

Nuclear attack was not, I admit, uppermost in my thoughts when I followed an arrow saying Stable Market into a muddy yard off Haslemere High Street the other day. I was in search of a set of old-fashioned pre-metric scales and had been advised that a shop called the Clutter Box would serve my needs. Having located it at the far corner next to a small scrap heap, I found the place closed. 'She's just popped out for a minute,' said a woman in a red hat who was rummaging through the contents of a box marked 'Everything in this box 5p'. I browsed about, inspecting broken kitchen chairs and chipped china jugs against Mrs Clutterbox's return. It was while I was pondering a pair of shapely black legs, the type that hosiery departments use for displaying tights, which might have converted into a coat rack, that I saw it - a large, black metal box like a windowless garden shed with one big and two small chimneys on top.

'What on earth is that?' I asked the woman in the red hat. 'A nuclear fallout shelter I think,' she replied without interest. 'That fellow who owns the Forge made it. There's a notice round the back.' I clambered over car bumpers and nettles to the back, and sure enough a faded sign proclaimed this to be a genuine nuclear fallout shelter and gave a telephone number.

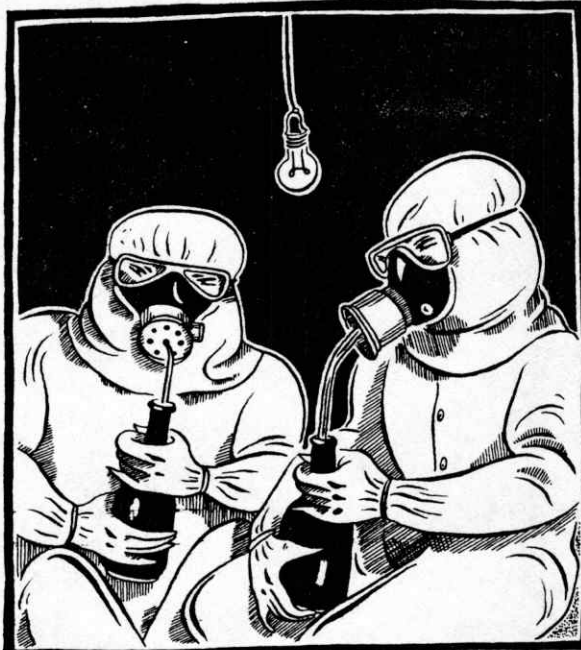
Now I, too, saw and was horrified by that recent television film showing what would happen if a nuclear missile were to land on Sheffield, and I was greatly cheered to know that the Chief Executive of Haslemere, whoever he was, had had the foresight to make proper provision for his war cabinet instead of making do with makeshift offices in the basement of the Town Hall. I said as much to Mr John Masterton, who designed and built the shelter, and he smiled sadly and said no, this had nothing to do with the defence of Haslemere in the event of a nuclear attack. He only wished it had. The shelter was his private property and one of these days he would remove it from its showcase behind the Stable Market and dig it into his garden.

The story of Mr Masterton's shelter has the uncomfortable familiarity of the story of the seven wise and seven foolish virgins. In the four years since he has been making them he has sold only two in this country but a steady stream to the Middle East, where wise desert virgins prevail. I said that perhaps the price might have something to do with the lack of home



SUE ARNOLD

Gimme shelter



interest. The basic shelter suitable for a family of four costs around £8,500 and this is without extras such as properly connected air filters, drainage system, solid state space-age manually generated batteries, wall-to-wall carpeting and so on. Again Mr Masterton smiled sadly and said that people thought nothing of spending £8,500 on a car or a cruise or a home extension. This was a home extension that meant life or death.

At the risk of sounding defeatist I said that the one feeling I had had after seeing the hideous effects of radiation and the ensuing nuclear winter was that instant annihilation was the answer, not a lingering death in a shelter. 'Ah, but say you haven't the choice,' said Mr Masterton. 'Say the bomb drops on Bagshot or Woking and you are still alive, then what?' He took me round the shelter.

If, as the experts say, a hole in the

ground is the only safe place, this is a pretty fancy hole. It has two wide bunks, a loo, a basin, an 80-gallon water tank, and sufficient storage space for six months' supply of tinned food. The large chimney turned out to be the entrance hatch leading to the de-contamination chamber. How would you know when it was safe to come out? Mr Masterton said you would send up a sensory probe to measure the level of fallout, the modern equivalent, I suppose, of Noah dispatching the raven. The two smaller chimneys were the air filters but these, said Mr Masterton, had been redesigned and were much smaller. 'Surely aesthetics are the last thing to worry about?' I said. Mr Masterton said it was nothing to do with aesthetics.

Just supposing your neighbours, foolish virgins all, got wind of your shelter and tried to force an entry. They wouldn't be able to because the trap door over the entrance hatch weighed over half a ton and could only be opened from within. So maddened would your neighbours be that their next move would be to nobble you, and how better than to cut off your air supply? The newly designed air system was as complex a piece of engineering as the labyrinth at Knossos. We returned to the 7ft-square living quarters. 'OK,' I said, 'you've dug yourself in, you've got food, air and water. How do you prevent yourself going off your head?' Mr Masterton indicated some boxes of Monopoly, Scrabble and *Good Housekeeping* magazines. One *Good Housekeeping* had recipes for Scrumptious Summer Fruit Desserts, which might, in the depths of an eternal nuclear winter, become irritating.

Feeling a little despondent, we arrived home to find my neighbour Mrs Purchas had arrived for tea. 'Good heavens John,' she said, greeting Mr Masterton. 'I had no idea you built fallout shelters. I'd better tell Christopher. He wants to install a ready-made concrete wine cellar. Maybe it could double as an NFO shelter.' Mr Masterton said concrete was no good because it was porous and in time radiation would seep in, which apart from everything else would damage the Château d'Yquem.

The answer of course is for Christopher and me to come to some amicable arrangement whereby he stores his wine in my fallout shelter and when the sirens go off we all make a dash for it and drink ourselves into oblivion - provided the Chief Executive of Haslemere doesn't block up our air holes first. □

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