London in Blackout Real Black and Quiet

This is the fourth of a series of articles about conditions in Great Britain and other countries visited by a group of Canadian newspaper editors. It was written for the weekly newspapers of Canada by their own representative on the tour, Hugh Templin, of the Fergus News-Record.

First impressions may not always be accurate, but they are always interesting.

The first thing that any visitor to England wants to see is the damage done by the bombs. I was no exception. The airport where our plane had dropped us down on British soil was interesting in its way, but much like a dozen others I had visited in Canada. There were only two apparent differences: The planes were of different types, though there were a few familiar Avro Anson, and the buildings were protected against the blasts from bombs dropping nearby.

The customs examination was brief, though the examiner did show some interest in the things I had thought it necessary to take to England with me. I had a short brush with the lady censor. She took away all the letters I had carried from Canada and appeared to be horrified that I had taken along a map of the British Isles. Apparently, had unwittingly committed a grave crime and she said she must confiscate it.

Evidently, a few girls get that way when given some brief authority. I met censors several times during the next six weeks, but none like that young lady. She even went so far as to take away two picture postcards I had bought in the Azores on the flight across the Atlantic. After a brisk argument, in which the customs man took my part, I got the map back. The letters and post cards arrived by mail at my hotel in London a week later, after being censored.

First Impression of Bombing

It was only a few miles to the nearest city, a seaport on the west coast of England. I had never been across the Atlantic before, so I watched with interest for the things I had been told about so often: the small fields enclosed by hedges, the slated or tiled roofs, the little locomotives pulling long trains of tiny wagons, for photography had made them all familiar. Only the barrage baloons floating over the nearby hills showed that England had changed.

As our car entered the city, we all looked around curiously for signs of damage. Rumors in Canada said that this ancient port was practically destroyed German versions said that the dock area was rendered useless. As we crossed a bridge over the river, I looked at the shipping and saw no sign of damage to the docks.

The first blitzed house stood on a corner. Or it had stood on the corner, for not a thing was left except a pile of bricks in the basement. The houses on either side seemed undamaged, except for a few boarded-up windows, but the corner one was done as cleanly as though it had been carved out with a big knife.

I thought to myself: "This is exactly what I expected to see: it looks exactly like the pictures."

In the next block another house had been hit. It wasn't as thoroughly destroyed. One side wall remained, and up it at irregular intervals were the fireplaces which had once supplied a bit of heat to its rooms. Part of the floor of one upstairs room hung in the air, with a bed on it.

Again there was that feeling that this was just what I had expected. It remained while we drove down a long street, with half a dozen houses missing at more or less regular intervals. After that, my feelings began to change. Perhaps it was the ruined churches. Several of them had nothing left but blackened walls. On the main business street, many stores were left without windows; others were hollow shells.

It made me angry before long. This wanton damage seemed so senseless. Obviously, military targets had not been hit or they had been repaired so quickly that the effect was slight. It was the houses that had suffered most, and the churches.

The train to London was crowded, but the six of us got a compartment to ourselves. On the wall was a detailed map of the railway line. I thought of the girl in the censor's office and my map. But I never saw another one on a British train. Most of the railway stations had the names obliterated or the signs torn down in the hope that invaders might get lost.

London in the Blackout

The train was about half-way to London when the blackout time arrived at about half-past six. The guard came in and pulled down heavy blinds over all the windows and doors. Even the door out into the corridor had a blind on it. It was the first hint that there is nothing half-hearted about the British black-out. It's black.

Inside the railway carriage, two dim lights kept the compartment in a state of semi-darkness. One was a white light, set high up in a deep funnel in the roof. The other light, more exposed, was blue and did not give enough light to make it possible to read a newspaper.

Of all the first impressions, none is more vivid than that of my arrival in London in the blackout. There was some doubt about whether the train had reached Paddington station or not, but everybody seemed to be getting out. One of the editors opened the door. There wasn't a thing to be seen except three scattered blue bulbs in a ceiling overhead. Moving shapes came past the door and one of them answered the question: "Is this Paddington?" with a short "Yes, sir."

Nobody who hasn"t been there will ever believe how dark London can be in the blackout at the time of the new moon. Three blue bulbs really give no light at all: they just intensify the darkness. And London was not only dark, but quiet as well. This didn't seem like a railway station. Outside, not a light allowed in the city.

Somehow, our hosts from the British Council found us, and they knew what to do. In a few moments they had a porter hunting for a taxi-cab. Where he went, I'll never know, but he came back with two, and in the light of later experience, that was something of an achievement.

Our taxi driver was old and his cab was ancient. Four persons and their luggage seemed like too much of a load, but we entrusted ourselves to him, hoping he knew what to do.

The only outdoor lights in London are the traffic signals and the shelter signs. Even the traffic lights are covered, except a tiny cross in the centre. The shelter signs have only a dim "S" showing on them.

An Uncanny Quietness

The feeling persisted that this could not possibly be the world's largest city. Sometimes the axi would stop and a bus or some more taxis would go across the intersection. Each had one dim headlight, fitted with shutters so that it threw a circle of semi-darkness on the pavement. The windows of the buses were covered. They were just dim outlines as they passed.

The tiny red cross at the corner would disappear and be replaced by a green one and the driver would start up again. Some of the editors, familiar with London in the past, asked him questions about the localities. Only once, at the corner of Hyde Park, did one of them guess correctly.

I am told that London in normal times is noisy at night, though not as bad as New York. In the black-out, it is quiet. Taxi and bus drivers find their way largely by instinct.

The cab stopped under some kind of roof. A man with a tiny pocket flashlight helped us out and called for someone to take the bags. We passed one by one through a revolving door and emerged suddenly into the bright light of a hotel lobby.

There was something familiar about the place. The feeling persisted even after I had been taken to my room and had looked into the bathroom with its Roman bath and Royal Doulton fixtures, reminders of past splendor. Then I remembered I had seen this famous hotel in moving pictures long ago.

Bomb Damage in London

The next morning I saw London for the first time. Our hosts from the British Council came around in an old car and drove us around the central part of the city, particularly that part of Old London which had been destroyed by the Great Fire in 1666 and rebuilt better than it had been. Now it has been destroyed again.

East of St. Paul's Cathedral and north of Fleet Street, there is an area of almost a square mile with hardly a building standing. Perhaps you have seen that remarkable photograph which shows the great dome of St. Paul's standing up above a mass of smoke and flames, while in the foreground the walls of ruined houses are silhouetted against the fire. I had wondered sometimes if that photograph was not faked. In a room of the Press Club in London I saw the original. Walking through the ruins of the old City of London, it is still easy to picture that terrible night.

Many of the walls which stood up in that blackened area since the big blitz last December have been torn down by demolition squads. Where there are basements, they have been cemented and turned into water reservoirs for fighting future fires.

This was an area of office buildings and publishing houses, with a number of fine old churches and some of the most famous administrative buildings. It was burned in a concentrated blitz one week-end, before the Londoners had learned how to fight the incendiary bomb. I don't think it could ever happen again. An indendiary bomb is small and light. I large bombing plane might carry a thousand of them. They are showered down by hundreds and are just heavy enough to go through a slate roof. It is two minutes or so before they burst into flame. Every second counts. The incendiary bomb can be conquered in the first two or three minutes. After that it takes the fire brigade to do anything about it.

Strangely enough, the things that touch the heart of the observer in desolate areas like this are the small things. In ruined houses, it is dolls or other toys lying around: in former office buildings, it is battered typewriters piled up, a dozen or so together, or some other evidence of the normal life that was once carried on there.

Yet even in the midst of this desolation, I had a feeling that the German bombers had failed. They had not even tried to hit military targets. It is thought they tried to wipe out the whole of London's fire fighting apparatus. They didn't succeed. The fire brigades were massed in that small area and more bombers came over, dropped high explosive bombs. Suddenly they stopped coming. It is said that a mist arose back over the Channel and it was feared they could not return safely. Whether that was the reason or not, London's fire fighters escaped to fight another day.

Seeing other parts of London later I felt again and again that the German bombers had failed. They destroyed thousands of houses and stores and offices, and dozens of churches. They did get many factories along the Thames. But they not only failed to frighten the British people; they also missed many of the most tempting targets.

For instance, every bridge over the Thames is in operation. It is said not one has been hit though thousands of bombs have gone into the water in an attempt to cut traffic. There are temporary bridges which can be quickly finished if any bridge is destroyed. They have never been needed.

I wandered through the dock area near Tower Bridge one day. The little houses in the East End have taken a bad punishment. In two places, I saw vacant lots piled high with bricks that must have come from hundreds of houses. But the docks were still in operation as usual with convoys going out the Thames. It was obvious that Tower Bridge itself had never been hit. The Tower of London has lost only a corner of one small bastion.

There hasn't been any bombing in London lately. It is now five months since the last bombs have fallen on the capital. Only once while I was in London did an enemy plane ever come near the city. From the roof of a newspaper office, I watched the flashes of the anti-aircraft guns away to the east. The German never got through.

There was bombing going on all the time, but it was around the coasts of Britain. I came through bombing one night in Bournemouth, and will tell of it in a later stroy. But conditions have obviously changed. The Germans no longer have superiority in the air. Defences are stronger. It doesn't seem likely that the British will be 'blitzed' again as they were last winter: actual invasion seems impossible.

Italian soldiers are complaining about the cold weather on the Russian front. They get so stiff they can hardly run.

The Land of the Rising Sun would like to seize a large portion of the Empire on which the sun never sets. But after the war clouds have disappeared it will be found that the Rising Sun is in eclipse.

"Every line in a newspaper costs the proprietor something" says an exchange. If it is for benefit of the individual it should be paid for. If the grocer were asked to contribute groceries to one abundantly able pay for them he would refuse. The proprietor of a newspaper must pay for the free advertising if the beneficiary does not and yet it is one of the hardest thing to be learned by many that a newspaper has space in its columns to rent and must rent them to live. To give away rent for anything less than living rates is as fatal to a newspaper as for a landlord to furnish free rent.

Gospel Workers' Church
Feversham, Ont.
Rev. C. McNichol, Pastor

Feversham Appointment
Sunday School — 10 a.m.
Sunday Morning Service — 11.
Sunday Evening Service — 7.30.
Olivet Appointment
Service at 3 p.m.

Flesherton United Church
REV. G. K. McMILLAN, B.A., B.D.
Minister
11.00 a.m.—Worship, Flesherton
12.00 a.m.—Sunday School, Flesherton
2.00 p.m.—Sunday School, Ceylon
2.30 p.m.—Worship, Ceylon
7.30 p.m.—Vesper Service, Flesherton

Maxwell United Church
REV. GEO. L. MERCER, B.D., D.D.
Minister

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28, 1941
11 a.m. — Eugenia.
2 p.m. — Mt. Zion.
3.30 p.m. — Wareham.
7.30 p.m. — Maxwell.
Note: The minister's subject will be "The New Year as an Adventure."
A cordial welcome to all.

FLESHERTON AND ROCK MILLS
B'PTIST CHURCHES
Frank B. Keys, Pastor

ROCK MILLS SERVICES
Sunday School — 2 p.m.
Church Service — 3 p.m.
FLESHERTON SERVICES
Church Service — 11 a.m.
Sunday School — 12 o'clock

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
FEVERSHAM
Rev. R. Forbes Thomson, B.A.
Minister
Evening Service at 7.30

It isn't practical to provide a telephone system BIG enough for all those who want to chat across the miles on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Hundreds of us will be on duty to put your calls through. If they're delayed — and some are bound to be — please understand and be patient.

Thank you.

On Active Service
Sterling Wings to Words

Merry Christmas

We wish to express our appreciation of your patronage and courtesy during the year now drawing to a close and to wish you

A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR

O. & A. Co-operative

Season's Greetings . . .

We think of our Customers as Friends and welcome the opportunity to tell you so, and to thank you for the friendship you have shown us in the past

We Cordially Extend the Season's Greetings

D. McTavish & Sons

Best Wishes and Thank You

May the spirit of Christmas stay with you throughout the coming year, and guide you to greater health, wealth and happiness than you have ever known. That is our Christmas Greeting to all.

HOWARD MILLIGAN

Best Wishes

IN APPRECIATION OF VERY PLEASANT RELATIONS DURING THE YEAR JUST CLOSING WE EXTEND TO FRIENDS AND CUSTOMERS A WISH FOR A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPINESS AND PROSPERITY DURING THE COMING YEAR — 1942.

Flesherton Planing Mills

Greetings

Merry Christmas! These two words have behind them all our good wishes for your future, and our gratitude to our patrons for their many kindnesses to us through the past year. May health, happiness, wealth and prosperity be yours in ever-increasing abundance.

McDonald Bakery