

Brislington Meadows and the Bristol Blitz

Ken Taylor (2023)

Bristol was one of the most heavily bombed cities in Britain in World War Two - in the ten months to June 1941 only Birmingham, Liverpool and London received more attention from the Nazi German Luftwaffe (Century of Flight undated). Brislington played an active role in the war effort but the bombing missions were actually aiming elsewhere, so the suffering of this neighbourhood on the outskirts of Bristol was - to use a popular military euphemism - collateral damage.

It's no wonder that the Land Quality Statement produced to support the proposed development of Brislington Meadows admits that the site has a high risk of containing unexploded ordnance including high explosive bombs, incendiary bombs, and sub-munitions, as well as the possibility of unexploded shells from the defender's anti-aircraft batteries. Surveys undertaken so far have not unearthed any of these potentially lethal weapons (Homes England 2022). It should be noted however that the surveys would not have been able to cover the whole area, not least because of the extensive encroachment of scrub into the fields (mostly originating in the hedgerows).

An aerial photograph taken on 29 Sept 1941 (RAF 1941) shows two large bomb craters in Brislington Meadows (approximate Ordnance Survey grid references ST62617113 and ST62657106), with another large crater in the allotments nearby (approx. ST62387113). The sketch map illustration shows two of them coincidentally lying on the 200 feet contour line.



Sites of three large bomb craters in and near Brislington Meadows that were recorded by the RAF on 29 Sept 1941 (sketched on a 1938 Ordnance Survey map).

An aerial photograph taken in 1946 (English Heritage 1946) shows the hedgerow that took a direct hit - the largest and most northerly of the three craters sketched in the illustration - had been reinstated in a semi-circular arc along the southern perimeter of the crater. It would appear

that the need to prevent stock moving freely between the affected fields took priority over filling the hole and reinstating the hedge in a straight line. The hole was eventually filled in, and small items of mid-20th century domestic refuse have been found on the surface there, suggesting it was used as a mini landfill site. The excavation of such a site would make a fascinating, if challenging, focus of a community archaeology project.

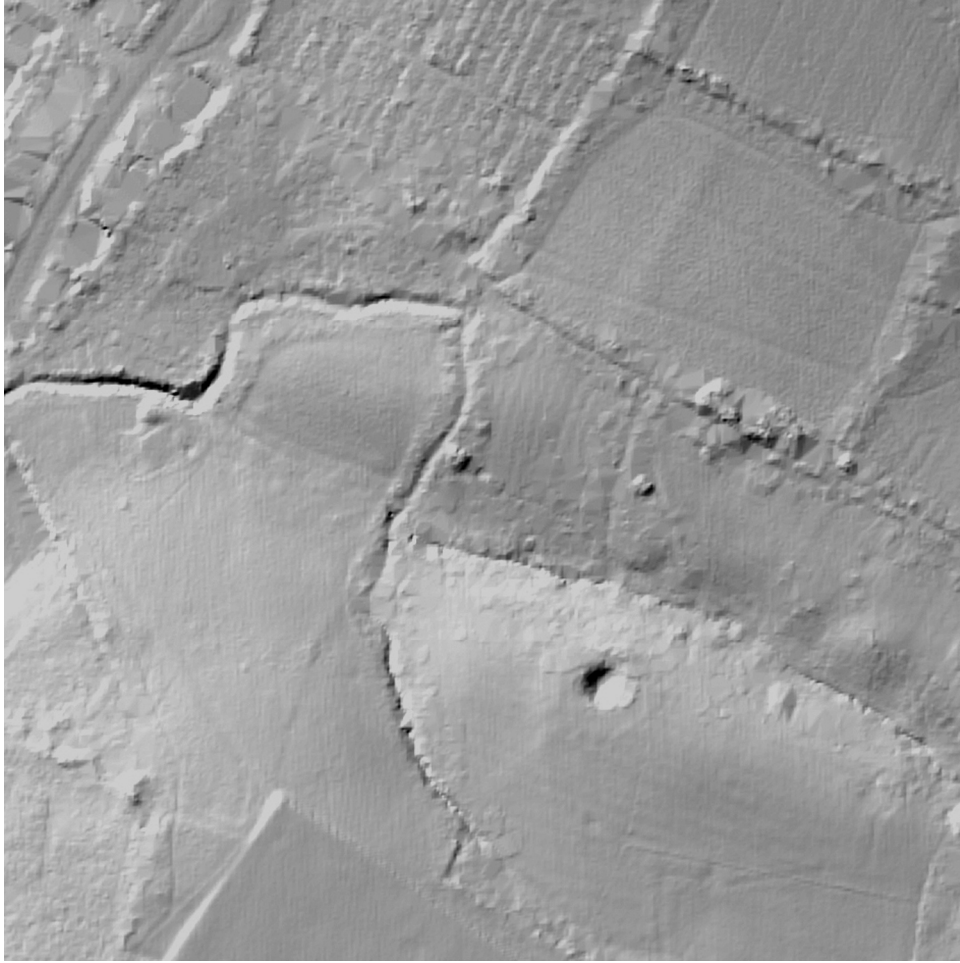
The 1941 photo also shows what appear to be bomb craters elsewhere in Brislington, including at or near the following places (using modern street names etc): Robertson Drive (approx. ST62877227), the circular pool at Eastwood Farm Open Space (approx. ST63417175), Woodcroft Close (approx. ST62257180), Whitmore Avenue (approx. ST63037115 and ST63047115). This list is indicative rather than comprehensive: other evidence may have been overlooked.

One of the bomb census maps for Brislington shows a bomb exploded in the small paddock immediately southeast of the kissing gate that leads directly into the fields of Brislington Meadows from the west (Culture24 undated). A small crater around 3m in diameter and 0.5m deep was seen in this field during a visit in 2010 at OS grid reference ST62447102.



The bomb crater, looking south down the hill (Taylor 2010, 15).

The depression still shows on LiDAR imaging - it's the small circle in the exact centre of the image below. LiDAR also shows a much larger crater in the next field southeast of the paddock, and this field took a smaller hit at approx. ST62537084 (RAF 1941). Please note there's no public access to these fields, which are in use with livestock. Bombs are also reported to have landed in nearby Victory Park.



Screenshot from LiDARFinder <https://lidarfinder.com>.

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A detailed account of how aerial warfare affected Brislington in World War Two has yet to be published, and the contemporary records that have survived aren't yet freely available online to researchers. The following notes provide some context for these battle scars, but are really just the tip of a tail fin showing above ground, indicative of a very large subject awaiting careful exploration.

As part of the offensive against Britain, in June 1940 Bristol's harbour and aircraft industry began to be targeted. In a nocturnal bombing raid in the early hours of 25 June, Brislington's Glenarm Walk sustained a direct hit with the loss of three lives. Pendennis Park and Grove Park Road were also struck in the same air raid - a photograph of the latter shows the widespread damage and the collapse of two terraced houses (Chard et al, 1995, 109).

The following notes contain only figures of fatalities (Penny, John undated), but for every death there would have been multiple casualties, damage to buildings, and explosions and carnage among the livestock and wildlife populations in the open countryside - Brislington was far less densely built-up than it is now. Many bombing raids produced no loss of human life.

On the evening of 3 September 1940 a seven-hour raid on Bristol with waves of high explosives and oil bombs caused three fatalities in Buckingham Road.

On the night of 24-25 November 1940 there were a total of twenty-four fatalities at Bath Road, Hampstead Road, Whitby Road, Wick Road, Wootton Crescent, and Wootton Road.

On the night of 6-7 December 1940 there were a total of thirty fatalities at Bangor Grove, Leicester Walk, St David's Crescent, The Rock, Wick Road, and Wootton Road.

On the night of 16-17 March 1941 there was one fatality at Church Row.

On the night of 30-31 May 1941, there were six fatalities at Wootton Road.

In April 1942 Nazi policy overtly changed to include the bombing of places without significant military targets - these became known as the Baedeker Raids. Bath was the second city (after Exeter) to suffer these attacks, and on 25 April 1942, shortly after 11pm, a small group of bombers failed to find their intended target of Bath and instead loosed their payloads over part southeast Bristol. Two hundred incendiary bombs and fifty tonnes of high explosives were dropped in this mistaken raid (Bath Blitz Memorial Project 2005) which killed fifteen people in Allison Road, Bath Road, Jersey Avenue, Langton Road, School Place, and Wick Road.

Finally, although people didn't know it at the time, the last fatalities occurred on the night of 4-5 August 1942, when two people died in Allison Road.

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