

## **The Polytechnic and World War Two**

Throughout 1939 there was an increasing tension and worry that war was on the cards. In preparation for an imminent threat, the Regent Street Polytechnic encouraged its male members to join the Rangers, its territorial force unit<sup>1</sup>. The female members were encouraged to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service.

In contrast to 1914, when everyone was instructed to continue as normal, London had to brace itself for aerial bombardment. Businesses closed or moved. The *Polytechnic Magazine* reports that 'many of the principal banks and big commercial houses have transferred their headquarters and valuables to the country'<sup>2</sup>. It also reported that the City had a black-out from sunset to sunrise in case of attack.

Many of the Poly's activities could no longer function in the same way. Its headquarters was moved out to Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire, the Craft Schools to Winscombe and the Secondary School to Minehead in Somerset in September 1939. The Secondary School shared the local county school's facilities and the boys were housed both with families and in hostel accommodation. The schools did not return to London until 1945.

Some of the clubs and societies continued as best they could, for example the Table Tennis Club and the Cricketing Club remained active but all sports at the Quintin Hogg Memorial Sports Ground at Chiswick ceased. The German Society also tried to continue its activities with the added wartime stipulation that it was only for British members and solely for the study of the language, not German politics or culture. However, due to opposition it ceased to function from March 1940.

The Polytechnic Touring Association (PTA) had to cease its Continental activities immediately, which was no easy undertaking. Despite the threat of war, the 1939 summer tours to mainland Europe had gone ahead and many tourists were staying at the Polytechnic Chalets in Lucerne, Switzerland. Between 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> August 1939 some 1500 PTA tourists were safely repatriated to Great Britain. On departure each of the 230 guests at the chalets was provided with a lunch basket in case nothing could be got on route. The chalets were then requisitioned as a military camp for the duration of the war.

By February 1940, 338 members of the Polytechnic were serving in the armed forces. Air raids, enlistment and evacuation left 309 Regent Street largely empty so, as they had during World War One, the Poly offered its facilities

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on The Rangers please read *The Polytechnic and the World War One* research guide

<sup>2</sup> *Polytechnic Magazine*, September 1939, page 202

and services as a training centre. As early as September 1939 a course in Electricity began for members of the Signal Corps. Around 9,000 sailors, soldiers and airmen were trained to be draughtsmen, radio mechanics, coach trimmers, cinematograph projectionists, and turners and fitters. Members of HM Forces were also taught Modern Languages.

The Sports Ground at Chiswick also had a role to play. It was initially requisitioned by the Middlesex County Council for use as an emergency mortuary before later being occupied by the Army and then the RAF.

With the initial threat of air raids coming to nothing, the technical schools did reopen some of their evening classes. However, the Blitz began in September 1940. The Polytechnic buildings at 309 Regent Street and 4-12 Little Titchfield Street were very fortunate to escape with no damage but the bombs did come very close. The Queen's Hall on Langham Place, diagonally opposite the Polytechnic was bombed beyond repair, and an 11 year old Polytechnic School boy and his mother were killed when a bomb landed in Great Titchfield Street. Chiswick did not survive the war unscathed. In April 1944 the Ladies Pavilion and the Boathouse were destroyed and in July 1944 the groundsman's flat was destroyed.

The members of the Poly at home rallied as they had during World War One. A War Comforts Section was once again established raising money through dances, concerts, and White Elephant sales. By October 1945 they had raised £1515 (over £40,000 today) which was used to provide care parcels and help to servicemen.

The Motor Body Craft School converted vehicles for use by the Local Auxiliary Fire Service and the Secondary School boys spent time collecting scrap iron, paper and other materials. The School masters joined the local Home Guard regiment in Somerset.

The Polytechnic had its own detachment of the British Red Cross Society and members of the Poly were encouraged to join. Training was provided in Home Nursing, First Aid and Anti-Gas. In 1940 the St Marylebone Division, of which the Poly had its own three detachments, had 814 members and 114 probationers and 1,618 candidates sat for examinations.

208 members of the Regent Street Polytechnic are known to have died during World War Two. A memorial was unveiled in the foyer of 309 Regent Street in November 1951. Unlike its World War One counterpart, this memorial does not group the names by rank but simply lists them alphabetically, suggesting a change in attitudes and a less hierarchical society by this time.

## **Relevant Sources in the University of Westminster Archives**

### The Polytechnic Magazine

Available online <http://westuni.websds.net/>

The *Magazine* features letters, news items, recruitment and enlistment details, wartime courses, and the War Comfort Fund.

### Administrative Papers

The records of the Court of Governors ([RSP/1/BG](#)) and Finance Committee ([RSP/1/FP](#)) include details of decisions taken during wartime, training, war time activities and the War Comforts Fund.

### Course Prospectuses

The Archives hold prospectuses ([RSP/5/4](#)) for most courses that were taking place during the War.

### Oral History Project Interviews

Two Polytechnic Secondary School pupils, Lionel Price ([OHP/37](#)) and Harold Beck ([OHP/38](#)), have been interviewed about their time at the school during the Second World War. They discuss evacuation, the running of the school, their accommodation, and the war. Excerpts of these interviews are available online <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/about-us/our-heritage/oral-history/the-polytechnic-secondary-school> . The full interviews can be listened to by appointment in our reading room.

### The Secondary School

The Secondary School collection ([PSS](#)) includes administrative records, issues of *The Quintinian* magazine and photographs and memorabilia of the evacuation period in Minehead.

### Olympia Zeitung newspapers, 1936

The official newspapers of the Olympic Games held in 1936 in Berlin. The newspapers are in German and feature articles and photographs of athletes and political figures ([RSP/6/4/3](#))

### Worswick Collection

The records of James Ronald 'Dick' Worswick, son of Thomas Worswick, Polytechnic Director of Education 1922-1932, include a photograph album of Nazi Germany in Spring 1939 ([WOR/2/3](#)) and his Flying Log Book from his time in the RAF, 1941-1943 ([WOR/2/4](#))