Bethnal Green Tube victims' story will be told

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Although it occurred at the height of the Second World War, the tragedy at Bethnal Green Underground Station that claimed 173 lives was not the result of enemy action but caused by an unsafe station entrance and the sheer weight of numbers of people seeking shelter from a threatened air raid.

Apart from a small plaque at the station entrance the terrible event is unmarked but now a memorial sculpture is under construction near the station and, thanks to the HLF grant, researchers at the University of East London will piece together the full story of the disaster, including recorded interviews with some of the survivors.

The event occurred on March 3rd, 1943, when an air raid warning sounded and local people in their hundreds converged on the station entrance to seek shelter underground. A new anti-aircraft rocket battery opened fire nearby and the unfamiliar, deafening noise led people to think that bombs were falling. People on the stairs into the station stumbled and hundreds behind them fell forward.

Ironically, no air raid took place but the authorities demanded a news blackout so that detailed news of the disaster was suppressed. The event has now been largely forgotten.

The project coincides with the 70th anniversary of the event this year. Thanks to the HLF funding recorded memories of some 20 survivors, rescuers and relatives of those who died will be gathered. These and other documents relating to the disaster and the effect of the war on Bethnal Green will form the basis of an exhibition that will travel to 12 local venues. Two audio guides – one for adults and one for children – will also be produced featuring some of the survivor's interviews and specially commissioned music. These will be installed around the memorial site to be accessed on smartphones.

A detailed guide book, also available in an online format, will be produced and made available for local libraries. All the archive material produced will we stored in future at Tower Hamlets Archive and Bishopsgate Library.

Sue Bowers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: "History has overlooked the details of this terrible event that befell the people of Bethnal Green. That omission will now be put right and give the opportunity for some who were directly affected to share their stories and for everyone else to learn about it."

Dr Toby Butler, senior lecturer in history at the University of East London, said: "We are honoured to be involved in researching and interpreting the history of the disaster and its aftermath. We will be working very closely with the Stairway to Heaven Memorial Trust who have worked tirelessly to raise funds for a proper memorial." He added that the project would like to hear from anyone who had any involvement or records from the disaster, the treatment of casualties or the subsequent enquiry and can get in touch via email to t.butler@uel.ac.uk or phone 01732 366670.

Further information

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