

RAIDERS OVER SHEFFIELD

THE STORY OF
THE AIR RAIDS OF
DECEMBER 12th and 15th, 1940

COMPILED FROM OFFICIAL
RECORDS BY AUTHORITY
OF THE EMERGENCY
COMMITTEE OF THE
SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

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FOREWORD

This is the story of the first severe air raids on Sheffield and of the work of all those people, whether carrying out official duties or shouldering private responsibilities, who played their part in the defence of the city and the restoration of conditions which by war time standards may be called normal. From the moment when (as people were tempted to say during the following weeks) "the war broke out", a long succession of services went into action. After fifteen months of waiting, and of making plans which in many cases had to be altered as the peculiar course of the war changed needs and circumstances, the emergency arose with appalling suddenness; each service had to fight with the equipment it had thought necessary, and the Government had allowed it, to provide, and there was no time to do anything but take up that equipment and make the best of it. Therefore, although there may be other "blitzes", perhaps heavier or repeated at short intervals, there will never again be a raid which will have the same interest as the one which first put the organisation, the strength and the courage of the city to the test.

In the following pages an honest attempt has been made to show the result of that test: what preparations proved adequate, what weaknesses were revealed, and what unexpected situations arose. It is not intended to portray a regiment of clerks issuing instructions and completing forms, but to tell a story of men and women fighting, working, tackling what were in every sense domestic problems.

Even during the time of writing, the experience of Sheffield has assumed an unusual place in the history of the home front. Few cities of importance have suffered a visitation of such terrible proportions and then been left in peace for months. Those months of peace have made it possible to judge, from this experience, the immediate effect of a big raid on the life of a city, and to trace the course of mental and physical recovery.

To make a plain tale of such an event has not been an easy task. On those two nights, five hundred thousand people shared an ordeal lasting many hours. If Tennyson's editorial poet in "The Princess" asks plaintively, "Yet how to bind the scattered scheme of seven Together in one sheaf?", he would certainly quail at the prospect of weaving so many plots into one story. A wide net has been cast for typical incidents and experiences, in the hope of finding the most striking features that were common to all. Ninety people, private citizens and officials engaged in public work, have been personally interviewed, and fifty-five others have supplied written material. The compilers acknowledge their immense debt to them, not only for their willing co-operation, but for the frank and illuminating way in which they told of their experiences and reactions. In many cases, their actual words are used, but they have often been too closely woven into the narrative for acknowledgement or quotation marks to be possible. In losing their separate voices, they speak for Sheffield. They also remain anonymous, as it would be invidious to mention individual names when the details here recorded represent so small a part of the fine total of gallant and useful work.

It is hoped that in binding together this scattered scheme the compilers have presented at least an accurate outline of that strange, grim, exciting fortnight before Christmas 1940, and of the dull, cold weeks of plodding work which followed.

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