingsthorne Road school

The route along an old lane behind our house into Edwards Lane is clear. There was a farm house and barn still in use near the junction with Edwards Lane.

108 Barford Road today. Much nicer than it was in 1939!

No photos exist of our house during the war, photo film not being widely available. These post-war shots show Sister Jean at both back and front of the house.
Note the fussy small pane windows, extremely difficult to black-out.


Cyril McKnight at Rootes No.2 factory, Speke, Liverpool during WWII. Rootes manufactured Halifax bombers. Cyril was the leading hand on tail assemblies.

My father (centre) doing night-time duty at Rootes No.2.

Making tail assemblies clearly was a quicker task than for the rest of the plane, consequently work here was a normal day-time shift with frequent overtime periods.

However, night-time fire watch duties were necessary.

It seems strange that in those days we children had a great deal of freedom. On the other hand my parents included us into most activities, rarely leaving us on our own in the house. Both Hunts Cross and nearby Speke housing developments were incomplete and without any leisure facilities and were remote from the rest of Liverpool. There were public libraries in Speke village and Woolton, both a mile's walk away, and we got used to walking long distances. There were no cinemas nearby. There was a small picture house at Woolton and larger emporia were accessible only by bus or bus and tram. There was a tram terminus in Woolton, which got us to Penny Lane and the Plaza cinema in Allerton. We had two bus routes, every 30 minutes a Liverpool Corporation green bus number 81 could take us to Woolton. But the Crosville "C" route, red livery, got us to the Pier Head in Liverpool via the Abbey Cinema in Childwall. Apart from the "red bus" the only other route to the city was by train, a somewhat irregular service.


Typical kids with their gasmasks

The war affected everything we did. Blackout was imposed everywhere, it was an offence to show any light at night. Aircrew at night can easily identify towns if they are lit up. People made special blackout curtains, some painted over some windows permanently. Father made special shutters which we had to put up at nightfall. Another problem was that we were required by law to carry gas-masks everywhere. (I recall being

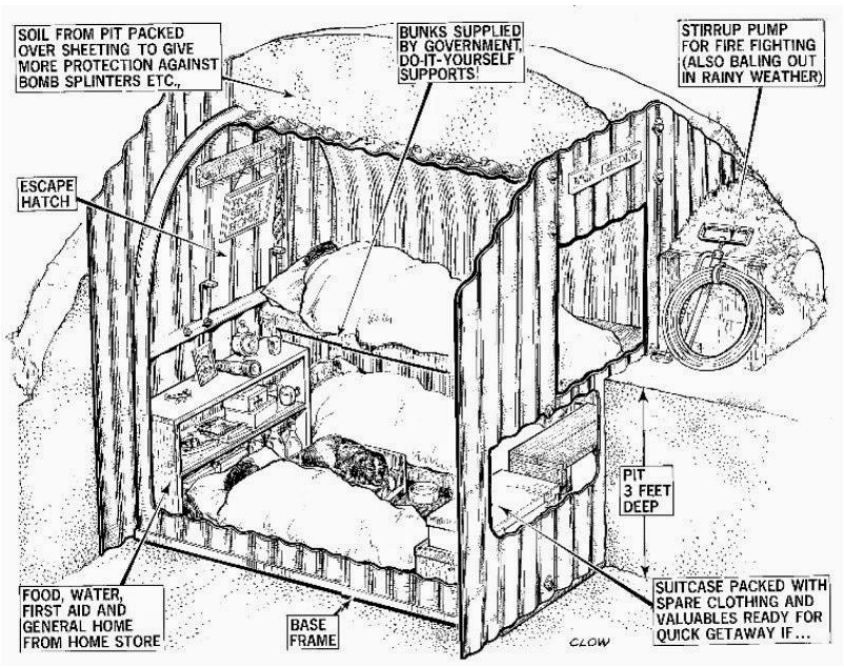
fitted with a gas mask in Dovedale Road school at the time of the Munich Crisis, such was the fear of Hitler's intentions.) Gas masks were stored in a cardboard box with a string loop attached. In time people bought much stronger containers, we had metal cans with a strap. If we went to a cinema we usually had to walk home in the blackout, up to three miles. I recall walking from the Plaza in Allerton along Allerton Road and through the Allerton cemetery following Father, whose gas-mask container gleamed in the moonlight like a beacon.

Of course we had torches, but batteries were precious and costly. For some reason one battery size – the most popular "number eight" ceased to be available and this caused a lot of comment.


A typical Anderson shelter. Note the gas masks, being carried in the issue cardboard boxes..

At home we were provided with Anderson air-raid shelters in the back garden. These arrived in time before the blitz on Merseyside started in August 1940. During that period, up to January 1942 we usually slept in the air-raid shelter. During the raids the shelter door was often left open so that Jean and I could see the searchlights and the AA shells exploding in the skies, they looked better than fireworks. The biggest hazard at the time was shrapnel from the AA barrage, tin hats were mandatory for anyone on ARP duty, such as our parents. After a raid kids went out into the fields and streets collecting shrapnel.

A family of four in the cramped and damp space of an Anderson shelter was scarcely healthy and at one point I caught pneumonia following a bout of measles and we then slept in the ground floor of the house until I recovered. I can remember the black-out shutters shaking with the roar of the Anti-Aircraft guns.



Our Anderson shelter layout was similar to this. We had four bunks.

THE BEGINNING OF THE BLITZ.

The first bomb to land on Hunts Cross was on 28th August 1940. Mother, who was standing outside the shelter heard the whoosh of the bomb very close and dived headfirst into the shelter before the explosion. It was the school holiday, I was seven years old, and the following morning I took a girlfriend, Penelope (she was all of six) to see the wrecked house in Kingsmead Drive. Photos of the damage only recently came to light in Police archives, when I saw them I immediately recognised the scene. Amazingly, two unaccompanied infants were allowed near, and I for one can remember it after 75 years. It was a different world then.

The author, 1940

The bombed house in Kingsmead Drive, Hunts Cross exactly as I remembered it! It and its neighbour were rebuilt immediately after the war in a similar style to the original. The area was remodelled much later to make space for an adjoining road and I think the house next door (to the left of colour photo) was demolished. The houses in this picture vary slightly from the rest of the road (diamond windows next to the door), and there is a lamp-post in a similar position, so I think we may, just possibly, be looking at the same location.

The following day there were reports that an unexploded A.A. shell had landed in the front garden of a house in Hillfoot Avenue. So everybody in Hunts Cross went and had a look. There was a round hole in the front lawn perhaps 18 inches across. We peered into the darkness and could see nothing. My mother remarked that evidently "they" had come along and simply pulled it out. The day after that we found that the front garden had totally disappeared; it was now a massive rectangular pit six feet deep. In fact "they" had dug out an unexploded HE bomb.

One of these houses had an unexploded bomb in the garden

During 1940 there were many reports of German planes coming over low in daylight. My Mother claims one flew right over our house whilst she was putting the washing out. My father said one had machine-gunned a bus carrying workers in Speke. Granny, grandmother on mother's side, was visiting us when the air-raid sirens started sounding as she got off the bus. An ARP warden sent her into the public air-raid shelter at the Woodend/Hillfoot cross-roads. She said she saw the Luftwaffe plane clearly, as a fighter plane from Speke attacked it. These were not fanciful events, despite Germany having ceased day-light raids. The planes would have been Junkers 88s, used by the Germans as reconnaissance. One has to admire the pilots bravery - and foolhardiness. On 8th October 1940 a Czech fighter pilot Flight Lieutenant Denys Gillam took off in his Hawker Hurricane from Speke and was immediately confronted by a Junkers 88 passing across him. He shot the Junkers down while his undercarriage was still retracting. The shoot down is thought to be the fastest air-to-air combat "kill" in the Battle of Britain and possibly of all time. The Ju88 crashed near Eastham docks.

"While taking off from Speke in his Hurricane, a raiding JU88 crossed the airfield in front of Denys Gillam, who promptly shot it down. It was the fastest air victory of the war, and probably of all time.
Robert Taylor made this painting of that event."

About this time we kids started visiting the war-wounded in nearby temporary hospitals. We took them comics and magazines bought with money raised by selling wild-flowers. The flowers came from nearby fields, and "bluebell wood" situated between Speke and Oglet. We were trespassers. The other side of the wood, we found a mysterious field of what appeared to be aircraft well away from the Speke airfield. We supposed it was a dummy airfield, designed to foil the Luftwaffe.

1941

Our road escaped major damage in the many succeeding raids, although on 14th March 1941 sticks of incendiaries were strafed along the adjacent Edwards Lane, missing most of the factories, and following instead the line of Barford Road. They failed in burning all the houses down


Jean's trophy looked exactly like this

because some of the incendiaries fell in the field behind us, and because the ARP were busy in the street during the raid putting out the fires that did take hold. The following morning the local kids hunted in the fields for burnt-out incendiary tail fins. My sister found more than that – a complete incendiary bomb buried in the field that had failed to ignite properly and this became a trophy, unfortunately now lost. The marking on its fin showed it had been manufactured in 1936. Hitler had indeed intended to go to war!

THE MAY BLITZ

In May 1941 the worst blitz took place over a period of eight days. For some reason our mother decided to give us a nice day out. I'm not sure of the date, but it must have been only a day or two after the May blitz paused on 8th May. This meant a visit to the delights of New Brighton, the Merseyside seaside resort. It had both an outside and an inside fairground, the latter being popular in the evenings because of the Blackout. Our usual way of getting there involved getting the Crosville red bus to the Pier Head in Liverpool. From there we would get a Mersey Ferry to New Brighton. If our timings were right, one could get there in just over an hour. We could stay until the evening, remembering that the last bus back from the Pier head left at 10.30 p.m.

On this occasion, there were problems getting on the bus. We always travelled on the top deck if possible, and mother on the way up put her arm through the window. In fact there was no window, many of the bus windows were absent, having been blown out during the blitz. We didn't get to the Pier Head, because of bomb damage we couldn't go any further than the foot of Brownlow Hill, adjacent to the Adelphi hotel. All roads from there towards the Pier Head were blocked by debris. Ahead of us Liverpool's largest department store, Lewis', was still smouldering. It had burnt for several days no doubt providing a fine beacon for the returning Luftwaffe. To complete our journey we had no choice but to walk the mile to the Pier Head, and we did this through the rubble of what Hitler had left of our city. Mother was most impressed to see workers prizing open a safe that had been rescued from the ruins of a bank. They got it open and a pile of ashes fell out.

The ruins of Lewis' department store, bombed on 3rd May 1941. The Adelphi hotel is in the background.

Behind Lewis' and to the right of the hotel is Brownlow Hill.

You can see why road traffic couldn't continue.

Damage behind the Mersey Tunnel ventilator.

James Street Underground Station. The ventilator tower remains. The old White Star building is also affected.

Bomb Damage after the May Blitz. The Custom House on the skyline had to be demolished.

Bomb damage after the May Blitz. The Liver building is on the sky-line.

The bombing had destroyed the city's water supply. In the weeks to come pipes would be laid along the city street to supply sea water for firefighting. At road junctions there were humps that would make today's speed bumps trivial.

We did get to the Pier Head and got a ferry to New Brighton. The route was via Seacombe on the other side of the river. There was difficulty in berthing at Seacombe and a temporary gangway was being used. This was because the Ferry boat Royal Daffodil II had been sunk during the night of 7/8th May at its berth. We could see the funnel, masts and railings of its upper deck sticking out of the water. The Mersey ferries served continuously through the war, day and night, acting sometimes as tenders or rescue boats for the many ships anchored in the river. The Royal Daffodil II was required to remain in steam throughout the night, fortunately its seven crew survived. The boat was raised, repaired, and went back into service within the year.

We did enjoy our day out to New Brighton.

AFTER THE MAY BLITZ.

Bombing raids continued intermittently throughout the rest of 1941 causing considerable damage. My parents liked to stand outside our Anderson shelter, ready to take ARP action. One night there was a mighty explosion that all but blew them back into the shelter. The story was that a parachute mine had been dropped over Hunts Cross, and picked up by a searchlight. The Ack-Ack guns fired at it and it exploded whilst still high in the air.

If an air-raid warning ("moaning minnie") sounded audiences in theatres and cinemas were immediately told and given the option to leave and take shelter. I recall seeing such warnings flashed onto the cinema screen, and the audience shouting "Oh, get on with the film!" We had got quite blasé about the situation.
The night of the 10th January 1942 saw the last bombing raids of WW2 in Liverpool. Upper Stanhope Street was the last street to be hit and ironically the Luftwaffe managed to hit Hitler's brother's (Alois Hitler) old house at number 102. The house was damaged beyond repair and remained in such a state for many years before being demolished. (See Appendix)

AND FOR THE REST OF THE WAR---
This was thus the end of my personal experiences of the Liverpool Blitz. For the rest of the war my memories are of locally made tanks being tested on the streets of Hunts Cross, a number of air crashes – I was able to get within yards of one whilst it was still on fire – German and Italian prisoners working on the fields, the Americans coming, stationed at Burtonwood but finding their pleasures more widely. One US major Codey married 16 yr old Alma Wilmot, a friend of my sisters. I recall a massive petrol dump right in the middle of Hunts Cross which vanished just before D Day, and there are many more memories.

We had little contact with Uncle Cecil Jack DeBurgh ("C J")in those days, we assumed that what is now called logistics occupied his time. A neighbour who worked for Edward Box Co. of Speke was also involved and told us of some of their problems. Transporting American aircraft from the docks to Speke airport, where they were assembled and then ferried to squadrons down South, was a major problem. On some occasions sections of the Overhead Railway had to be removed to allow passage. The photo below shows a convoy of Mustang aircraft on their way to Speke. It is passing the Plaza Cinema on Allerton Road. It may seem to some who know Liverpool not the most obvious route, but the direct route had a bottleneck in Garston, the road so narrow that trams there were single track.

2/15 American Mustangs going down Allerton Road

In the photo, to the left of the Plaza cinema (later renamed Gaumont), is the farmhouse of a dairy farmer called: A. HERD
Also on the left can be seen a "Green Goddess" tram. They got the name because war losses brought many of the oldest red-coloured trams out of retirement. One famously dropped her motor on the ground in Lime Street bringing a major part of the tram system to a halt. In the Liverpool Echo was published a poem about the red tram being contrite and ashamed in front of the "Green Goddesses."

Uncle Cecil Jack was slated to receive a knighthood, but unfortunately was killed with his wife in the Bryce Canyon air disaster in October 1947. Because of post war travel money restrictions, he wore a diamond ring as surety for any emergency.
He died wearing the ring, which I now have.

A tram leaving the bottle-neck in Garston.

Jean and I and other local kids would collect wild flowers and sell them for charity. We were also involved, through the school, in collecting "salvage" paper. On occasion we would visit a Ministry of Pensions Hospital in Childwall to give magazines and comics to the war-wounded. We were always admitted, whatever the time.

AND AFTER THE WAR

The decision was taken not to rebuild St Luke's church but to leave it in its gutted state as a memorial to those who died. It remains as such to this day.

St Luke's church, kept as a memorial

There was a serious effort to rehabilitate Germany after its defeat. Part of this was school children exchanges with Germany. And so a teenager, Jurgen Stock came to stay for a while to stay with Jean. He wanted us to know two things - that the Luftwaffe only bombed industrial targets and never civilians, and that he had been told by British troops that the Liverpool slums were the worst in the world. So we took him into the city and showed him the flat areas of rubble that were the so-called slums, and, of course, St Lukes.

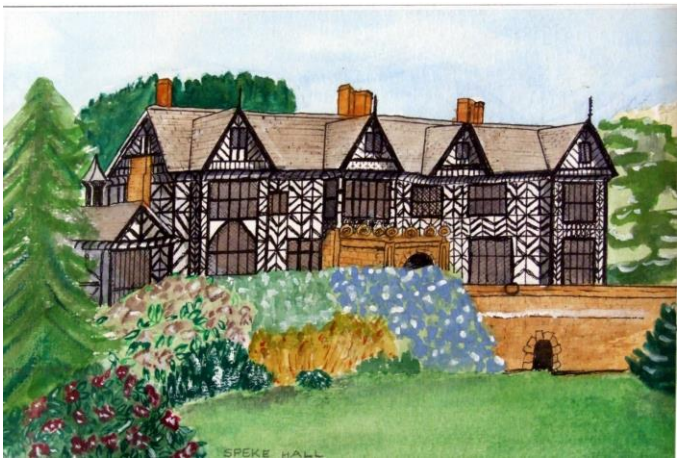
THE EFFECT OF THE WAR ON THE AUTHOR.

To us children the war was a source of excitement and things seemed rather flat afterwards. The fact that many died had not entered our minds. The holocaust was especially absent from our thoughts, because we didn't know it had happened. The occupying armies had uncovered terrible scenes in the concentration camps and the government decided to show these to the population in a series of photo exhibitions. In Liverpool these were in marquees set up on the cleared blitz sites, one had to be over eighteen to see them and the newspapers didn't print them, so us kids weren't to know the horrors of war, apparently. However, I am sure that war-time news reels showed tanks driving over corpses in the snow, that is my recollection. As we grew older there was a feeling of cynicism amongst the youth. A referendum for voters (over 21 yrs age) voted for conscripted national service for 18 yrs old men. National service men served and died in many conflicts after the war. No wonder some regarded themselves as being regarded as mere cannon-fodder.

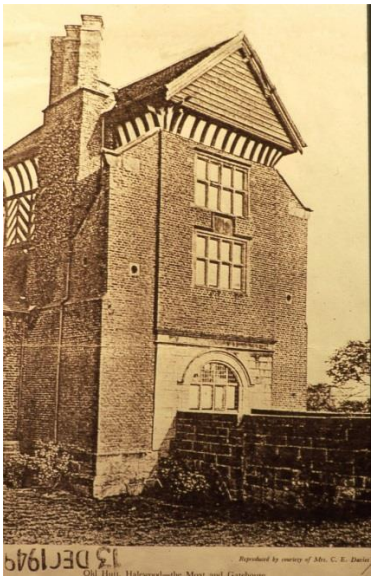
The war resulted in a number of shops selling "war surplus" electronics. These were an Aladdin's cave for me and my friend Ernie, as we taught ourselves electronics. I built radios, oscilloscopes, and a tape recorder.
For myself, however, I remained fascinated by the RAF. In junior school I had got a prize for my painting of a Spitfire, which I copied from a jig-saw puzzle. Throughout my schooling I would walk to Speke airport of an evening to watch the planes coming in. At Liverpool University where I was trained to be a nuclear Physicist, I was accepted into the University Air Squadron as a cadet pilot. I would have preferred, after graduation in 1954, to have taken a short term commission in the RAF in lieu of national service but it wasn't to be. Britain's Nuclear programme more or less directed me straight into the Atomic Energy Authority, my employer until retirement.

The author, soloing in a Chipmunk trainer.

LOCAL HERITAGE


Speke Hall, as painted by Jean McKnight

We were rather proud of the old sites that could still be seen whilst we lived in Hunts Cross. A regular summer outing was to walk along Dungeon Lane to a spot on the river Mersey called Oglet which boasted a small sandy beach. From there we could walk to the lighthouse at Hale Point which at one time was a source of sand for the St Helens glass industry. We would pass the grave of the Childe of Hale, a sixteenth century giant, 9 feet, 3 inches (2.82 m) tall. His portrait hangs in Speke Hall, a well preserved Tudor building. For a time access to Speke Hall, being close to the airport, was restricted, but once restrictions were relaxed later in the war, it became a popular venue for picnics. It was originally under the care of Liverpool Corporation, and the guides had a reputation for excessive embroidery of the history. ("She threw the baby hearl outer the winder into the moat"--- we could all see it was a 50 yard lob!) It is now National Trust.


The Old Hutt gatehouse in 1960

We also had a ruined hall called the Old Hutt in the adjacent village of Halewood. The gatehouse survived an incendiary attack during the war, but in 1960 it was demolished for the Ford Factory, an act of vandalism that would not be tolerated today.

In the direction of Woolton, a pleasant walk along Hillfoot Avenue took us to Camp Hill, site of an ancient British settlement, but for us, simply a good picnic spot.

Near Old Hutt lane in Halewood was an unusual site known as The Horses Rest. It was run by Liverpool Corporation as a retirement home for cart horses. Liverpool had its own stud for carthorses and they were used mainly for bin collection duties. They dragged a covered wagon into which bins were unloaded by the bin-men. Every so often a motorised lorry would turn up from the depot in Smithdown Road (near Penny Lane) and changed the wagon. The horses needed no driver, they simply moved along the road as the bins were collected. I have been unable to find a photo of this remarkable service, but am still looking.

The Horses Rest closed in the 1960s and was transferred to the RSPCA as an animal sanctuary.

PENNY LANE

Immortalised by the Beatles, Penny Lane was our nearest sizable shopping centre. When I went on a tour of Liverpool I was disappointed to find that the guide got it wrong. There is a Penny Lane, of course, but at its junction with the Smithdown Road tram route was a Tram Stop called Penny Lane. (Stops got their names from the roads adjoining the tram route). This tram stop developed into a transport hub, essentially a round-a-bout island with six roads connecting with it. Properly called Smithdown Place, everybody called it "Penny Lane", because this is what you asked the tram conductor for. We know the Beatles meant the whole

area, because of mention of a Fire Station. This was on the far side of Smithdown Place from the Penny Lane junction. So there!

(In 1943 I won a Liverpool City Junior Scholarship that got me into Quarrybank school in Allerton, the same school later attended by John Lennon. My first primary school, Dovedale Road in Mossley Hill was attended by George Harrison. So what?)

Area known as"Penny Lane", actually Smithdown Place.
Penny Lane is seen stretching into the distance.

APPENDIX ---HITLER'S *BROTHER*?

Alois Hitler married an Irish woman and lived for a time in Liverpool. She claimed Hitler visited in 1910 to avoid conscription into the Austrian army and like his half-brother was a nuisance. It is firmly believed in Liverpool that both Alois and Adolf were thrown out of a pub, and at that point Adolf's attitude became "no more Mr nice guy!" Thus we could argue that Liverpool was the ultimate cause of WW2. When Hitler got to power he wanted to attack Liverpool. First he had to start a war with the British, and because of the limited range of bombers he needed to invade countries nearer to Liverpool. The RAF famously limited his ability for daytime attacks and he had to wait for development of a sophisticated radio navigation system, which was spoiled by counter measures. So many raids were needed. The proof of all this is that the raids ceased once the area of his humiliation, the house of his brother, was destroyed. Unfortunately for Adolf, in the process he had produced many side issues such as the war with Russia. **Hitler's nephew and sister –in-law emigrated to America and published nasty things about him**. This must have annoyed Hitler, because in December 1941, for no obvious reason, he declared war on America (and maybe it was he who persuaded Japan to attack Pearl Harbour). What more proof do you need?

Is this true? Surprisingly, the sentences in bold *are* true! Not sure about the rest.

SOURCES

In doing this memoir I have been aided by internet records, notably the time line history starting with:-
http://liverpoolremembrance.weebly.com/bombings-1940.html

And photos from the police record:- http://www.merseyside.police.uk/about-us/our-history/photo-archive-the-ww2-blitz/

For the history of Speke Airport and Rootes Aircraft Factory see-
http://www.forgottenairfields.com/united-kingdom/england/merseyside/liverpool-speke-airport-s1198.html
https://fcafa.wordpress.com/2011/07/29/czech-mates/
Hitler's brother: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2616624/Hitlers-half-brother-lived-terrace-house-Liverpool-according-census-documents.html
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