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MR TURNER : a memoir (March 1949)

The Boys' School was bombed on Tuesday the 29th September at about, I think, 10.20am.

I heard the sound of aeroplane's engines immediately followed by their explosions. I judged the bombs had fallen a good way off as the explosions were not loud, neither was the concussion pronounced. I was talking to the O/C of the Petworth Flight, Air Training Corps who had come into my office at the Bank about the possibility of obtaining from Mr Stevenson, the Headmaster at the Boys' School, some wood wind instruments for the A.T.C. Band. Little did we know that poor Stevenson was at that moment being killed.

My wife telephoned down to me from our flat over the Bank to find out where the bombs had landed as she was sure they were near North End House where our son was at school. I at once rang up that school to ask if their place was all right and was astonished to hear Mrs Baggalley, the proprietress say that it was in a pretty bad mess and she would be glad of assistance. It was found later that not one of the sixty souls in the building was injured, though a good deal of damage was done and the school had to be closed some weeks for repairs. Mrs Baggalley's little daughter Ann - who was about three years old - had just been dressed ready for a walk and was looking out of a bedroom window with her face close to the glass when the blast from the explosions sucked the glass outwards instead of blowing it in.

Hardly had Mrs Baggalley rung off when Mr C.D. Martyn, the A.R.P. Officer rang up to ask me to go with him to the Boys' School (some one-hundred yards from North End House) which had had a direct hit. I believe he and I were on the scene of the disaster within some 15/20 minutes of its occurrence. On our way down North Street we saw a line of stationary vehicles stretching in the Horsham Road direction from about the Wheatsheaf Inn. The roads near the bombed site were pretty well choked with rubble and debris.

On arrival I found a number of people searching in the ruins of the School: among them some of the boys' parents and also the Rector. The latter, whose cassock was smothered in dust and stained with blood was carrying an injured child to the road side to await an ambulance. A cloud of dust still hung over the place and the smell of detonated explosives was strong.

I cannot remember how much of the school building was standing, but I have an impression that only a portion of the outside wall abutting on to the North Chapel road remained, with some remnants of the interior walls: most of the latter not more than three or

four feet high. Part of the outside wall just mentioned - about fifteen or twenty feet high - appeared unsafe, and attempts were made to pull it down with ropes. However, it held and was not demolished until some days later. Rescue work was impeded by piles of debris, and I think I am right in saying that the search for victims went on all that day and part of the next. Never shall I forget the amazing fortitude of those parents and relatives who gathered at the spot patiently waiting for news.

Some Canadian troops travelling towards Petworth gave prompt help and within a few minutes of the explosions were on their way with some of the injured children to the Red Cross Centre, in charge of Mrs Brydone, and to the First Aid Post at the Cottage Hospital. Eventually such of the children as needed hospital treatment were taken to Chichester. True to type, the County A.R.P. authorities made a fuss because the injured children were not sent direct to Chichester hospitals. It mattered nothing to them whether or not the children could stand the journey without prior attention. On the other hand I do not think one can praise too highly the Rescue Squad sent from Lodge Hill by the County authorities.

It was a dull, cloudy morning and a Junkers 88 machine was being chased from East to West parallel to the Downs by one of our Beaufighters, when the Junkers made a sharp turn North, and got away from his pursuer. He came down through a bank of cloud just South of Petworth and it is assumed let his bombs go at Petworth House which, from above, may have looked like a barracks. Of the three bombs dropped one struck a tree only a few feet from Petworth House, ricocheted from the ground through a shrubbery, over the park wall and struck the school. Another ricocheted making a direct hit on the school and the third dropped just behind the building. All seemed to be fitted with slightly delayed action fuses for there was a tale of one child in the main classroom who put his hand on the bomb which came to rest by the fire-place to steady it. There were tales also of the Headmaster ordering the children quietly to file out. The Headmaster and an assistant mistress were killed in addition to twenty five boys. Lord Leconfield's laundry adjoining the School was badly damaged and a man working there subsequently died from his injuries. Today, six-and-a-half years after the occurrence the laundry still stands as a gaunt reminder, with its broken walls and rafters.

The incident, the first of its kind affecting a school in this country, attracted much attention. It was only owing to the fact

that some twenty boys were in another part of the town at a wood-working class, that the casualties were not heavier, and I know the Ministry of Information made the utmost publicity for propaganda purposes in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. Money flowed in for helping the victims and those families distressed by the bombing: contributions were received from as far afield as Australia and the U.S.A. A committee appointed to administer the fund made grants for hospital comforts, surgical appliances, travelling for parents and so on, as well as for dental and other treatment. Over £600 remaining has just recently been handed over to the Petworth Rural District Council for the erection of a memorial.

The Saturday following the bombing was a glorious day of sunshine, blue sky and fleecy white clouds: most fitting for the funeral.



"The coffins were drawn up on army vehicles outside the Church..."

Photograph by George Garland. Print loaned by Tony Ball.

The coffins were drawn up on Army vehicles outside the Church while the Rector conducted an impressive service and a congregation crowding the building almost to its limits heard a sermon delivered

by the Bishop of Chichester. I left before the service was over to be ready at the Horsham Road Cemetery to announce the name on each coffin as it was received by bearers for its carriage, so that parents and relatives could follow it to the side of the large communal grave.

During the whole of the funeral ceremony one or two of our fighter 'planes circled in the neighbourhood, to give protection from air attack I was told, but I was never able to verify this.

The conduct of some members of the Press on the day of the funeral was not particularly creditable. As churchwarden I was charged with the allocation of seats in the Church, and I had no little trouble in dislodging one hard-faced bitch of a reporter of one of the London Dailies from a pew reserved for bereaved parents. Another woman reporter of the same type was checked by a friend of mine for shouting to a photographer friend from various positions to "Come and get another from here" while the Committal Service was in progress. Highly indignant she asked my friend if he knew to whom he was speaking: a reporter from the I shall feel eternally grateful to him for replying that he might have known it and if she made any more disturbance he would give her into the charge of the police.

It will be appreciated that six years and six months have elapsed since the events I have tried to describe above and memory plays peculiar tricks. It is more than likely that some details are not strictly accurate, but I have tried to relate what I believe to be the facts.

F.H.L. Turner
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Petworth

March 1949

Note:

Mr Turner was Manager of the Westminster Bank at the time.
The time given for the raid is probably incorrect.