

Petworth School bombed

[Four pages: newspaper article, eye-witness account from a book, photo]

West Sussex Gazette, October 1st 1942

BOMBS ON A SUSSEX BOYS' SCHOOL

BIG DEATH ROLL: MANY INJURED AND MISSING

One of the most terrible blows suffered by any community in the country from bombing in recent months befell a small town in Sussex this week, for bombs dropped by a single raider who appeared over the place during a rift in low clouds, fell on a boys' school with catastrophic effects. Four bombs were dropped. One which fell in the park adjoining did not explode.

It is stated that there were between 70 and 80 boys in the school, with the staff. The final report as to the number killed was not available when we went to press, but by nightfall of the day of the raid some of the youngsters were still unaccounted for. It was then stated that there were 22 dead, 18 missing, and 34 injured. One boy died in hospital during the night. The figures appear to include the casualties at a small laundry near the school, where one worker was killed and two injured.

The school casualties included the death of the Headmaster, Mr. Charles Stevenson (56), who has been in charge of the school for a good many years and has been organist at the Parish Church for some time, and another teacher, Miss Charlotte Marshall, whose home was at Duncton. Two other teachers—Miss Weekes, who came from Portsmouth, and Miss Moresby—and many of the boys who survived their fearful experience were injured. The list of victims would, no doubt, have been even greater than it is but for the fact that some of the boys had left the school for a time to attend a woodwork class in another part of the town hospital and other hospitals.

The emotion caused in the little place by this appalling tragedy needs no description. Our correspondent reports distressing scenes—the way anxious parents quickly arrived and began frantically to assist the A.R.P. Services in their search for children among the ruins of the school, and the subsequent scenes of anguish as the full effects of what had occurred came to be realised. Hours after the explosions groups of parents and other people waited and waited for information about children around a notice-board at the casualty clearing station.

One witness of the scene describes it as resembling what has so often occurred at the head of a coal pit after an explosion in the pit.

Some of the boys appear to owe their lives, like the teacher herself, to the fact that when she heard the whistle of the falling bomb Miss Weekes gathered them round her close to a wall. These children were unhurt. The wall by which they "sheltered" is practically the only part of the school left standing.

This was the first raid experienced by the town, but reports testify to the speed as well as the efficiency with which the members of the A.R.P. Services engaged in rescue work. Ambulances were soon on the scene and so were other vehicles, and doctors and Red Cross nurses, police, and others were, of course, prompt in doing all they could for the injured before and after these were taken to the town hospital.

It is stated that the bomber which brought such desolation to so many homes (and it appears that none of the children killed were evacuees) was flying at roof-top level when its bombs were dropped and that, as stated, it had swooped down through clouds. The explosions shook the whole town. Bodies and debris were hurled far and wide—some of the bodies over a high wall on the opposite side of the road into the park already referred to. The school—a Church school—was built many years ago and has therefore been the place of education not only of a large proportion of the local population, but of men now scattered all over the world.

At mid-day yesterday our representative stated that digging in the ruins was resumed at daybreak. Several parts of bodies were recovered, but many of the remains were unrecognizable, and clothing could be the only means by which anyone can be definitely traced. By noon yesterday the bodies of the following had been identified:—

Miss Marshall; Albert Burgess, aged 12; Frederick Charles Bushby (10); Paul William Robin Thayer (9); Bryan Denis Cross (11); Roy Gumbrell (10); Donald Eric Holden (7); William George Harrington (7); David Charles Moss (9); Charles Hillman (8); John Bertram Morey (7); Robert James Shane (8). Also Mrs. Eva Streeter (61) who was manageress of the laundry.

The Police have nothing but praise for the way all the Services worked, the help of soldiers being most valuable.

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AIR RAIDS

From *Petworth Society Magazine no. 69* (Petworth Society Sept. 1991)

The bombing of Petworth School, September 29th 1942

By Jumbo Taylor

I had worked as an errand boy for Mr Payne, the Lombard Street butcher even before I left school but now, two years out of school, I was working there full time.....When I started Tuesday had been a relatively busy delivery day, involving a bicycle round to Lodsworth, River, Sutton, Bignor, Duncton, Byworth and Graffham, but now there simply wasn't the meat to justify such a round. In any case there were few enough who could afford meat twice a week, even if they had the coupons. What meat there was tended to be delivered at weekends, half a pound, three quarters perhaps, and a slice of corned beef, some by trade bicycle but the more outlying calls by van. All butchers then had a van and a delivery round. Petrol rationing to three gallons a week effectively meant only one delivery.

As I have said, the Tuesday round had dwindled virtually to nothing with the shortage of meat but Mr Payne had an arrangement with Mr Webber at Frog Farm to take half-a-dozen chickens a week. They were a very useful addition to a frugal supply. It was my job to take my bicycle down to Frog Farm to pick up the chicken and I did this every Tuesday.....Gwenda Morgan was working at Frog Farm as a Land Girl and together we would put the birds in sacks, three to a sack, for me to bring back to Paynes in the panier of my trade bicycle. The chicken were definitely a luxury and as such were not only restricted to those who could afford them but also allocated on a rota basis, often the birds were cut in half. Once back at the shop they would be killed, plucked and hung ready for the weekend.

September 29th was such a Tuesday, a damp, drizzly morning. I left the shop in Lombard Street at 10.45 to go down to Frog Farm to collect the chicken. Gwenda would be there to help me and it was a familiar errand by now. I was half way down Frog Farm Lane and in the hollow that the track forms there when I heard the roar of an aircraft coming up from the direction of the river, over the hill to the left and just visible over the hedge on the skyline. As I watched the plane appeared out of the rain. It was flying low, about 150 feet, and even on a murky day like this seemed to cast a huge black shadow. The plane was a Junkers 88 but painted jet black, quite unlike the camouflaged planes we saw normally. The black set the white crosses under the wing into relief and there was a swastika visible on the tail fin. I could see the port underbelly side quite clearly. I stopped the bicycle and sat in the saddle with my feet on the ground. I twisted round to watch it. As a member of the A.T.C. I was trained to observe and recognise. For two perhaps three seconds I watched. It seemed a long time and it occurred to me that this was not the sort of day to expect low flying aircraft; the weather was only suitable for specific air-raids. It was drizzly and overcast. As the roar of the engines receded there was a crump. It was perhaps four or five seconds since I had first seen the JU 88 and it had disappeared completely from my view. Another couple of seconds and smoke and dust could be seen at the back of the Arbour Hill to the north, two distinct black curtains drifting lazily across the overcast sky. It would be an attack on one of the camps to the north of the town, Holland Wood perhaps. There were camps at Pheasant Copse and a new camp in construction at Lower Pond. The smoke however seemed to be drifting from the east. It was something to note but this, after all, was wartime and it was not too unusual.

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I carried on down to the farm, caught the chicken with Gwenda and put them in two bags in the panier at the front of the bicycle. I then cycled back to the shop. This would take some five or ten minutes and I would be back at the shop around 11.15.

Bombs were certainly not routine but they were not unusual either. When I entered the shop Mr Payne took me on one side and said he believed the school had been hit. Everyone was doing what they could but there was no point in going down there, rescue work was in full swing. By 11.45 just about an hour from when I had first seen the plane, I had killed and plucked the chicken. I set off down North Street toward the school. There were broken tiles and timber in the street but I didn't know that the school had been destroyed or that anyone had been hurt. It seemed just one incident in a number of wartime incidents. I was, I suppose, concerned but unaware. However the further I went down North Street the more obvious it became that the dust and smoke I had seen were the result of a direct hit on a building. When I arrived on the scene, it was a picture of complete devastation, a cliché if you like, but that is the only way I can describe it. I could judge the scale of the disaster from my knowledge of the building. After all, I had left only two years previously and I was due there for night school that very evening. The building was never planned to cope with an incident like this. The site was literally crawling with people involved in rescue, tunnelling under the rubble and moving timbers. Over everything hung the suffocating smell of cordite and masonry dust. There were Canadian troops, local volunteers, police, anyone who was available, all sorting desperately through the rubble. As I stood there, one or two boys were being brought out on stretchers, rescuers talking quietly to them. I had a feeling of hopelessness I had not previously had – nor would ever experience again.

There was nothing to do but go home. We lived at 318 Park Road. First I went back to the shop and told Mr Payne I was going home. My mother didn't know about the disaster and I didn't tell her but my father came in about 12.20, put his arm around her and broke the news. My brother was missing and unaccounted for, but there was so much uncertainty during those first hours. He might easily be in hospital and as yet unidentified. We could only hope. This first day was one of total uncertainty. We clung to hope all that day and with increasing desperation in the days and weeks that followed. Perhaps my brother was wandering somewhere suffering from loss of memory. Sometimes even now when I pass the site and the old cemetery the thought comes to mind although I know it's impossible. That first day we waited and prayed for someone to and come and say that he was alive. Mr Godwin, the Rector called late in the day to say that Keith had not been found but still there was no certainty. That night the drizzle continued, we could only lie in bed and listen to the drip of the rain through the leaves, wondering if there was any hope for someone still lying under the rubble. Perhaps my brother was still lying unidentified somewhere in hospital. By Wednesday evening it was hope against hope. On the Thursday or Friday an attempt was made to identify belongings and pieces of clothing. My father recognised a belt and part of a jumper but it still wasn't final, there was still the desperate hope that it was all a mistake and that someone would come along and say they found my brother wandering somewhere. That hope persisted for months, years even. I don't think my parents felt any hatred just loss. Certainly at the time there was a charged atmosphere but ultimately the bombing exposed only the futility of war. No one would have done this deliberately and no one could take pride in such a disaster. I am sure no one did. Neither pilot nor crew could have anticipated the tragic result of their mission.

Jumbo Taylor was talking to the Editor

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Rescue workers among the rubble of Petworth School after it was destroyed by bombs on September 29th 1942



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