

Liverpool During the Second World War

Breck Road sidings

Not all children were evacuated from high risk areas of Liverpool, as this story reveals. During the May Blitz a munitions train arrived in Liverpool late in the evening of 3 May – too late to be accepted at the docks. It was then shunted back to the nearest available sidings, which was a compromise between being safely away from the docks, but near enough to get on with the job of unloading in the morning. The Breck Road sidings, about three miles away, were deemed most suitable. What happened next was not a directed or precise attack on the sidings, but was generally accepted as being a stray plane offloading bombs as it flew away from the targeted dock area. It was an unlucky hit in a relatively quiet residential area, around midnight. The bomb landed on the track next to the munitions trucks, but soon set them alight, and then the trucks began to explode one by one.

Meanwhile adjacent houses (Worcester Drive, Pennsylvania Road) were suffering fire damage and they were evacuated, as well as their Anderson shelters. Several emergency teams of signalmen, ARPs and firemen tried to manhandle the trucks away, but had to call for the help of a locomotive. The men who went off for the engine fetched a shunter from Edge Hill, two miles to the south on that line. On the way they met a goods train and took that instead. However, as they approached, they came across a crater in the line and realised they could not get near the sidings. One of the men fell in the crater and had to be rescued. They had to settle for saving other trucks, mostly containing Spam and corned beef. The situation had not improved by dawn and the fires raged throughout the next day (4 May).

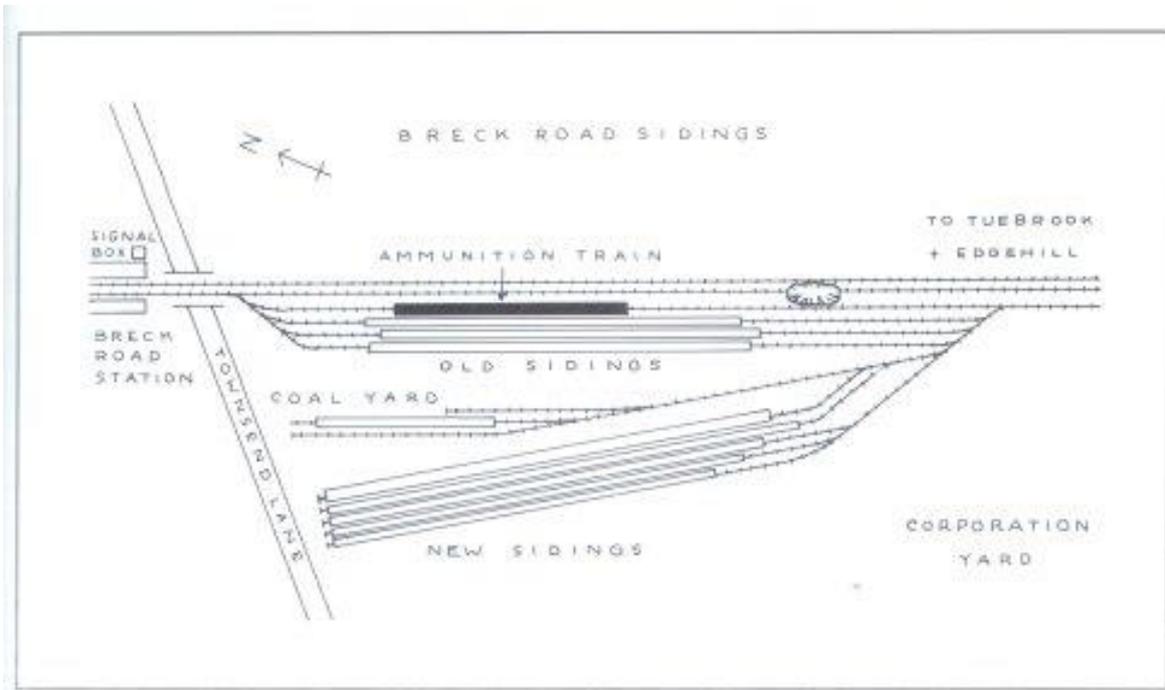
*Hazel Royden being interviewed for the BBC Radio 4 programme **Making History** by producer Nick Patrick.*



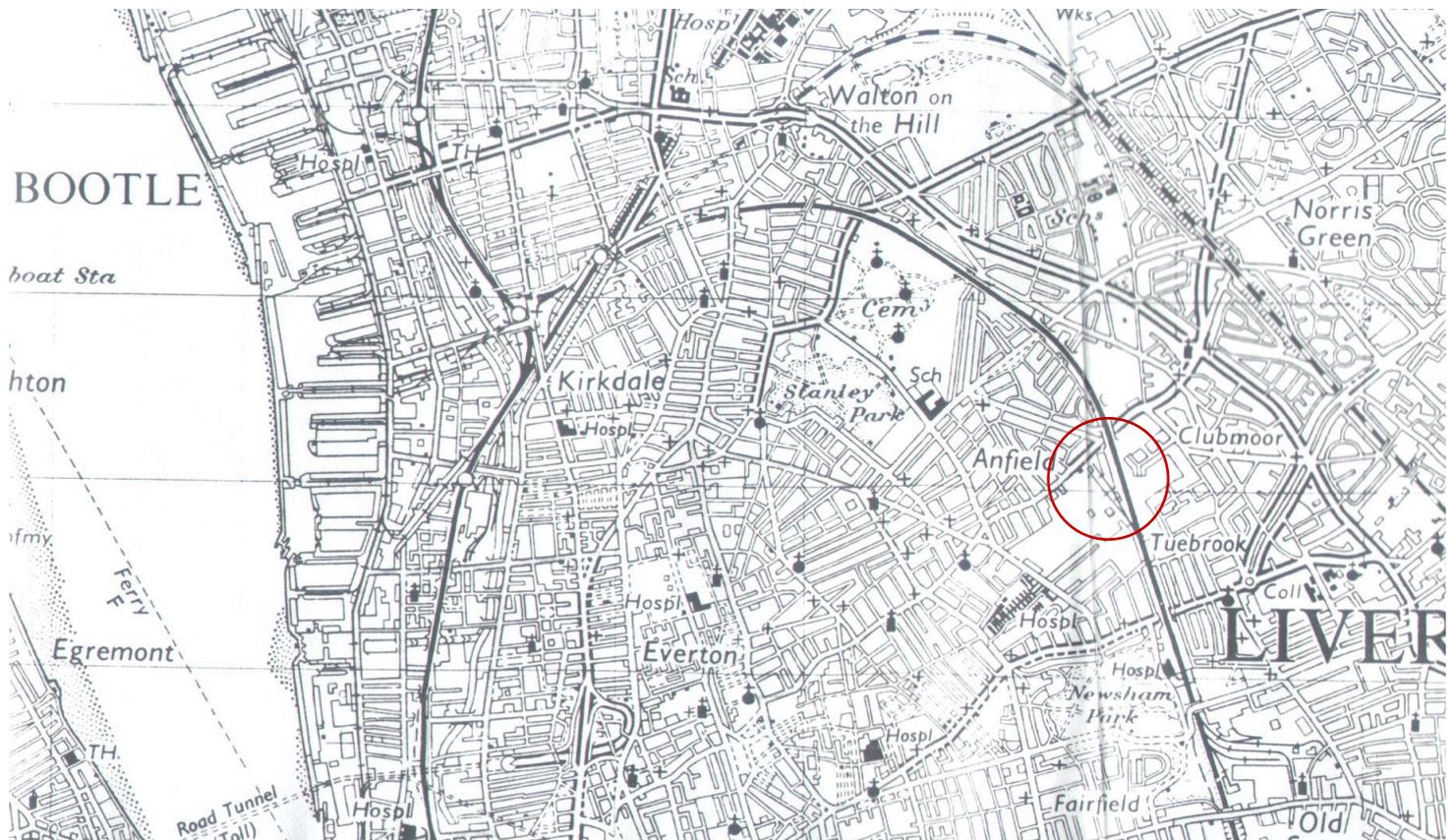
The munitions trucks continued to explode at regular intervals during the day, leaving a 250-yard trench gouged out along the main line. The nearby houses were uninhabitable for some time afterward. Three men received the BEM and one the George Medal – amazingly, no one was killed. My mother, **Hazel Royden** (née Wiggins), lived nearby in Daneville Road:

It was an horrific night, there were blasts going off everywhere – we were in the Anderson shelter throughout the continuous bombing. In the morning, we emerged to find our house damaged – the windows were blown in, but then my father said ‘Look at this – it’s not even part of a bomb, it’s like iron plate off a train’. He had found a big piece of iron or steel – it had sliced straight through our front door and taken it clean off the hinges – it was the only real damage our house sustained in the war. It had been blown over from the sidings. We were always up between 5–6am to collect shrapnel out of gutters to take in to school for recycling. I remember there were loads more that morning. That same day my father and I walked to the siding – we didn’t know what had happened – there were rumours abounding, so we went to see. It felt a long way for my little legs, but in reality, it was a short distance. Many land mines had dropped – there were huge holes cordoned off in the roads. I can remember hoping the Clubmoor Picture House where we went to hadn’t been bombed, but luckily it was unscathed. As we approached the siding, we were not allowed near, there were big white tapes and we were stopped by the ARPs from going any further. Later there was a great fuss over why the train was there in the first place – I remember heated discussions between the adults. But then, the bombs could have hit the Royal Ordnance Factory at Stopgate Lane near Aintree – only a mile away. They did hit a munitions ship (*Malakand*) in the docks that night, which was the greatest explosion ever heard in the area.

(This incident and interview was first aired as a featured story on the BBC Radio 4 programme *Making History* in 2001.)



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Map of Liverpool showing rail access to the north docks and the Breck Road sidings (circled), where the munitions train was backed up.



Making History - Radio 4

Liverpool May Blitz 1941

Making History received a query about an incident in the May Blitz of Liverpool in 1941. In the first week of May Liverpool suffered the heaviest bombing of the war in Britain outside London. The docks were the main target, but 3,000 people were killed and 11,000 homes completely destroyed. The incident which interested Professor Tony Redmond was the hit on a munitions train in the Forfar Road area of Clubmoor. He wanted to know why the train had been moved to a siding in a residential area. His mother and elder brother were buried in an Anderson shelter by the debris but survived, and the back of their house was blown down.

Mike Royden, a Liverpool historian, says that the munitions train arrived in Liverpool late in the evening – too late to be accepted at the docks. It was then shunted back to the nearest available sidings, which was a compromise between being safely away from the docks but near enough to get on with the job in the morning. The Breck Road sidings were deemed most suitable. Mike says the bombing was not a directed or precise attack on the sidings but was generally accepted as being a stray plane offloading as it flew away from the targeted dock area. It was an unlucky hit in a relatively quiet area around midnight.

The bomb landed on the track next to the trucks but soon set them alight, and then the trucks began to explode one by one. Several emergency teams of signalmen, ARPs and firemen tried to manhandle the trucks away but had to call for the help of a locomotive. The men who went off for the engine fetched a shunter from Edge Hill, two miles to the south on that line. On the way they met a goods train and took that instead. However, as they approached, they came across a crater in the line and realised they could not get near the sidings. One of the men fell in the crater and had to be rescued. They could not get near the munitions train and had to settle for saving other trucks, mostly containing Spam and corned beef. The situation had not improved by dawn and the fires raged throughout the next day (4 May). The munitions trucks continued to explode, leaving a 250-yard trench gouged out along the main line. The nearby houses were uninhabitable for some time afterward.

Three men received the BEM and one the George Medal. There were always strong feelings in Liverpool about why the train was there in the first place. However, the bombs could have hit the Royal Ordnance Factory in Stoppage Lane near Aintree only a mile away. They did hit a munitions ship in the docks that night, causing the greatest explosion ever heard in the area.

Extract from Merseyside at War 1939-45

The docks were again a target that night, which also made the local population vulnerable with the labour housing in close proximity, the cramped court housing and endless rows of terraces spreading in regular rows away from the dock road both north and south of the city centre. Consequently, it became Dock Board policy that if munitions trains arrived too late in the day to be accepted by the docks then they would be shunted back to the nearest available sidings, which was a compromise between being safely away from the docks, but near enough to get on with the job of unloading in the morning. The Breck Road sidings, about 3 miles away near Anfield, were deemed most suitable.

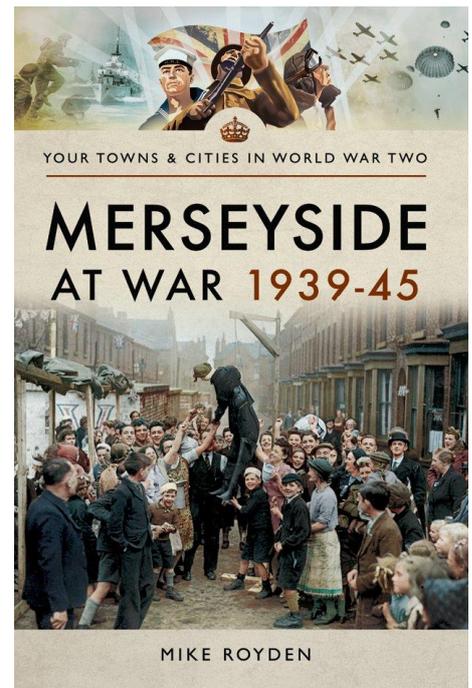
As enemy aircraft flew away from the targeted area, still offloading their payload to lighten their journey home, the Breck Road sidings, in a quiet residential area, took a hit around midnight. The bomb landed on the track next to the munitions trucks, setting them alight, and one by one the trucks began to explode. Below the embankment, the adjacent streets of Worcester Drive and Pennsylvania Road had to be evacuated as fires started to spread through the houses. Meanwhile, 34-year-old goods guard George Roberts was among a group of ten railwaymen of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway who acted with great heroism that night, trying, with several emergency teams of signalmen, ARPs and firemen, to manhandle the trucks away. However, they soon realised they would need an engine. Men were despatched to Edge Hill to fetch a shunter, but on the way back they came across a goods engine and decided to bring that instead. However, as they approached, they came across a bomb crater impeding their way, and realised they couldn't get near the sidings. In the pitch dark of the blackout, one of the men even fell in the crater and had to be rescued. Unable to get near the munitions train, they concentrated on saving other trucks, mostly containing Spam and corned beef, which they uncoupled and shunted away. The situation had not improved by dawn and the fires raged throughout the next day into 4 May. The munitions trucks continued to explode at regular intervals, leaving a 250-yard trench gouged out along the main line, and blast damage left the nearby houses uninhabitable for some time afterward. Due to the brave efforts of all those men that night there were no fatalities.

Three men received awards for this courageous action: George Roberts was awarded the George Medal, and goods guards Peter Kilshaw and James Edward Rowland received the British Empire Medal, the citation reading:

During an enemy air raid a bomb fell on a train of munitions stabled in an old siding. Roberts, accompanied by Kilshaw and Rowland, volunteered to go to the scene and, at considerable risk to themselves, the men made an inspection of the sidings and uncoupled wagons which were in danger of burning. During the whole of the time the men were engaged upon this work, explosions were occurring in the munitions train and there was added danger from high-explosive bombs which continued to fall nearby. Roberts, as the leader of the party, set a high example and showed considerable initiative and courage.

London Gazette, 11 November 1941

After the events of 3/4 May, there was a great deal of discussion over how best to handle the import and export of high explosives through the city and the port. The LMS promised never again to hold ammunition trains overnight at Breck Road sidings – only to be caught doing it again within three months.



I first heard the story as a youngster, as my mother Hazel Royden (then Hazel Wiggins), lived nearby. She later recounted her memories from that time on national radio on BBC Radio 4's *Making History* programme:

It was an horrific night, there were blasts going off everywhere – we were in the Anderson shelter throughout the continuous bombing. It was so terrifying to a little girl. I hated the shelter, it was cold and wet and quite cramped with my brothers and sisters, and I can smell it now just talking about it, the mustiness, the damp earth, it brings back frightening memories. It was difficult to get any sleep as it was so uncomfortable and terrifying once the Blitz started. And then tired out, we'd have to go to school the next day. My father took some of the doors off from inside the house to make extra bunks for us to sleep on in the shelter, but it was still hard to sleep. The most comfortable night I had was when once I refused to go out and hid under the stairs, I got in a lot of trouble for that.

But this night it was my parents who were in the house with my youngest sister. I, as the eldest aged 10, was looking after my two younger sisters and brother. I was so terrified that I screamed outside the back door to make them come out and come into the shelter with us, even though I risked a telling off.

In the morning, we emerged to find our house damaged – the windows were blown in, but then my father said 'Look at this – it's not even part of a bomb, it's like an iron plate off a train.' He had found a big piece of iron or steel – it had sliced straight through our front door and taken it clean off the hinges. But we were lucky, as apart from the windows, it was the only real damage our house sustained in the war. It had been blown over from the Breck Road sidings. We were always up between 5 and 6 am to collect shrapnel out of gutters to take in to school for recycling. I remember there were loads more that morning. Later that same day my father and I walked to the siding – we didn't know what had happened – there were rumours abound, so we went to see. It felt a long way for my little legs, but in reality, it was a short distance. All the trees were covered in what looked like cotton wool, and it made everywhere look like there had been a snowfall. Maybe it was some kind of packing off the munitions [gun cotton]. Many high explosives had dropped – there were huge holes cordoned off in the roads. I can remember hoping the Clubmoor picture house, where we children went to regularly, hadn't been bombed, and luckily it was unscathed. As we approached the siding, we were not allowed near, there were big white tapes and we were stopped by the ARPs from going any further. Later there was a great fuss over why the train was there in the first place – I remember heated discussions between the adults. But then, the bombs could have hit the Royal Ordnance Factory at Stopgate Lane near Aintree – only a mile away. They did hit a munitions ship in the docks that night which was the greatest explosion ever heard in the area.