

The Leicester and Leicestershire Civil Defence Corps, 1948 – 1968

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The greatest contribution to the end of the war in the Far East in World War Two was the dropping of two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This was the culmination of the Manhattan project, a research and development project which had been initiated during the War, bringing together scientists from the allied nations to work on the creation of a new type of weapon which was to have unimaginable destructive power.

The post-war period saw the development of nuclear weapons with even greater destructive capabilities. At the same time, relations between the Western Allies and the USSR began to deteriorate rapidly. Meanwhile, the USSR had also begun to develop its own nuclear weapons and by 1949 was the second 'super power' to have a growing arsenal of them.

The development of atomic and nuclear weapons signalled a new era and the start of the period now termed the 'Cold War' as the world looked to be moving towards what many saw as the brink of a catastrophic Armageddon. With growing concern, governments across the world sought to plan for what would happen to a country and its survivors after a nuclear attack, and to re-evaluate their strategies for a military and civilian response, including plans for evacuation and the provision of medical aid and food supplies.

Britain was to develop its own nuclear capability by the early 1950s but as soon as the USSR had started to acquire its own nuclear weapons, the need for an updated civil defence organisation in the country was recognised and quickly acted on. This saw the passing of the Civil Defence Act of 1948 which required all local authorities to provide a primarily volunteer-based body of men and women to augment civilian services and authorities in times of war or emergency. Known as the Civil Defence Corps, each local division included a Headquarters Section which was divided into Intelligence and Operations, Scientific and Reconnaissance, and a Signals section. Other branches within the local division were the Warden, Rescue, Welfare, Ambulance and First Aid sections.

This article aims to provide an overview of the setting up and operation of the Civil Defence Corps in Leicester and Leicestershire.

Leicestershire and Rutland were potentially dangerous places to live in the early stages of the Cold War. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, contemporary

government assessments identified a number of key local targets. These included targets from neighbouring counties where the subsequent blast and fall-out from these would also have caused serious problems in Leicestershire. The basing of USAF bombers in eastern England in the 1950s and 60s further added to the risk of nuclear attack.

There was no fixed requirement for numbers of personnel in each local section nor for each county as a whole, and, as such, some areas would be able to respond better than others. Initial planning in the Leicester city and the county was based upon the first training exercise in late 1949, when the nucleus of the local Corps played out various scenarios to establish the current effectiveness of the county's readiness to combat a major crisis, and to assess what resources were needed to improve the safety of its population. As expected, the exercise revealed major weaknesses in the defence of the city and county, and a recruitment drive was instigated.

Recruitment proved to be a challenge throughout Britain, with people seeing the war as won and the Corps as a waste of time. Several films were produced showing fictional Civil Defence scenarios, and were shown at cinemas to encourage



The Civil Defence Corps badges worn on the beret and left breast pocket, showing the King's Crown and the Queen's Crown. (Author's collection.)

Main local targets	
Type of Target	Location
Regional Seats of Government	Nottingham
Major Cities	Nottingham Leicester
V-Bomber bases (carrying the nuclear deterrent)	RAF Cottesmore (Rutland) RAF Wittering (Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire)
Thor Missile Bases	RAF Melton Mowbray (Leicestershire) RAF North Luffenham (Rutland)
Surface to Air Missile Air Defence Sites	RAF North Luffenham (Rutland) RAF Woolfox Lodge (Rutland)
Army depots	Grantham (Logistics Corps) (Lincolnshire)

recruitment. Also available for showing at cinemas were public information films which provided help and advice on what to do in a nuclear attack. However these would only be shown if war was threatened.

The *Waking Point*, produced by the Crown Film Unit in 1951, was a notable recruitment film which followed the fictional Joe Mercer, the 'ordinary man in the street', who comes to believe the best way to help people in all scenarios is to join the Civil Defence Corps after his son is involved in an accident. British Pathé also filmed several training sessions involving the Corps in order to both document the Corps and stimulate recruitment.

As happened elsewhere, the Leicester and Leicestershire Corps also had promotional stands with posters, usually accompanied by leaflets, and a few members who toured around the county to cinemas, markets and fetes to enable people to seek advice and gather information about the role of the Corps. Recruitment in the county rose gradually in the 1950s, when the threat to the country was perceived as high. In November 1949, the city and county divisions numbered 257 but by February 1950 this had risen to 325, and 3000 by November 1953. By October 1956 this had increased again to 4809.

Upon joining, the new member would receive a membership card, and after training, would be issued with a uniform similar to army battledress in midnight blue. The uniform bore the corps badge on the left breast pocket with the area title underneath. Shoulder titles displayed the branch of service the member belonged to. Badges of rank, proficiency and role would be added upon the passing of the relevant course. Qualifications gained in other civilian organisations, such as St John's Ambulance and the British Red Cross, could also be displayed. Issue of uniform was slow, however, and armbands were issued as a stop-gap at first, although these were later retained. Some members who had served in World War Two wore their old uniforms. In January 1953, the *Leicester Mercury* reported that the Head Warden of the Coalville Division, Mr L. E. Thompson was the first to get the new uniform in the city or county.

Training took place across the county at a local level, usually in village halls, but more specialist training took place at specific centres. Billesdon took county recruits with the main training centre at Rufford in Nottinghamshire. The site at Billesdon was a former prisoner of war camp known as "Extown", now a council recycling depot and a nature reserve.

These centres had mock buildings, apparently bombed, that members would learn to make safe and remove casualties from. Training sessions were occasionally carried out on waste ground or old bomb sites. The Market Harborough Division was allowed to use some old houses marked for

demolition by the council, providing they demolished them during their training for free.

What is now St Mary's car park in Melton Mowbray was used by first aid parties for practice. A Melton resident, Norman Agar, remembers having theatrical make-up applied as a boy and being left in the waste ground to be 'rescued'. Unfortunately he was forgotten about and as he emerged onto Norman Street, he shocked a lorry driver with what appeared to be an horrific injury.

The headquarters for much of the Corps existence in Leicestershire was a joint county and city command at 50-52 Belvoir Street in Leicester. In 1967, a new reinforced building was provided on Abbey Lane in Leicester, where ASDA now stands.

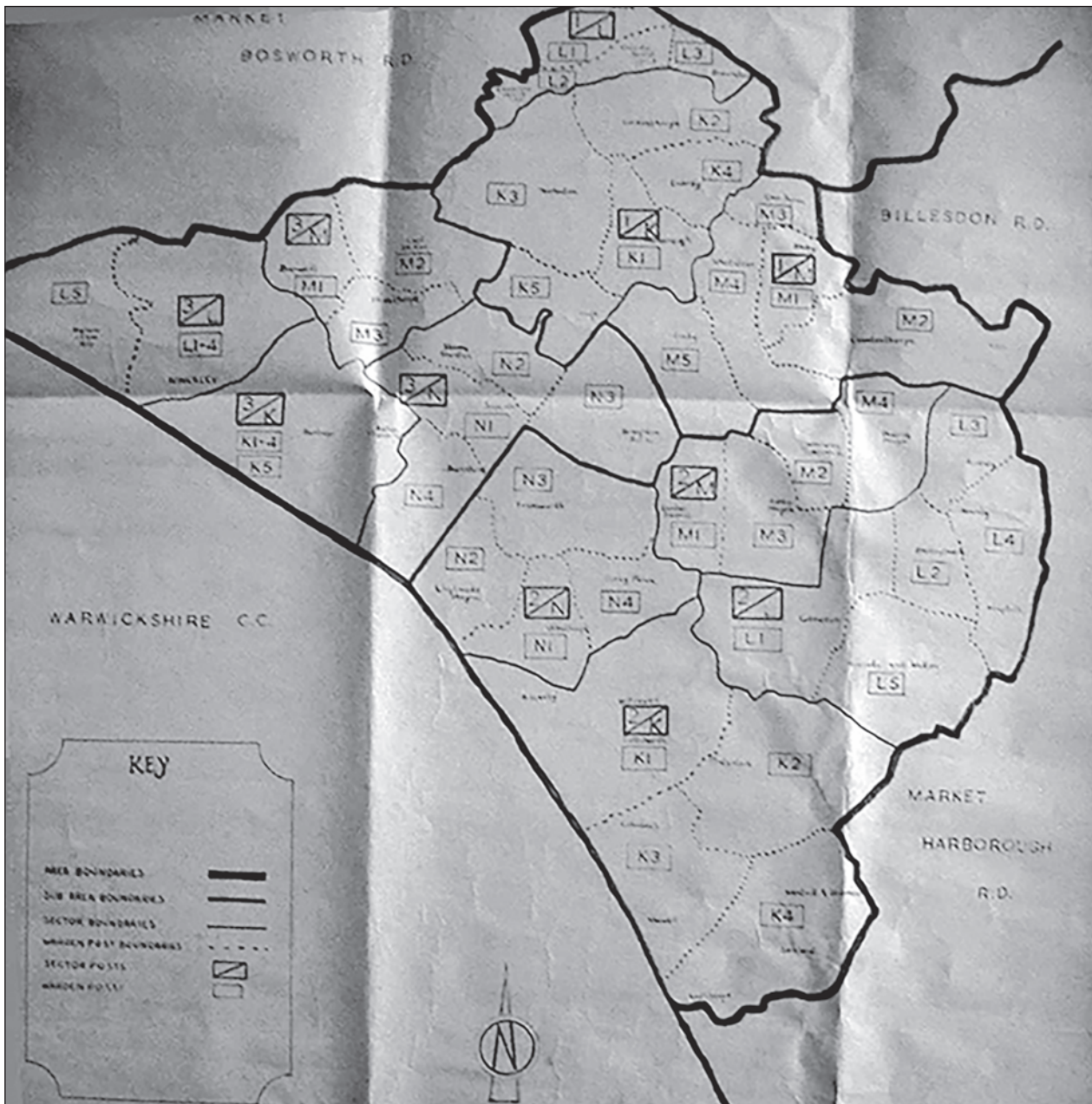


A rather forlorn looking picture of the 'new' reinforced building on Abbey Lane from 2010. (Photograph online on 28 Days Later Forum, unable to trace original source.)

Women were recruited to the Civil Defence Corps in post war Britain. By the late 1950s they made up well over 90% of the Welfare sections, and a third to a half of the Headquarters sections. They were however, barred from the Rescue sections, ostensibly on account of the nature of the work, the official line being that this was not work for a 'normal woman'. Some women did though learn basic rescue skills as part of Warden training.

The Corps member most people would see on a regular basis, was the Warden. Filling much the same role as an Air Raid Precautions Warden in World War Two, a civil defence Warden was responsible for a small area, usually a few streets. Warden posts could be found in houses, meeting halls, churches, and occasionally in pubs. There were 13 of the latter in the Market Harborough Division alone, including the Rose and Crown at Thurnby, the Royal Oak at Great Glen and the Shoulder of Mutton at Foxton.

A Corps Warden was a 'jack of all trades', who undertook planning within his/her local area ready for responding to an attack or emergency. Pre-attack evacuation, was envisaged by the government and wardens would assist the Welfare section with the moving of the population to safer areas. Those Wardens in safe areas would also help the Welfare section with billeting (which was a legal requirement in times of war).



Map of the Civil Defence Leicestershire Group Area 35C [Hinckley, Blaby and Lutterworth], c1950; showing the area, sub area, sector, and warden post boundaries, and warden and sector post positions. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, location mark DE8112.)

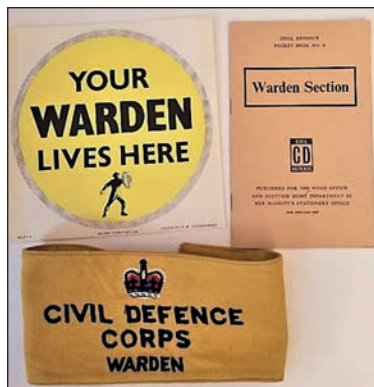
Post-attack, a Warden would assist with rescue, usually co-ordinating squads moving into a damaged area. He would have identified buildings to be made into rest centres and first aid posts in conjunction with those sections. Several schools were identified as possible auxiliary hospitals should they survive. Burbage Secondary Modern near Hinckley, Broom Leys Primary School in Coalville and King Edward VII in Melton Mowbray are just some examples. Wardens would assess the suitability of these buildings as part of their job.

To make sure the various members of the corps continued their training and constant revision of their practices, large scale exercises were undertaken across the county. Exercise 'June' in July 1952 had "Extown" bombed, with 200 people

moving in to provide aid. The *Leicester Evening Mail* reported it as a 'complete success'. In July 1956, again 200 volunteers took part in 'Exercise Tin Hat', which imagined a nuclear bomb explode near Hinckley. Non-lethal radioactive fall-out would be descending on the town, allowing units to move into the area. Although there was serious damage and several fires started, the Wardens posts survived. In October 1954, Exercise 'Intergrate' was held, when six counties combined in the county and involved several thousand people and over 100 vehicles.

To try and ensure there would be some chance of rescue and co-ordination, especially in the most dangerous areas, mobile columns were created in the counties. The idea was that in the prelude to war, the column would move out of its

local area to a safer place, and then, post-attack, return to their local area to assist with rescue. This worked in theory, but with the number of targets in the country, there were few safe areas. The mobile column for the county was to be stationed in Wales. Unfortunately this was next to a number of possible targets and, as such, may not have survived.



Your Warden Lives Here sticker to be displayed in the window of their home; a pocket book outlining procedures and useful information, and an armband. (Author's collection.)

In general, given the small size and island nature of Britain, it would have been difficult to find safety from nuclear targets. By the late 1960s, the Government's approach to this dilemma included building underground structures for use by local, regional and national government, providing instructions for the general population on

how to protect their homes, and planning for full-scale evacuation. Mass evacuation civil defence exercises took place, and the mass exodus of people from the city and county during each July to the East Coast towns, with the large numbers of people and a greater number of traffic movements, provided an opportunity to test evacuation and traffic control. Leicester city's Corps division 'Kept Buses Moving' according to the *Leicester Mercury* in July 1967, with 25 members using radios and controlling the flow of buses into the city to take an estimated 8000 people away.

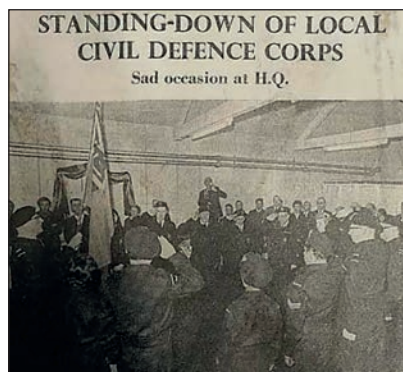
The Civil Defence Corps also had a valuable wider role. Whilst the main focus of civil defence, in the eyes of the public, remained as preparing for nuclear attack, the Corps also provided general assistance for the public.

Transport and other civil emergencies often tested the Corps across the country, enabling its members to put part of their training into practice. They attended aircraft and train disasters. Searches of areas for missing people were also common. The Aberfan disaster of 1966



Bridge work, Rugby Road, Lutterworth. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

saw Corps members on scene, digging through the avalanche to reach trapped persons. One of the biggest mobilisations was for the East Coast floods of 1953. Civil Defence Divisions from across the country provided rescue and welfare to those affected. The *Leicester Mercury*, in March 1953, reported that just over 200 volunteers from the Civil Defence and other organisations assisted with operations in Sutton-on-Sea. In July 1964, Rugby Road bridge in Lutterworth had suffered damage and the Rescue section was called in to help with shoring up and making safe to allow its use to traffic once again.



The Loughborough Echo of 22nd March 1968, marked the stand down of the Civil Defence Corps. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

With the world entering a period of detente, economic slow-down and rising government debt, the Labour government under Harold Wilson ordered a strategic defence review, which was to report its findings with a view to implementation in 1968. Amongst other economies made in the sector, the Civil Defence Corps met the axe. Although largely made up of volunteers, some were paid at headquarters and training centres. The Corps maintained a huge fleet of vehicles and a large amount of buildings. Exercise costs, along with members receiving "bounty" payment and expenses for training, meant costs were high. Shortly afterwards, it was announced in January 1968 that from the 31st March, the Corps was to be stood down. Many reacted to the loss of the Corps with shock and disbelief, and according to the Civil Defence Association's website, many of the Corps' volunteers considered the real reasons for the stand down were less to do with economics and more to do with political expediency.

Thankfully, the Civil Defence Corps were never called upon to perform their nuclear role in an actual attack.

Sources:

- Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland: Civil Defence Archives.
- Items from the Author's Collection.
- Blogspots, Forums and Oral History: Nick Marshall, Norman Agar, 28 Days Later.
- Films: *The Waking Point; A Warden and His Duties*; British Pathé.

If anyone has information on the post-war Civil Defence Corps or was in the corps in Leicestershire and Rutland, the author would be pleased to hear from them -please email: jed_jaggard@yahoo.co.uk