As a person who walks around London on a regular basis I have become fascinated by the remains of war damage that still exist from the Second World War. While it might not be thought as conventional archaeology, conflict archaeology is fast becoming a popular activity. With this in mind I set out over the past few weeks to investigate the remains of war damage in London and how it still affects our lives and surroundings.

My first port of call was to look at the London County Council Bomb Damage Maps 1939-45 Atlas, which I warn you is such a large book, it would put War and Peace to shame. The book contains all the maps that shows the damage resulting from German bombing of 1939-1945. The former London County Council produced these maps, immediately after the Second World War to assess the resources required for post war reconstruction. It became the basis for the Abercrombie Plan which was the blueprint for the rebuilding of post war London. This was the brainchild of Sir Leslie Patrick Abercrombie, who designed a plan that he believed would transfer London from a city destroyed by the devastation of war into an center of peace, hope and prosperity. According to his plan, the city would be organised into separate independent zones, new road systems would be used to improve transport and more open space would be created. Moreover housing would be transformed, with most of London's old Victorian housing stock(slums) being demolished and people being housed instead in large apartment blocks across the city.

A key component of this plan was the development of a green belt for London. Abercrombie presented his plan with the statement that 'Adequate open space for both recreation and rest is a vital factor in maintaining and improving the health of the people. To help develop this further he also proposed the establishment of new parks in the surrounding suburbs of the city. Abercrombie's most ambitious park plan was for the Lee Valley in North East London. While it took nearly 20 years after the war to become a reality, a special Act of Parliament (in 1968) was enacted to create powers for the creation of the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority. It continues to levy a tax on all Londoners, despite the fact that almost all the Park's visitors are from the local area.

To enable Abercrombie rebuilding plans to be implemented efficiently, accurate maps of the devastation that London had suffered had to be created. Army surveyors, de-mobbed from the Army, were employed, told to get on bikes and record local damage for the compiling of a huge Bombing Map. These maps were to become the foundation for the Abercrombie Plan for the Rebuilding of London.

The various Boroughs of London knew the extent of the damage that had occurred in their areas, but a full picture was needed so that repairs, demolition and rebuilding could be organised. Over 30% of the private homes in London had been destroyed, people were...
desperate for homes. This resulted in Town Halls being put under enormous pressure to create and build replacement accommodation. It was vital to plan and allocate scarce building materials to where it was required. It was clear to all that the rebuilding effort was urgent and the pressure to work quickly was intense. The Bomb Damage maps were to form the bases of this work.

Each borough was directed by London County Council to provide detailed sketches of their damaged areas as soon as possible.

The reports from the surveyors enabled the architects and assistants to trace small areas of the Ordnance Survey maps in Indian ink, they then coloured them in, to show the degrees of the damage to each property. These plans were then sent to the various County Halls for further study.

The method of doing it in small patches, meant the work could be shared out in all the local offices and the task completed quickly. This was years before the advent of coloured photocopiers. Each of the small pieces of map, with the damage marked with coloured pencil, were then sent off to be built up into the Bombing Maps.

The Bomb Damage Map of the area around Islington Green School, 1939-45

Colour Key References

- Black - Total destruction
- Purple - Damaged beyond repair
- Dark Red - Doubtful if repairable
- Light Red - Seriously damaged, but repairable at cost
- Orange - General blast damage, not structural
- Yellow - Blast damage, minor in nature

O V1 flying bomb large circle
o V2 long range rocket. small circle

The coloured areas of the maps showed the widespread bomb damage, while the different colours indicate its level of severity. Some houses were repaired; others were patched up temporarily. Even those houses not bombed, deteriorated over time because there could be little maintenance during the war and they were in dire need of care and attention.
Looking at these maps helps to explain the cluster of old and modern buildings that can be seen not just in the center of London but also in the towns that make up the suburbs of London. It also explains why some buildings seem to have had stories removed or missing when compared to buildings nearby. This can be clearly seen in the town of Orpingtion only 8 miles from the center of London.

Between 13th of April 1944 and 27th of March 1945, there were no fewer than 63 V1 flying bombs and 14 V2s that hit Orpingtion. The impact point where these bombs landed would have experienced total devastation. A scientific reconstruction carried out in 2010 demonstrated that the V2 creates a crater 20 m wide and 8 m deep, throwing up around 3,000 tons of material into the air. As the blast spread out it would cause blast damage to other houses nearby, reducing in effect as the distance increased from the point of impact. This would have ensured few houses or buildings would have escaped the effect of the bombs.

Many of the houses in Orpingtion were patched up and later repaired properly, others were knocked down and new buildings being built to replace them. Some of the houses would have had their top stories destroyed or so severely damaged that the house was repaired by its removal. However where there had been major incidents and damage, this led to the building of completely new blocks and even new streets.

This is clearly seen in the centre of Orpingtion where one side of the High street is comprised of buildings from the 1950s or 60s while the other side is comprised of buildings from the mid 1930s. This is explained when you look at the Bomb Damage Maps which show that the more recent buildings are sited on areas that suffered the heaviest bomb damage. One building that stands out from the surrounding building is the Post office, which dates to 1934. While this was badly damaged it was repaired while the surrounding bomb damaged building were demolished after the war and replaced by the modern buildings we see today.
The next time you walk around London or in the towns that surround it have a look at the buildings and see if you identify the evidence of the devastation that engulfed London and its surround area nearly 70 years ago.

These bombing maps and records can be consulted in most Borough Archives, but not in Camden. There, in a piece of mindless stupidity, the records were destroyed as a gesture against War. People who had been killed had the indignity of being obliterated from the record, in a piece of futile gesture politics.

In addition to the recording of the bomb damage these maps would also record position of unexploded bombs which could be a danger in the future.

In part 2 of this article I will look at the continued danger of unexploded bombs that still remain from the war.

To be continued....

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Hi Gordon, our writer is currently away playing in the trenches, but upon his return we'll get him to check his records for you.