

Plymouth From Destruction to Reconstruction

KS2 History Resource



Museum
Gallery
Archive

The Box is Plymouth's new multi-million pound museum, gallery and archive. With brand new exhibition spaces alongside state-of-the-art facilities for research and learning, it's the perfect place to teach, inspire and engage students of all ages.

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About this resource

This resource covers some of the broad themes that relate to Plymouth during World War II and the post-war period. In particular, it looks at the impact this major conflict had on the city and its people.

Plymouth suffered greatly during World War II.

The docks and naval base made it a major target. This resulted in the almost total destruction of the city centre and the displacement of tens of thousands of Plymothians.

Amongst this charred and ruined city, a radical new plan was developed to enable its complete redesign and reconstruction. MPs, Councillors and planners sought out the finest architects, designers and artists to create a new city – a modern city – worthy of replacing what had been lost.

The city we see today epitomises the ambition and vision of this post-war planning.

Our city centre is the most complete post-war planned city in Britain, as important and representative of its time as Georgian Bath or Medieval York is of theirs.

Plymouth in World War II



The Blitz of Plymouth

The 'Blitz' was a sustained campaign of heavy air raids on British cities carried out by the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) from September 1940 until May 1941. After London, Plymouth was the most heavily bombed city in the country.

The Plymouth Blitz took place during the months of March and April 1941. Over 200,000 incendiary bombs were dropped on the city along with over 6,600 high explosive bombs.

At the time, the Government and the press censored stories about the destruction in Plymouth, playing down the severe damage caused by the raids and instead concentrated their stories on London and Coventry.

The centres of Plymouth and Devonport were devastated. 1,174 people were killed and 4,448 were injured in Plymouth over the course of the War. Around 30,000 people were left homeless.



Defence at home

In 1937, before the outbreak of war, the Air Raid Precautions (A.R.P) Act was passed.

From 1938, air raid shelters were provided in Plymouth and anti-aircraft guns, searchlights and barrage balloons were deployed. Public buildings were sandbagged.

The defeat of France in 1940 led to the establishment of the Local Defence Volunteers (L.D.V), later known as the Home Guard. This earned the nickname 'Dad's Army', because many of the recruits were above the age of service for the armed forces.



RAF Harrowbeer

At the beginning of World War II it was assumed that Plymouth was too far from German air bases to be under threat of aerial attack.

However, following the capture of France in 1940, Plymouth was faced with an immediate danger.

It was agreed a new air base was needed at RAF Harrowbeer near Yelverton. Rubble from destroyed buildings in Plymouth formed part of the hard core for the new runways. The base became fully operational in autumn 1941.

Pilots from Britain, Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, Poland and Brazil flew from RAF Harrowbeer.



Evacuation and refuge

Plymouth, surprisingly, was not included in the plans for mass evacuation of towns and cities drawn up at the start of the War. There was no organised evacuation until 1941.

Plymouth was classified as 'neutral'. It was neither a danger area from which people should be evacuated, nor a safe area for relocation from elsewhere. Consequently, evacuees from other regions of the country filled local authority lists in the South West and there was a shortage of housing for refugees from Plymouth.

Many 'trekked' out into the countryside to avoid the nightly air raids by bus, train, lorry, car, ferry or on foot.

They sheltered in church halls, barns, tents and even in hedgerows or ditches. Each village within 20–30 miles of Plymouth had taken its share of refugees.

Official statistics estimated that 50,000 people trekked out of Plymouth each night during the worst periods of the Blitz.



Surviving and thriving

Edward Dingle began trading at 30 Bedford Street, Plymouth in 1880. By 1939, the now renamed E Dingle & Co Ltd had 80 departments, employed over five hundred people and had plans to rebuild the store.

That changed on the night of 21 March 1941. A fire started by incendiary bombs in the nearby John Yeo department store spread to Dingles and burned the building to the ground.

Determined to continue trading, the company bought and leased shops and houses throughout Plymouth and the surrounding area. By 1945, the store employed 600 people.

The construction of the new store began in November 1949 and it opened on 1 September 1951. The building was the first new department store to open in the UK since 1938. Designed by John Burnet, Tait & Partners, London, the store provided local customers with 35,000 square feet of retail space over four floors.



E. DINGLE & CO

E. DINGLE & CO

NO ENTRY

Quick off the mark

In July 1941, Lord Reith, the Minister for Works and Buildings, visited Lord Mayor Waldorf Astor and encouraged the city to “*plan boldly and comprehensively and not to worry about finances or local boundaries*”.

Lord Astor approached one of the country’s leading architects/planners, Professor Patrick Abercrombie, to ask him to devise a plan for the rebuilding of the city.

Professor Abercrombie first toured the city in October 1941 with Lady Astor and met his main collaborator on the project, James Paton Watson, City Engineer and Surveyor. It is reported Abercrombie established the principal of Armada Way on his first visit, linking the railway station with Plymouth Hoe.

Abercrombie and Paton Watson drafted their first plan by November 1941, with a further 19 designs being considered over the following 12 months. ‘A Plan for Plymouth’ was completed by April 1943 and published in April 1944.

It was indeed the ‘bold and comprehensive’ plan suggested by Lord Reith.

CITY OF PLYMOUTH

NEW CITY CENTRE



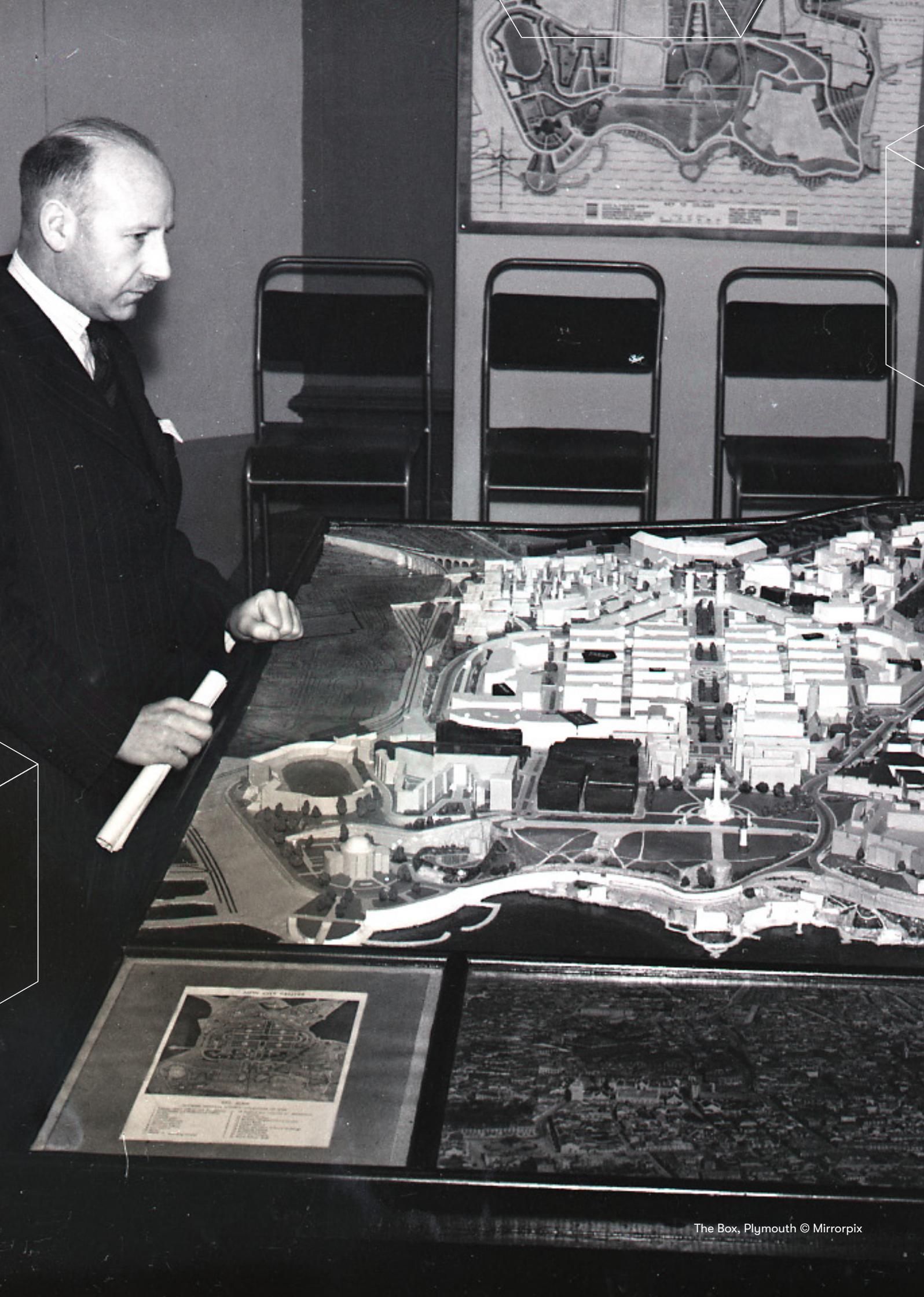
A Plan for Plymouth

Having been urged to plan ‘boldly and comprehensively’ by Lord Reith in 1941, Abercrombie and Watson’s Plan certainly didn’t disappoint.

The plan analysed all aspects of the city and the surrounding area (extending well beyond its administrative boundary), exploring everything from history to geography, demographics to agriculture, before presenting a radical and all-encompassing vision of a modern city.

Based on the Beaux Arts ‘City Beautiful’ style and influenced by British architect Edward Lutyens’ plan for New Delhi and the formation of Welwyn Garden City, the Plan proposed the almost complete removal of the old city centre. It included the formation of a grand north to south axis, connecting the railway station to the Hoe. Originally called Phoenix Way, it was renamed as Armada Way.

The Plan also proposed the construction of 13 brand new housing estates, known as ‘Neighbourhood Units’ and a series of ring roads and bypasses, increasing the size of the pre-war city considerably.



Reconstruction of the city

The reconstruction of the city centre began in 1947 with the construction of Royal Parade.

Banks, insurance companies and large department stores were the first buildings to be constructed, as they had the resources to obtain the scarce materials required.

Although the design of buildings was left to individual owners and developers they had to follow strict parameters and be approved by Coordinating Architect William Crabtree, a former pupil of Professor Abercrombie.

Many of the larger stores appointed some of the country's leading architects, with others being designed and built by the city's own City Architect, initially E G Catchpole and then HJW Stirling (1950 onwards). As well as reconstructing the city centre, work began on building thousands of new homes and estates, such as Ernesettle, Whiteleigh and Honicknowle.

Reconstruction of the city took around 15 years to complete.



A plan realised

‘A Plan for Plymouth’ resulted in the complete redesign and construction of the city centre and the development of a number of new neighbourhood areas.

The city expanded far beyond its pre-war boundaries. However, the Plan was never fully realised.

A series of compromises were reached throughout this period. Paton Watson disagreed with HJW Stirling over a number of aspects of the Plan. In particular he felt Stirling’s proposal for the new Civic Centre was too high and deviated too far from the original Plan. Architects Jellicoe, Ballantyne and Coleridge were eventually brought in to produce the final design for this iconic building. Stirling redesigned the Guildhall and Crown Court in the civic square, as well as housing in the suburbs.

For many the completion of the Civic Centre and the opening of the new Tamar Bridge, in 1962, signalled the end of Plymouth’s reconstruction with any work undertaken after that being seen as normal development.



Ideas for activities

Stories, stories, stories

The objects in archive and museum collections usually come with incredible stories attached to them, from which we can paint our own picture using our imagination of the time and context they came from.

Imagine yourself in the situation of a child whose school was bombed during World War II. Perhaps you had to attend another school in a completely different part of the city, maybe without your friends. Perhaps you were evacuated during the war, returning a few years later to find your house in ruins. Possibly your favourite shop in the city centre was also in ruins.

How might you remember these experiences, so they can be passed on to future generations?

Imagine yourself in this situation - you could write a diary, a newspaper entry, a short story, a play – or maybe you'd like to record a video-diary or write an online blog?

Ideas for activities

Volunteering in green spaces

During the war the home front required significant numbers of volunteers to ensure the safety of residents. These ranged from official duties such as Air Raid Precautions - volunteers making notes of where bombs dropped, ensuring the black-out was observed and sandbags were in place - to the basic clear up of debris and helping people move around.

These volunteers made huge contributions to the lives of others. Volunteering is still important today and can be done in a variety of ways.

Why not arrange for your pupils to volunteer as part of a local project to help the lives of others? A great place to start would be **Nature Plymouth** - a Plymouth City Council initiative to help improve Plymouth's natural spaces. You can also find opportunities through **Improving Lives Plymouth**.

Why not help clear up a local park or beach so that others can benefit from your help?

Ideas for activities

Redesign the city

Why not ask your pupils to become a city planner by redesigning the city centre? Ask your pupils to look closely at a pre-war map and a post-war 'A Plan for Plymouth' map – the differences between them are significant.

Planners for 'A Plan for Plymouth' had to consider a number of different factors when redesigning their plan – transport links, public services, cultural and educational areas, shopping areas.

You will need to consider all these when designing your version of Plymouth's city centre.

- Will there be any key new buildings, and which architects would you want to design them?
- What kind of views will the people of the city be able to see?
- How easy will it be to get across the city on foot or by car?
- What buildings would you have to remove to build your vision of the city, and what support for, or opposition to, the changes do you think there might be?

Ideas for activities

Architectural masterpieces

Following on from the 'Redesign the city' activity, ask your pupils to take one building from their new plan and draw it using two-point perspective.

Two-point perspective differs from one-point perspective (the single 'vanishing point') and three-point perspective (two 'vanishing points' at either side of your paper and one at the top).

It allows you to draw a building as if you were standing in front of it, looking at the corner of the building. Remember to include ideas for materials for your 'key building'.

Why not look at the websites of leading architects working today for inspiration?

Caruso St John Architects
David Chipperfield Architects
Zaha Hadid Architects
Heatherwick Studio
Jamie Fobert Architects

You could extend this activity if you use software such as Trimble SketchUp, drawing your model in the normal way, and printing views of the building from a number of different angles. Why not add a number of models to one large map to create a 'virtual walk-through' of your city?

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