

What was life like in London during World War II?

During the six years Britain was at war, 1939–45, life was frequently hard for Londoners. Food and clothing were rationed and in short supply. Bombing caused fear, injury, death and destruction. Families were often separated due to evacuation and fathers going away to fight. Londoners learned to live with uncertainty and hardship.

How did rationing and shortages affect Londoners?

Rationing was introduced to control supplies of food and clothing during the war. Dried and tinned food became common as fresh meat and fish were in short supply. The government's 'Dig for Victory' campaign encouraged people to grow their own food to avoid fresh produce shortages.

Every available plot of land was used for farming. In Kensington Gardens flowers were replaced with cabbages.

Clothing coupon books like this one were issued by the government to all Londoners.

Adults were allowed to use 66 coupons a year – children were allocated additional coupons to allow for them outgrowing their clothes during the year. All clothes were rated. A pair of shoes used five coupons while a suit used 18 coupons. People were encouraged to 'make do and mend' to help their clothes last longer.



Clothing ration book, 1942

Pages of the book had different coloured coupons. The coupons shown here are blue. Only one colour could be used at a time. The government announced when the next colour could be used, to prevent people using all their coupons too quickly.

Rationing should have imposed a 'fair share for all' but this was not always the case.

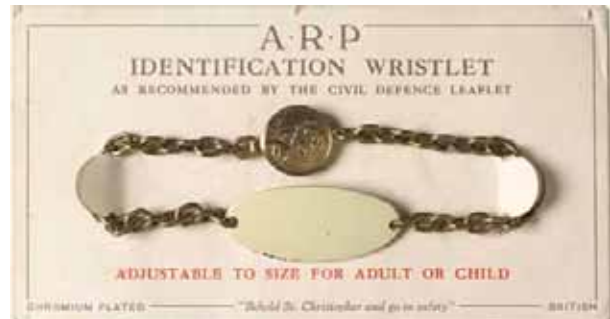
Due to rationing, boys had to wait until they were 12 years old before being allowed to wear long trousers.

Why did Londoners wear identity tags?

During World War II, 100,000 London homes were destroyed and over one million houses suffered damage. Over 80,000 Londoners were killed or seriously injured. One in ten of all deaths that occurred during the war were children.

Bomb injuries suffered by Londoners often made identifying wounded people difficult. The authorities encouraged civilians to wear identity tags to speed up the process.

Many Londoners wore metal bracelets like this one engraved with their personal details, to help with identification.



I.D. Bracelet, 1939–45

This identity bracelet has a charm attached to it which shows Saint Christopher, the patron saint of safe travel. This would have given wearers comfort that they were protected on their journeys.

On 10 May 1941 more than 3,000 Londoners died or were seriously injured.

What was life like for children who were evacuated?

London was a main target for enemy bombing during World War II. The government encouraged parents to send their children away from London for their safety.



Evacuee postcard, 1939

Volunteers organised an evacuation programme. Children were sent away with their school teachers to live with host families in 'safe' areas such as the countryside.

This picture postcard was one in a series made by a greeting card company for parents to send to their children. The image of happy children it shows offers a positive view of evacuation. This cheerful card hides the reality of life for some child evacuees.

Many evacuees stayed with very kind families and were cared for and happy like the children in this postcard. Others, however, stayed with families who did not want them there and were less kind to them.

Up to one half of London's population were away from their homes for some period of World War II.

How did Londoners keep themselves safe during the war?

Many Londoners used air raid shelters called Anderson shelters to keep themselves safe during air raids. You can see what the inside of a shelter looked like in this engraving. The shelters were named after government minister Sir John Anderson. These shelters were given free by the government to all householders with a garden who earned less than £250 a year.

Air raids often happened at night. As can be seen in the engraving, it was common for whole families to sleep in the shelter.

At six feet (nearly two metres) high and buried in four feet (just over one metre) of soil, the conditions in the shelter were not always pleasant. Like the people in the engraving, Londoners were cramped together and shelters often flooded.

These shelters could only be used by those with gardens to put them in. For Londoners without a garden, protection was found in any available cellar space, in Underground stations or in public surface shelters found in open spaces such as parks.



Engraving by Mary Dunnett,
Inside the Anderson Shelter, 1943. © Mary E J Fox

Thousands of Londoners sheltered from the air raids on platforms and staircases and in the tunnels and ticket halls of the London Underground stations.

Community spirit

World War II is often seen as a time of great community spirit. Londoners were seen as calm in the face of danger, sharing a positive spirit, courage and a determination to succeed.

Living in the capital, Londoners were always the first to hear breaking news. This photograph shows crowds of Londoners gathering in Piccadilly Circus on May 8 1945, Victory in Europe Day (VE Day).

When Londoners heard that peace in Europe had been declared, crowds came out onto the streets and flooded into central London. London landmarks such as Buckingham Palace, Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus became a focus for celebrations.



Photograph by Wolfgang Suschitzky, *Piccadilly Circus, VE Day, 1945.* © Wolf Suschitzky



The war against Japan continued until August 1945.

See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, both on display and in store. Go to

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections

Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank

BBC Primary History – World War 2
http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/world_war2

Visit the Museum

Many objects relating to World War II are on display in the People's City: 1850s–1940s gallery at the Museum of London.