



LIVERPOOL

Understanding Unexploded
Ordnance (UXO) Risk in
Liverpool: Bombing History
and Remaining Threats



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WWII Bombing of Liverpool



Its strategic importance made Liverpool a prime target for German bombing raids

During WWII, Liverpool played a significant role in Britain's wartime effort, serving as the nation's maritime lifeline when London's ports fell silent. As home to Britain's second-largest port, the city channelled an impressive 4.7 million troops and 74,000 aircraft through its docks, whilst the famous Cammell Laird shipyards produced 100 warships for the Allied cause.

By the end of the war, Liverpool was the second most heavily bombed city in Britain, behind London. By the 23rd of October 1940, Liverpool had suffered 200 air raids, increasing to 300 by 12th December.

Liverpool endured its darkest hours during the devastating Christmas Raids of 1940 and the infamous May Blitz of 1941. In the aftermath of the bombing, 500 roads were closed and one third of the houses in the city were damaged or destroyed. It involved 681 Luftwaffe bombers dropping 2,315 high explosive (HE) bombs and other devices, including numerous 1kg incendiaries. The raids put 69 out of 144 cargo berths out of action and inflicted 2,895 casualties.

The largest explosion on Merseyside during the war was caused when the ammunition ship SS Malakand, in Huskisson Dock No.2, exploded during the May Blitz. The vessel contained 1,000 tonnes of bombs/shells and the resulting explosion destroyed several acres of the surrounding docks.

Several bombing decoy sites were set up close to the Wirral, which succeeded in attracting many bombs that would otherwise have landed on the city and the docks.

The majority of Liverpool's civil defence records are hidden or – more likely – destroyed. As such, wartime bombing records are less consolidated than other major British towns and cities.

After the explosion, the anchor of the SS Malakand was discovered over a mile away!

British and Allied UXO in Liverpool

Being such a significant port city during WWII, Liverpool and the Merseyside area was home to a number of features that led to contamination from British ordnance.

Liverpool's air defences included barrage balloons above the docks and at sites around the city, which usually deterred the raiders from attacking below 5,000ft.

At least eight heavy anti-aircraft (HAA) batteries were situated within proximity to the city centre, which would have been firing constantly during the heaviest raids over Liverpool.

RAF fighter aircraft were based at Speke, Cranage, Tern Hill and High Ercall, Wrexham, Anglesey and Blackpool. Gladstone Dock became home to an anti-U-boat fleet and was a base for transatlantic escorts and minesweepers.

An electronically controlled minefield was laid between Gladstone Dock and New Brighton on the Wirral.

Impact of legacy UXO



One of the legacies of this conflict is buried unexploded air-dropped bombs or anti-aircraft projectiles resulting from the failure of a proportion of the weapons to function as designed.

It is commonly accepted that the failure rate of these munitions was approximately 10% and, depending on their shape, weight, velocity and ground conditions, many penetrated the ground and came to rest at depth.

Intensive efforts were made during and after the war to locate and render safe all unexploded ordnance (UXO) but, unsurprisingly, not all were found and dealt with. This is evidenced by the regular, on-going discoveries of UXO during construction-related intrusive ground works.

A sample of recent finds:

October 2024, two items of UXO found on the same street in Bootle.

July 2024, a WWII grenade was found buried in a Birkenhead garden.

May 2024, a suspected WWII bomb found in Port Sunlight.

In March 2024, two suspected bombs were found in a single day, one in New Brighton, the other in Birkenhead.

November 2023, WWII hand grenades found in a Merseyside canal.

June 2022, WWII German incendiary bomb found in Liverpool.

September 2021, an unexploded WWII bomb was found at the location of Bramley Moore Docks, close to Everton Station.

July 2021, two unexploded bombs found in the Wirral.

July 2019, a WWII grenade was found in the Leeds Liverpool canal near Tarleton.

May 2019, WWII grenade found at a recycling centre in Liverpool.

A sample of post-WWII Bomb Disposal

Officer clearance tasks:

August 1969, 250kg UXB recovered in North Branley Dock

November 1969, 250lb British UXB found in South Nelson Dock

March 1984, 250kg UXB found in West Sandon Docks

April 1991, 250kg UXB found in Liverpool

(Undated), 250kg bomb and 2 x fuzes found in Liverpool

Managing UXO risks with Igne

UXO presents a serious hazard to construction projects, causing delays, safety risks, and financial loss. Igne provides expert UXO risk assessment, detection, and clearance, ensuring projects proceed safely and efficiently.

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