

**MOST
SECRET**

**WESTERN APPROACHES HQ
MUSEUM**

Liverpool's Secret Second World War Bunker

**Education Pack
Key Stage 3**

Combined HQ
Western Approaches

TO BE KEPT UNDER LOCK AND KEY

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to ensure the secrecy of this document

Western Approaches HQ Museum

Education Pack

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in Western Approaches HQ. This pack is designed to provide information about the bunker, its role during the Second World War and some of the opportunities we offer schools.

This pack has been created to meet the requirements of National Curriculum Key Stage 3 History, specifically:

- *challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day*
- *a local history study.*

Planning Your Visit

- **Pre Visits:** Teachers are welcome to visit the museum at any time to familiarise themselves with our layout and discuss specific requirements. You can take advantage of our occasional free entry holiday offers for teachers and teaching assistants and one child or a complimentary entry if you have a confirmed booking.
- **Parking:** Unfortunately, we have no parking facilities on site and as a city centre site we have limited on street parking near by. We are within easy walking distance of Moorfields and James Street Merseyrail stations though.
- **Special Needs:** Western Approaches HQ is committed to helping all students access our museum. However, due to the nature of the bunker, physically disabled access is limited. Please contact us prior to visiting to discuss any specific requirements for your pupils.
- **Toilets:** Toilets are located on the ground floor. There are no toilet facilities inside the main bunker space.
- **Lunch:** A lunch room facility is available for school groups but this must be booked in advance as there is limited space. There is no eating or drinking allowed in the main bunker space.
- **Behaviour:** We want everyone to enjoy their visit to Western Approaches HQ and to ensure this please remind your pupils that there will be other visitors present in the museum and to act appropriately at all times. Discipline remains your responsibility and appropriate adult supervision is expected.

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1. Background

With the approach of war in the late 1930's preparations were undertaken right across Britain including here in Liverpool. Derby House was already under construction for the Ministry of Defence when orders were given to construct a reinforced concrete bunker beneath it.

The bunker was to become one of the most important sites in the whole of the Second World War as it became headquarters for the Battle of the Atlantic, organising and protecting the vital supply convoys needed to keep the war effort going and organising the war against the deadly German U-Boats (submarines).

2. What was the Battle of the Atlantic?

Britain's survival depended on vital supplies from North America and the Empire and these had to be transported in merchant ships across the Atlantic Ocean, where they were under constant threat of attack by German submarines (U-Boats). To combat this threat, the merchant ships were organised into convoys (the convoy system had been successfully used towards the end of the First World War), escorted by Allied naval vessels and, if possible, aircraft to protect them.

At first, many ships were lost and with the fall of France in June 1940, the subsequent building of U-Boat bases along France's west coast and an increase in U-Boat production by Germany, the Germans came close to winning the battle and starving Britain into submission. At the start of 1943, Allied losses continued to grow and Admiral Döntiz, commander of the German Navy, now had 200 U-boats operating in the Atlantic. British supplies, especially of oil, were running out, and it became a question of whether Allied shipyards could build merchant ships fast enough to replace those being sunk.

By April 1943, the impact of the American involvement in the war, increased shipbuilding, improved air cover and the development of new tactics by the Allies began to turn and the U-boats were clearly struggling to make an impact. Even worse, from Hitler's point of view, was the fact that Allied sinkings of German submarines began to escalate, with 45 being destroyed in the months of April and May. Admiral Döntiz, recognising that the U-boat's moment had passed, called off the battle on 23 May 1943. This was not the end of the threat in the Atlantic, but thereafter it was greatly diminished.

The Battle of the Atlantic was one of the longest campaigns of World War Two, and it was proportionally among the most costly. Between 75,000 and 85,000 Allied seamen were killed and about 28,000 (out of 41,000) U-boat crew were killed during World War Two, with some two-thirds of these in the course of the Battle of the Atlantic. The stakes could not have been higher. If the U-boats had prevailed, the Allies could not have been successful in the war against Germany.

In March 1942, Winston Churchill coined the term '**Battle of the Atlantic**' to emphasise its importance. Later he would admit that ".the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril."

3. Liverpool in the Second World War

Liverpool had an important role to play for Britain and its Empire even before the war as one of the largest and busiest ports, but this made it a high priority target for the German air force (the Luftwaffe) once war broke out.

The docks and the ship building facilities were vital for the war effort and were the main targets for the Luftwaffe from August 1940 through to January 1942.

Liverpool suffered heavily during these air raids and was the second most bombed city in the country outside London. Over 4,000 people lost their lives and over 10,000 homes were lost. The most intense bombing came during the Christmas Blitz of December 1940 and the May Blitz in 1941. The May Blitz saw a continuous period of 8 nights of bombing and over 1,500 people killed.

The people of Liverpool also had to contend with having their sons, husbands, brothers, and daughters being called up for the various armed forces, the blackout, shortages of clothing, petrol and other luxury goods and of course, food rationing. Throughout the war though the spirit of the Liverpool people was never diminished and a real sense of community and camaraderie developed.

Explore the impact of the war on Liverpool and rationing with our specifically designed workshops.

4. Combined Headquarters, Western Approaches, Derby House, Liverpool:

Derby House was under construction in 1938 as part of the redevelopment of Exchange Buildings, just behind the Town Hall. As war approached orders were given for a secret headquarters (HQ) bunker to be built beneath the building and Exchange Flags Square. To ensure maximum security, the builders were told they were building a "restaurant", though how many of them believed this story is anyone's guess!

At the outbreak of war, the building, located in Rumford Street and still incomplete, consisted of two floors of offices and accommodation for the senior officers above ground and two floors of the most sensitive parts of the headquarters underground in a bomb and gas proof, reinforced bunker. Affectionately known as 'the citadel' or 'the fortress', it was also referred to by those who worked there as 'the pit'.

In February 1941, Western Approaches Combined Headquarters was moved from Mount Wise, just outside Plymouth to Derby House, Liverpool under the command of Admiral Sir Percy Noble. Liverpool was chosen for its proximity to the convoys as the northern and western ports were now the most important, being furthest from German occupied Europe and closest to North America. Plymouth was also deemed too vulnerable to German air raids though in August 1940, Liverpool itself had become the target for the Luftwaffe (German air force).

From 1941 to the end of the war in August 1945, Combined HQ Western Approaches master-minded the Battle of the Atlantic, planning and protecting the convoys and fighting a ruthless war against the U-boats. Radio signals from ships and aircraft, communications from the Admiralty in London and importantly, de-coded Enigma messages from Bletchley Park were all received and processed within bunker. Over 30,000,000 message forms (written copies of radio signals, etc) were handled by staff during the four years and the bunker was linked via cable to large radio transmitters in Birkenhead and to the most vital Government offices, including a direct link to the USA via undersea cable.

At the end of the war in August 1945, the headquarters was opened to the public for one week so they could see what exactly had been going on beneath their feet. Following that the bunker was sealed and very little is known about its usage over the next 50 years. It is believed to have been kept as a training establishment for the Royal Navy, but almost everything had been stripped out by the 1970's. Two floors of living and mess (canteen) facilities were lost in the 1950's when the underground car park was built under Exchange Flags Square, and for much of the 1980's a stationary shop occupied the ground floor parts of the bunker. In 1993, to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic, Western Approaches Museum was opened, the brain-child of local businessman Fred O'Brien. Sadly, the museum became neglected until 2017 when Big Heritage, a not-for-profit, community interest company took it over and is in the process of developing the museum.

5. 'The Fortress' today

Of the original 50,000 square feet, only around 33,000 square feet remains, though not all areas are yet open to the public. The main highlights are:

a) **The Operations Room:**

Arguably, the room where the Second World War was won, as this is the very heart of the operations of Western Approaches HQ during the war. All information arriving at the bunker was processed and eventually made its way onto the large, two storey map wall, providing an up to date visual representation of the situation in the Atlantic.

WRENs and WAAF's acted as 'plotters' in this room, climbing the moveable ladders to plot convoys, submarines, aircraft and even the weather and sea conditions on the map wall.

Here pupils will hear about the course of the Battle of the Atlantic, the role of the WRENs and WAAF's and the operation of the room.

The 'Ops' room contains many interactive activities for pupils to enjoy, including original telephones and typewriters.

b) **Commander-in-Chief's Office and sleeping quarters**

This was the office and sleeping quarters for the most senior officer in Western Approaches HQ, the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C). From 1942, Admiral Sir Max Horton was C-in-C and pupils will learn about his career, character and the role he played in winning the Battle of the Atlantic.

c) The Walker Room

In the Walker Room, pupils will learn about one of the most successful Allied naval officers of the Second World War, Captain F.J. Walker, also known as “Johnnie” Walker. They will also get an insight into what the conditions were like at sea during the Battle of the Atlantic.

Three short videos show the conditions at sea, the main Operations Room of Western Approaches in action, the return of Captain Walker to Liverpool after his most successful cruise and Captain Walker’s funeral at Liverpool Cathedral in 1944. Captain Walker is commemorated with a statue near the Museum of Liverpool on the waterfront alongside several memorials connected to the Battle of the Atlantic (further details on these can be provided upon request)

d) The Radio Room

This was the Royal Navy Signals Office and received coded signals from the ships at sea and the Admiralty in London. Messages arrived via morse code and were written down and handed through to the Royal Navy Signals Officers in the room next door who then passed them to the relevant parts of the HQ.

This room now has some interactive activities for pupils including practising their morse code and deciphering messages.

e) The Wartime Street

The final part of the museum looks at Liverpool during the Blitz and focuses on the lives of the ordinary citizens of Liverpool. Our ‘wartime’ street scene takes pupils back to the 1940’s with its sweet shop, grocers and even an unexploded bomb!

All of these are visited as part of the guided tour available to schools and are described in an interactive, educational and entertaining way, with plenty of opportunity for ‘hands-on’ experiences for your pupils.

6. What we offer

a. Interactive Guided Tour

An interactive guided tour of the HQ bunker focusing on the story behind Western approaches HQ and why it was in Liverpool, the operation of the bunker, the lives of those who worked here and the impact of the war on Liverpool as a city. Pupils will have the chance to explore the main areas of the bunker experience life underground in the 1940’s. (Approx. 1 ¼ Hours)

Tours can be tailored to meet your syllabus requirements. Please contact our Education team to discuss.

b. Workshops

We currently have three one hour workshops available, *Coding & Cyphers*, *Rationing* and *Liverpool at War*, where pupils will add to their knowledge and understanding of the Second World War through small group activities. More workshops are planned. (Approx. 1 ¼ Hours)

If you have specific requirements please contact our Education Team to discuss.

c. Wartime Waterfront Walking Tour

This is a self-guided walking tour of the Liverpool Waterfront area and the impact of the Second World War on this area. Includes details of the various memorials and statues connected with the war and the Battle of the Atlantic and also gives an insight into some the lesser known facts about Liverpool during the Second World War.

Teachers are responsible for leading these tours but all information and maps etc will be provided by our Education Team. (Between 45 mins and 1 ¼ hours long)

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A Typical Visit:

a) Up to 35 pupils:

- 10.00 – Arrival at the museum. Coats and bags stored in cloakroom
- 10.15 – **Group 1:** Interactive Guided Tour **Group 2:** Workshop
- 11.00 – **Group 1** Workshop **Group 2:** Interactive Guided Tour
- 12.15 – Lunch (if booked) or Depart
- 1.00 - Depart

b) Over 35 pupils and up to 70:

- 10.00 – Arrival at the museum. Coats and bags stored in cloakroom
- 10.15 – Interactive Guided Tour
- 11.00 – Workshop
- 12.15 – Lunch (if booked) or Depart
- 1.00 - Depart

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