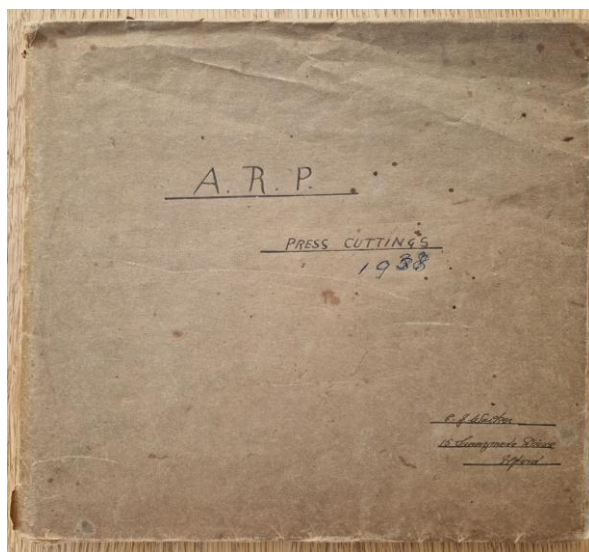


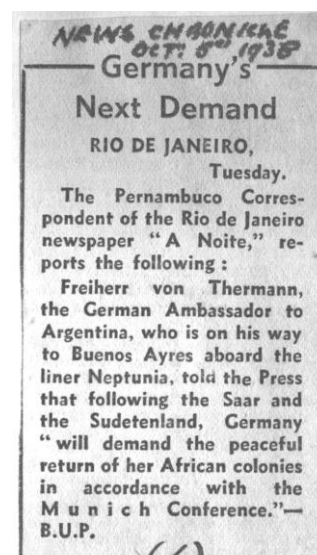
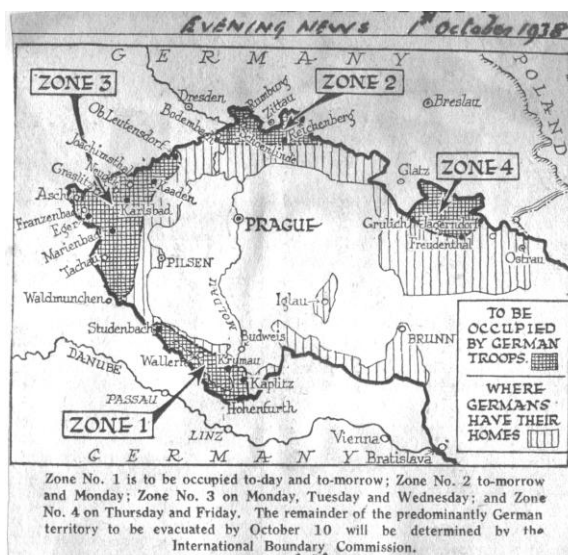
## Munich and A.R.P. Panic in 1938 – David Gray

The Munich Crisis, in September 1938, involved a meeting between Neville Chamberlain (British Prime Minister), Adolf Hitler (German Chancellor), and other leaders to address Hitler's demands for the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. The crisis resulted in the Munich Agreement, where Czechoslovakia was forced to cede the Sudetenland to Germany. This agreement, though intended to prevent war, is now seen as a prime example of appeasement and a major step towards World War II. Czechoslovakia was not invited to the Munich Conference and felt betrayed by its allies. The agreement, signed on September 30, 1938, allowed Germany to take the Sudetenland and paved the way for Hitler's further aggression, ultimately leading to the invasion of Poland and the start of World War II. This period was seen as an international crisis, certainly in Britain, and focussed the minds of most civic leaders and local authorities on the importance of getting their Air Raid Precautions (A.R.P.) arrangements up to the standard required in case of an impending war.



To say that the Munich crisis caused panic at local level in Britain would not be overstating it. I have compiled this article from news stories in a scrapbook that I have in my collection entitled 'A.R.P. Press Cuttings 1938,' which was kept by C. J. Walker, 15, Sunnymede, Ilford, above.

The map below, shows how Czechoslovakia was split up, Hitler would soon take it all. The article next to it does not bode well for the future.



Every page in this scrapbook is filled with press cuttings, all covering stories relating to the lamentable preparations in the London area associated with Air Raid Precautions. A report on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 1938 *below*, tells of a recruitment drive for half a million ARP recruits.

**DAILY TELEGRAPH**  
*4<sup>th</sup> October 1938*  
**DRIVE FOR 500,000**  
**A.R.P. RECRUITS**

---

**LESSONS TAUGHT BY**  
**EMERGENCY**

---

**NEED FOR TRAINED**  
**PERSONNEL**

The national campaign for 500,000 more Air Raid Precautions volunteers opened in most parts of the country yesterday.

Contrary to expectations it was not possible for the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, to inaugurate the drive with a Government appeal.

During the day, however, house-to-house distribution of 7,000,000 illustrated folders enclosing local enrolment forms was begun by air raid wardens, canvassers, and through the post. On hoardings, notice boards, public vehicles and railway stations the 1,750,000 coloured posters designed for the campaign began to appear.

Following yesterday's meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, which was attended by Home Office officials, it is expected that the Government's intentions both in regard to A.R.P. generally and the recent emergency measures will be made known within the next day or two.

**THE IDEAL TIME**

It is emphasised in official quarters that pending such an announcement local authorities can safely proceed with the drive for recruits. The present time, it is considered, is ideal for stressing the vital importance, the existing shortcomings, and the consequent needs of A.R.P.

Improvisation in A.R.P. is not good enough. In the view of official circles that is the outstanding lesson to be drawn from last week's emergency. Most of this improvisation was necessitated by the shortage of personnel. Untrained men and women, volunteering at the last moment, had to perform duties for which a good deal of specialised training is essential. Consequently there were bad breakdowns, and errors committed which might have had disastrous consequences.

It is also clear that far less recruiting was accomplished last week than is generally believed. Tens of thousands volunteered their services temporarily; only a small proportion joined the ranks permanently. At least 450,000 A.R.P. volunteers are urgently required.

(5)

On Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> October a story appeared telling of an early example of profiteering.

**"Who made the fortunes on the sandbags,"** cried the headline. "The crisis profiteers are now sending their bills in. These bills are staggering municipal authorities all over the country. They show that in many cases the prices of materials needed urgently for the protection of the nation were raised in a few hours far beyond all bounds of reasonable profit making. A demand is already being raised in many districts for Government action to be taken before the bills are paid, so as to prevent an intolerable and unnecessary burden being put on the ratepayers."

"Responsibility for putting the ratepayers at the mercy of the profiteers lies to a large extent with the Home Office. A few days before the [Munich] crisis arose the Home Office instructed local authorities to make contracts for all materials required for A.R.P. work. Quite suddenly, before contracts could be completed, the Home Office sent an urgent message instructing the authorities to 'Place orders immediately.'" [We could now substitute A.R.P. for Covid, and we would see that very little has changed over the years. Even the *Greatest Generation* wasn't going to miss the chance of a quick profit by taking advantage of a bad situation].

"Then the 'scramble' began. There was no question of getting tenders or haggling over contracts. It was a question of 'Take it or leave it. That is our price. If you don't pay it, someone else will,'"

**Take It Or—**  
Then the 'scramble' began. There was no question of getting tenders or haggling over contracts. It was a question of "Take it or leave it. That is our price. If you don't pay it some one else will."

Some other typical examples of what happened were told to the Sunday Express by the municipal officials in various parts of the country.

**Essex** — "The price of sandbags rose in a day from 2½d. to 10d. One borough engineer had a quotation of 2½d. a bag and was authorised by the council to spend £400 on bags to protect his pumping station. By the

time he was able to telephone his order, the price had risen to 11¼d.

**Yorkshire** — Within five minutes of arrangements being made for trenches to be dug the price of timber was raised in one area by £3 a [plank]. The price of sandbags which had been 1½d. each, rose so high that the council ordered wooden boxes instead."

A contractor supplying Ilford's council stated, "We phoned round and accepted a price from a company. The price was exorbitant compared with the day before and when they sent in the confirmation they stuck another halfpenny on each sandbag. They also insisted we should leave a deposit of £500. Our work's foreman had to be at this company's premises with the money before we could shift any of the material... The firm would not accept a cheque."

The Star reported on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> October, "**Complete Overhaul Needed.** Urgent need for complete re-organisation of London's A.R.P. scheme was today revealed by some 29 officers responsible for the safety of millions of Londoners. Many reports, compiled from crisis experience, expose grave breaches in the present plans.

To-day I made a tour of London's A.R.P. officers, and found that many of them were seriously hampered by the delay of the Home Office in reaching a decision concerning the gas masks already issued and the construction of further trenches and shelters.

I was told that in some boroughs where thousands of masks were handed out during the crisis, the masks have been so badly looked after that most of them are now useless. Every day that the Home Office delays its decision thousands more masks are being ruined.

Captain Hollis, A.R.P. officer for Shoreditch, where 80,000 masks were issued, told me that, in his opinion, the cheapest solution would be a complete re-issue in the event of another emergency.

"People carried their masks home in the rain, children play with them in the streets, and few are looked after," Captain Hollis said. "I should not like to trust one now. Some boroughs have themselves bought boxes for householders to preserve their masks. Others pasted bills in every street giving instructions how to look after them."

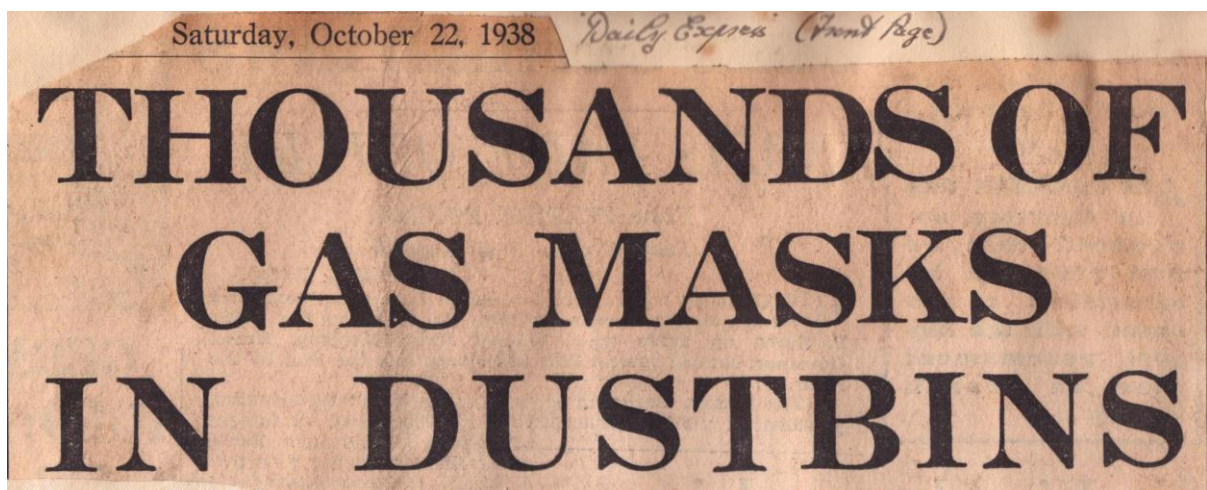


Most areas were waiting for decisions to be made by the Home Office but likely conclusions would be:

- More power for A.R.P. officers.
- Establishment of a Central London meeting place for officers.
- Placing of A.R.P. on a semi-military footing in an emergency.
- Government control of necessities.
- Issue of pay, rations and uniform to full-time emergency A.R.P. workers in military lines.

There was a grave shortage of small respirators. Lack of authority to requisition schools and other buildings for distribution of masks was a serious handicap. There was a complete inability to stem the tide of profiteering in sandbags, wood and other materials. Captain Hollis said, "One [officer] rang me up the day after he was appointed A.R.P. officer to a London borough and said 'For heaven's sake help me. I don't know a thing about A.R.P. and I've got this job. Will you let me have your scheme to work out here?'"

"I have had appeals from officers all over the country who know nothing about their jobs. Some officers have so little authority they are overruled by Town Clerks. There is nowhere in London where A.R.P. officers can meet...we have no badges or any other signs to distinguish us, and sometimes we are asked 'Who the hell are you?'"

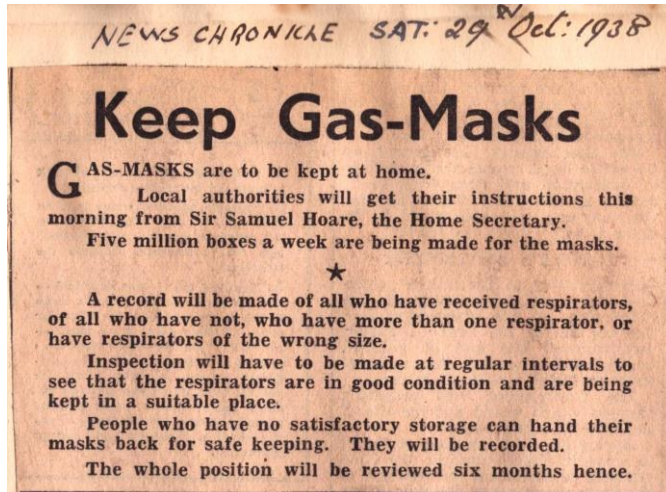


The above story stated, "Thousands of the gas masks which cost the Government 2s. 6d. each and were issued free have been damaged by the public since crisis week. Thousands of others have been found in dustbins and on refuse heaps all over the country. An official in charge of refuse collection in one London borough said yesterday that many hundreds had been found by his workmen and saved from the incinerators. Half of them he said cannot be used again. They have been too badly damaged to be repaired, or so soiled that they could not be worn again even after disinfection."

"Local A.R.P. organisations are awaiting Home Office orders on what is to be done with the 38,000,000 masks issued. In a few cases the organisations have already collected them from the public. One reason given for the damage done is failure on the part of the A.R.P. department to supply cardboard boxes in which to store the masks at home. The department promised that a box should be handed out for each mask, but only a small number of boxes are available."

"Some of the masks being retrieved from refuse dumps are being taken to pieces, examined, disinfected, and put back into storage. Districts with fairly complete A.R.P. organisations are keeping a check on the masks issued. Five hundred Paddington wardens, for instance, were last night continuing their house to house visiting. People were asked to produce their masks so that the

fitting could be checked. At the same time they were examined for damage or rough handling. Westminster A.R.P. workers have also had masks returned by the refuse collection department. An official there said that if it is decided to recall all masks he did not expect his department would get more than 50 per cent back. He had seen 20 to 30 children 'none over twelve years,' playing in a Pimlico Street in their masks. A report was received from Brighton that people put on their masks when cutting onions."



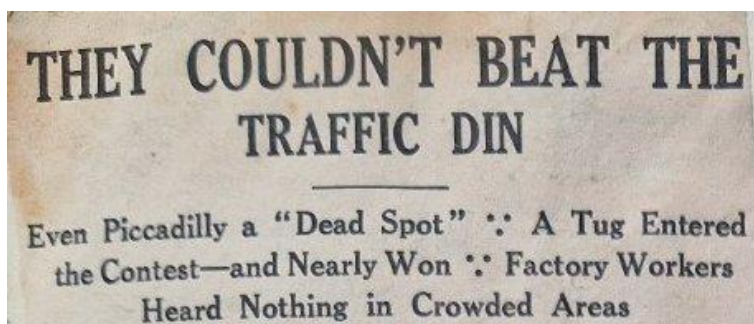
News Chronicle Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> October 1938: **"No Permit to Pump A.R.P. Trenches** – It is a wicked waste of money to have trenches almost complete and be unable to get authority to pump them dry and cover them over," declared Alderman A. J. Bryant, Chairman of Finchley's A.R.P. Committee at a council meeting.

A report from the A.R.P. Committee stated that in the absence of instructions the trenches had not been covered. They were now flooded and were deteriorating. It was recommended that four pumps be purchased and the committee had

instructed their officer to approach the Home Office on the matter.

The A.R.P. officer now reported that he had an interview at the Home Office but that he was 'shied off,' when he broached this subject. The Mayor (Alderman A. T. Pike): "I don't think the Home Office came out of the crisis with any credit."

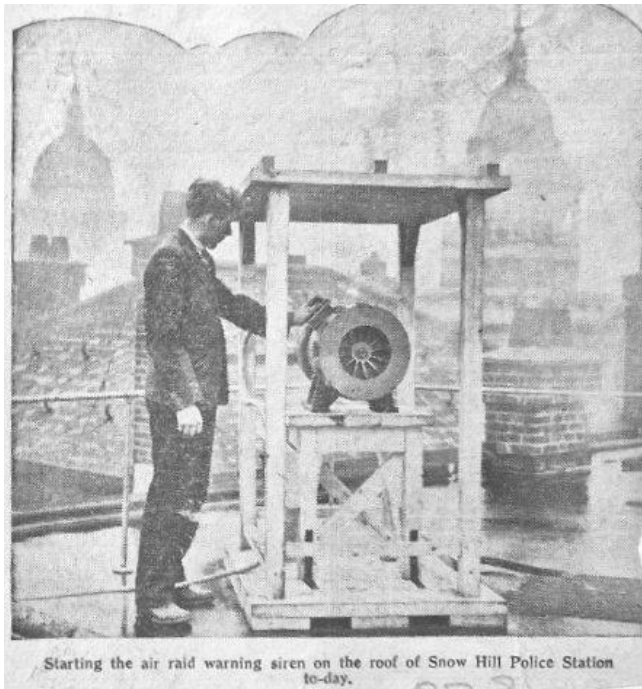
One of the biggest problems for all London boroughs and indeed everywhere across the country was how to pay for all of the A.R.P. initiatives, such as trenches, shelters, uniforms, whistles, rattles and bells, etc. Lewisham estimated their approximate emergency expenditure up to October 24<sup>th</sup> 1938, was £18,616. £15,107 of that was for provision of shelters for the public, including materials, labour, transport and equipment for trench digging. Other expenditure included fitting, assembling and distribution of gas masks £1,938, and medical supplies and equipment for first aid posts and first aid parties £1,102. It was hoped that the whole £18,616 would rank for a Government grant of 65 to 75 per cent, but first the ratepayer's money had to be found and spent. It was also stated that 1,500 torches, 1,500 whistles, 1,000 rattles and 500 handbells were having to be bought on instruction from the Home Office.



Left: The Evening News Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> December 1938. "Under admirable sound-carrying conditions, London's new sirens for air-raid warnings received a first official test today. But the performance was so unconvincing that it may almost be described as a 'flop.'"

An hour after the sirens had finished, people were ringing up Scotland Yard and various police stations to ask what had become of them. 'We are still listening, but have heard nothing yet,' was the general substance of these enquiries. There were dead spots in Piccadilly, Bermondsey, Shepherd's Bush and elsewhere – which the warning utterly failed to penetrate. The peaceful roar of London traffic was too much for the alarm.

Near Westminster Bridge a hooting tug entered into competition with the siren and, according to pedestrians, nearly drowned it. In large city offices near Blackfriars the warning passed unnoticed and a report from a large Bermondsey factory was that it was heard only by an observer on the roof. At that factory, employing 1,000 hands workers were asked to listen attentively to the warning (a) in the noisiest part of the factory, (b) in the quietest part of the factory, and (c) in the factory precincts, and give their opinions.



People within the factory declared they had not heard the siren at all. Yet there was a siren for the Bermondsey area in Rotherhithe, and another not far away at Southwark. The test underwent one handicap in Central London through a non-starter at Bow Street. There the siren became disconnected just before it should have come into action, and it had to be scratched from the show. That left 99 for the test – 95 in the Metropolitan police area within an 8-mile radius of Charing Cross and four in the city. While the sirens were heard in some upper floor city offices, they were not heard in the basements.

For the purposes of the test a fluctuating warning signal was sounded at 11.20am for two minutes. Five minutes later it was followed by a continuous 'Raiders Passed'

signal for two minutes. In Whitehall the siren at Scotland Yard was heard clearly in back rooms of the Treasury and Home Office and in the Cabinet room in Downing Street. At the Admiralty, the siren passed almost unnoticed. Unofficial comments generally were that the warning was not sharp or imperative enough." The tone of this report appears to somewhat dismissive of the siren tests, however they were to be very much relied on when war did break out less than a year later.



In October 1938 the British Government announced plans for the evacuation of civilians from areas where they thought severe enemy bombing raids would occur in time of war. The map *left*, shows heavily populated areas in black that would be evacuated to the white areas. The shaded or dotted areas would be held in reserve.

The decision, based on recommendations of Sir John Anderson's Committee on Evacuation, meant that 1,900,200 people would be removed from London and Middlesex, 130,300 from Newcastle and Gateshead, 515,700 from Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield and Hull, 611,400 from Liverpool, Bootle, Manchester and Salford and 320,700 from Birmingham. They would be taken comparatively short distances to safety zones. This plan left untouched the whole of the West Country, capable of housing another 776,234 people, and Wales which could billet 546,582.

The Government added five main principles:

- Evacuation would not be compulsory.

- Essential production in large industrial areas must be maintained but large numbers of people from these areas should be evacuated.
- There will be compulsory billeting in the safety zones.
- The Government will pay the initial cost of evacuation. Refugees who can contribute to their subsequent maintenance will be expected to do so.
- School children will be moved out in groups from their schools in charge of teachers if parents cannot make their own arrangements. But the decision rests with the parents.



Various London districts were amazed to see that they were classified as 'Neutral' zones, and therefore would not be evacuated. Only the shaded areas in the plan *left* would be evacuated.

On Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> January 1939 the Evening News reported "Another storm broke over the Government A.R.P. muddle creators today following publication by the Ministry of Health of the list of municipalities scheduled for evacuation and non-evacuation. In many districts within Greater London and in obvious 'target' areas outside there was amazement when it was found that they had been listed as 'neutral' – not to be

evacuated and not to receive those from evacuation areas.

In **Enfield**, the Chairman of the council said "We have considered the problem most carefully and have always wanted to be an evacuation area. We have a big and increasing population – nearly 100,000 now. In this densely populated area we have a big ordnance factory and, just outside, the Waltham gunpowder factory."

The Vice Chairman of the **Croydon** A.R.P. Committee said "This is one of the craziest things I have heard for some time, and quite typical of the mentality of the average Government department. It is the silliest thing imaginable to describe Croydon as a neutral area – Croydon, the home of London's airport, a place known to practically every foreign pilot who has ever flown here – a place containing one of the biggest power stations around London, and situated directly on the main railway line to the coast. In face of those facts, how anyone can describe Croydon as neutral completely baffles me. Only a Government department could have said such a thing." Croydon's population was 240,000.

An official at **Hendon** town hall said "We feel that Hendon, with a population of 156,000, is very far from being a safety zone and we have to consider very carefully the question of the children."

Representatives from **Chingford** echoed Hendon's comments, and said that any sort of underground dugouts would be a serious problem because water was reached at a depth of about a foot.

**Thurrock** Urban District Council said besides the Tilbury Docks and the landing stage, there were many large and important industries. **Dartford**, **Wembley**, **Wimbledon** and **Erith** were equally amazed at being left off the list of boroughs for evacuation. No doubt there was a major revision of these plans once the blitz started.



Finally, the picture below shows that gas masks continued to be taken for granted throughout the war by service personnel as well as civilians and the Civil Defence services. The main complaint from the authorities throughout the war was that people did not write their details on the gas mask containers so they could be easily returned to their owners. It does beg the question however, how on earth could a soldier not realise he had left his gas mask and steel helmet on the bus or the train. Why wouldn't they notice it was missing!



LOST GAS MASKS—Some of the masks and helmets left in London 'buses and tube trains being sorted at the Lost Property Office, Baker-street, where they await claimants.