

HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING AT WAR: HOUGHTON'S LAST AIR RAID SHELTER



CIRCA 1950S



2012

FOLLOWING THE OUTBREAK of World War II, Houghton Urban District Council rolled out a programme of air raid shelter building across the district. This was aimed in particular at those who were unable to erect an Anderson Shelter which needed to be partly below ground level.

The lonely lodge for Hillside Cemetery, the last house at the top of Sunderland Street, was occupied by the Cemetery Keeper, Mr Flem Ely, and his wife. The UDC constructed a brick air raid shelter with a concrete roof for the use of any visitors to Hillside Cemetery who were caught out during an air raid and Mr Ely took up the post as one of Houghton's forty-six Air Raid wardens (see other article).

Measuring almost three metres wide, and almost two metres tall, there were wooden benches inside the air raid shelter and it was enclosed by a reinforced metal door and a metal escape hatch. The escape hatch was bricked up after the War, and the air raid shelter was used as tool



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storage by successive cemetery groundsmen, though vandalism in the 1970s saw the removal of this brickwork, revealing the window-like escape hatch. The door and benches have long since disappeared and the air raid shelter is now sadly neglected and open for abuse. Recent acts of vandalism have revealed that the structure is constructed of a comforting three layers of brick.

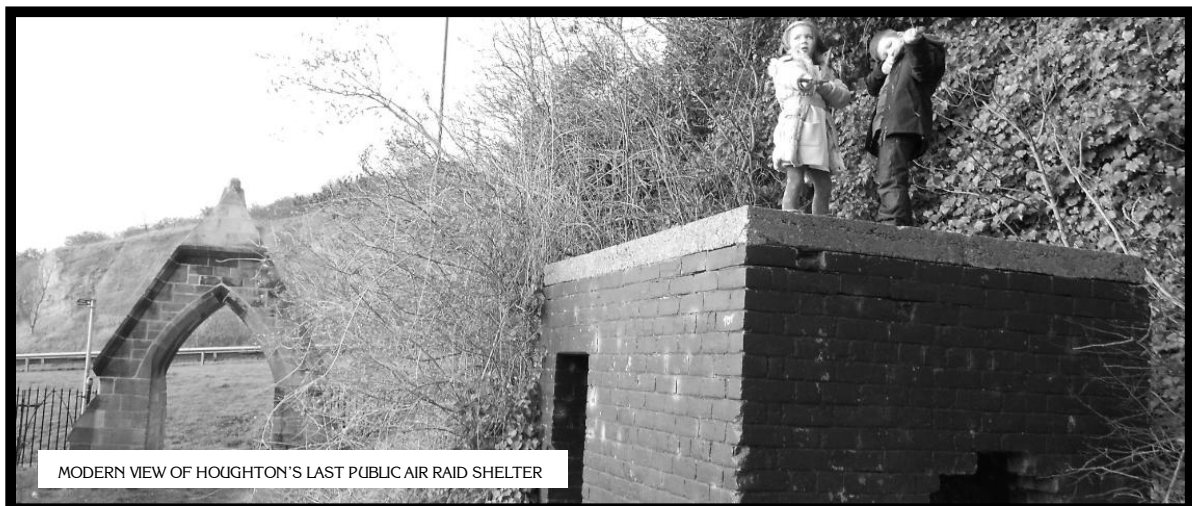
Local resident Ron Atwill recollects the brick air raid shelter:

"My Grandad was friendly with old Mr Ely, the cemetery keeper. They both kept carnations and were both leek growers, keen on their allotments. Mrs Ely was friends with my Nana and they knew each other from the British Legion. In 1943 or 1944 I was at the cemetery when the siren went off and we had to go for cover in the air raid shelter. I can remember the wooden benches inside. Old Ely used to collect the battered glass globes from graves and put them on the tip. He gave me one to use as an aquarium and my Dad sanded it into the yard!"

During the Second World War a siren was located on High Hillside, where all of the town below would be able to hear it. The town of Houghton was lucky to escape relatively intact during the German's bombing raids, but bombs were dropped in the vicinity: four high explosive bombs were dropped on Houghton Cut in July 1940, and we can only imagine what this must have been like for Mr and Mrs Ely who would have sheltered in the nearby Hillside Cemetery air raid shelter.

Paul Lanagan

PAUL LANAGAN BA HONS
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MODERN VIEW OF HOUGHTON'S LAST PUBLIC AIR RAID SHELTER



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

:: With grateful thanks to Mr Ron Atwill for sharing memories.

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