



# EXETER

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



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# WWII Bombing of Exeter



**Exeter was the first city to be attacked as part of the Baedeker Blitz, a series of retaliatory raids targeting areas of cultural and historical significance.**

Exeter contained few strategic military Luftwaffe targets, although the city was home to major rail infrastructure and utilities, such as gas works and water treatment works.

Exeter sustained only minor bombing activity during the early phase of the war. The first bombs fell on 7th August 1940 causing only minor damage. This, like most of the 19 raids on Exeter, was a 'tip and run' raid.

On the 23rd and 24th April 1942 numerous high explosive and incendiary bombs were dropped on the city. Luftwaffe bombers returned in smaller numbers on the following two nights, dropping more bombs.

Some records report 2,020 1kg incendiary bombs dropped, but it is likely that the total number was closer to 4,000. Several delayed action bombs were dropped which detonated at intervals of up to three days after the attack. At its peak, 54 metric tons of high explosive bombs and incendiary bombs were dropped on the city in 46 minutes. It was unusual in that an unprecedented high concentration of 1kg incendiary bombs fell, and single houses were being struck by 3-5 incendiary bombs simultaneously.

However, on the 4th May the city sustained another devastating raid. Enemy aircraft executed an intense and highly concentrated attack. Over 75 tons of HE bombs and many thousands of incendiary devices were dropped in one night. More than 400 shops, 150 offices, 50 warehouses and 36 pubs and clubs were levelled.

## Key Facts:

- Over 1,500 of the city's 20,000 houses were destroyed, 2,700 were seriously damaged and few of the remaining 16,000 were left unscathed. A total of 265 people were killed and 111 seriously injured.
- Exeter was initially seen as a safe place to be evacuated early in the war.
- Many of Exeter's historic buildings were destroyed during these raids.

## Exeter's Military Past

RAF Exeter, on the perimeter of the city, was the largest military facility in Exeter and served as a Fighter Command Station. WWII-era airfields are a common location for the discovery of post-war UXO!

Local defence was bolstered by the 1st Devon Home Guard Battalion, which prepared anti-invasion defences and manned anti-aircraft positions.

These defences ranged from pillboxes (concrete structures) to trenches and anti-tank obstacles. But also, many anti-aircraft defences, such as barrage balloons and anti-aircraft batteries.

The balloon's primary role was to deter enemy aircraft, particularly low-flying bombers and dive bombers, from accurately attacking targets. The presence of the balloons forced enemy pilots to fly at higher altitudes, making their bombing less precise.

# Impact of legacy UXO



## Sample of Finds:

- 12/22, a Mills Hand grenade was discovered in the River Exe close to the city centre, in similar areas to where the Home Guard were operating.
- 02/21, picture above, this 1,000kg unexploded WWII bomb, nicknamed The Hermann after Hermann Goring, Hitler's second in command, was found in Exeter (it was found just 300m from a defensive barrage balloon location).

## Legacy:

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 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.

## 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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