

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

AIR RAIDS

East Grinstead cinema bombed

[Three pages: book extract, photos, book extract]

From *The War in East Sussex* (Sussex Express and County Herald, August 1945)

The Cinema Tragedy

The worst incident at East Grinstead during the war, and one of the outstanding disasters in the county, occurred just after 5 p.m. on Friday, July 9th, 1943, when Whitehall Cinema and many business premises in London Road and High Street were demolished by a string of bombs dropped by a lone German plane.

A total of 108 people were killed, and 235 were injured. Fire added to the horror of the scene as it spread in London Road from an ironmonger's stores which received a direct hit. Four and five-storeyed buildings with their up-to-date and spacious shops were reduced to rubble. Considerable damage was done in the High Street, where a number of shops received direct hits and were demolished and the occupants killed outright. Fortunately there was no fire in this area, or the whole length of old buildings, many of them half-timbered, might have been burnt to the ground.

In the Whitehall Cinema there was an audience of 184, including a number of school children, and they were trapped when the bomb fell. The usual notice announcing an air raid alert signal had been displayed, so that anybody who wished to leave might do so. Suddenly there was a terrific crash, and, to use the words of a survivor, "the whole building seemed to collapse like a pack of cards, trapping most of the audience." The bomb crashed

through the roof into the front of the auditorium. Many were buried under falling masonry and were killed instantly, and others were pinned down and badly injured. A small number escaped with minor injuries. Efficient Civil Defence workers and soldiers commenced the gigantic task of clearing the rubble and rescuing the trapped and the injured, while the N.F.S. fought the flames. It was the darkest hour the town has ever known.

The Wednesday following was a day of mourning in the town, when the victims were laid to rest in a communal grave in Mount Noddy cemetery. The service, which was attended by many hundreds of people, was conducted by the Bishop of Chichester. On Sunday morning, July 18th, a memorial service was held at the Parish Church, and words of comfort to the stricken town were delivered by the Bishop of Chichester.

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Whitehall cinema, East Grinstead, after being bombed on July 9th 1943



© East Grinstead Town Museum [EGRTM 135.17.229]

Funeral for victims of Whitehall cinema bombing, East Grinstead, July 14th 1943



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From *Chequer Mead, History of a Local School 1859-1990*, by Eileen Shepherd and Marilyn Seabrook (Lockholt & Co, Printer, C.1992)

By Miss S Brons

.....Sadly, we lost children from the junior school when the Whitehall was hit by stray bombs. Some children had gone to the cinema on that Friday after school, partly because it was raining, but mainly because their mothers were working in a small munitions factory at the top of Rice's Hill. These children were among the casualties, and following their funeral the infants seemed to do nothing but draw and make coffins in plasticine. This distressed me, but Miss Jefford, very sensibly, said to me, "My dear, just let them go on doing it; they need to work it out of their system."

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