

The Night of April 8th-9th, 1941

The attack on Coventry on the night of April 8th-9th took the form of two separate raids. The first, which lasted until nearly midnight, was followed by a lull, before the attack was resumed in the early hours of the morning.

April 8th was the penultimate day of Easter term. The annual 1st XV photograph was taken during the day, the last photograph to be taken of the School before the bombing. The fire-watching party that evening was led the School's senior History master, Mr E.B. Shipley. He recorded that the members were a little late getting their supper. The wail of the sirens was followed quickly by the

opening up of the guns and the falling of the first bombs. A shower of incendiaries fell on the School and, in Mr Shipley's words, *"the playground became suddenly pinpointed, almost incandescent, as the incendiaries showered down. We were to see much pyrotechnic brilliance later on, but nothing was more vivid than that moment."*

The School's fire-crew were soon hard at work. Fortunately, several incendiaries that had fallen on the roof of the School rolled off into the playground, where they could be dealt with relatively easily, the technique being to empty sandbags onto the

bombs. One, however, had fallen near the laboratories and had to be tackled from a piece of flat roof nearby. Mr Shipley and the School porter, Mr Thorogood, provided the sandbags that *"willing boys"* quickly took to the incendiaries. The stock of sandbags being soon exhausted, other bags were pulled down from the entrance to the A.R.P. post. In this way, some 15 bombs were tackled. On this first phase of the night's work, Shipley commented: *"The crew had youth and agility and plenty of ready experience at hand to teach them! It was hard work keeping pace with their needs."*



KHVIII 1st XV 1940-41

Back row: B.J.Taylor T.D.Trickett H.G.Oswin G.A.Barnett R.C.Richards

Middle row: B.L.Taylor A.F.Adams J.G.Powell G.L.Murray I.W.Fraser

Front row: J.H.Goodman R.E.Shreeve C.E.J.Dupenois G.A.Parkes W.H.Carruthers

Taken on 8th April, 1941 before the final fixture of the season. When interviewed in 2005, Brian (B.L.) Taylor and Bill (A.F.) Adams revealed that, in advance of the photo, the carved Victorian bell pull had been switched for a lavatory flush, which can clearly be seen on the right of the image. Despite thorough interrogation, and the passing of more than 60 years, team loyalty held firm and name of the individual responsible was not revealed!

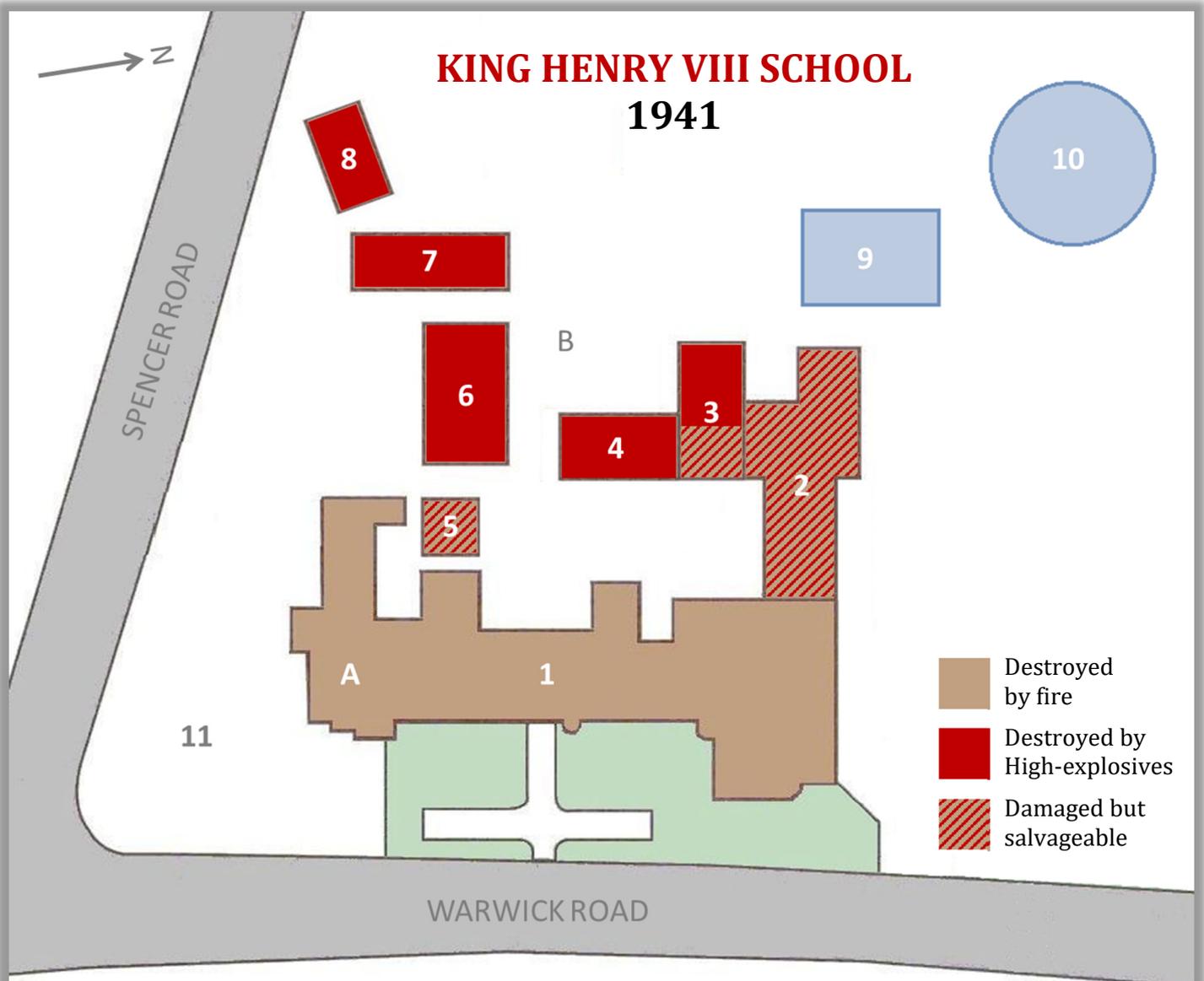


One of the first to arrive offering assistance was Deputy Head Warden Alfred John Ward, a 35-year-old capstan operator from Moor Street in Earlsdon. He was awarded the British Empire Medal in September 1941 for his devotion to duty on the night 8th/9th April. The official citation in the London Gazette tells us:

“During an air raid a H.E. bomb demolished several dwelling houses. Warden Ward at once took charge of the rescue of persons who were trapped in the debris. Regardless of the danger from unsafe walls and debris he crawled into the wreckage and succeeded in bringing out the victims. Ward displayed qualities of leadership and his devotion to duty at all times has been outstanding.”

However, the original recommendation written by Chief Warden Ratliff contains further details of Ward’s actions, including:

“At another incident he climbed the central tower of King Henry VIII Schools which were blazing furiously and at grave risk materially assisted in salvaging valuable records and stock.”



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| 1. Main building | 7. Old workshop | A. An incendiary bomb sets fire to the dry roof timbers of the Headmaster’s house |
| 2. 1934-35 extension | 8. Pavilion | B. High-explosive bombs destroy buildings and salvaged artifacts |
| 3. Chemistry lab | 9. Site of air raid shelter (second shelter believed to be near Spencer Road) | |
| 4. Woodwork shop | 10. Site of barrage balloon of 917 Squadron | |
| 5. Tuck shop (commandeered as ARP Post 604) | 11. Headmaster’s garden, given over to food production during the war | |
| 6. Gymnasium | | |

Towards the end of this work, the party had become aware of *"a glow in the front corner from the direction of the Headmaster's house, but we were too busy with the School to go there straightaway"*. An incendiary had lodged behind a chimney, where it had started a fire. The Headmaster's house was at the southern end of the School and was integrated into the main body of the buildings: a fire there jeopardised the whole of the School. With remarkable determination, Mr Shipley and his youthful charges now turned their attentions to this new threat. Ladders were obtained from the laboratories and carried from the back of the School to the front; unfortunately, they proved too short to reach the fire. Undeterred, the party entered the building, equipped with two stirrup pumps, and attacked the fire there. Soldiers had now appeared to give assistance. However, it proved difficult to get at the source of the fire, which had soon established a firm hold in the dry roof timbers. The fire brigade had to be sent for.



E.B. Shipley

band continued the struggle. Initially, they helped the brigade with their hoses, before turning their attentions to salvaging what they could from rooms near the fire. They duly carried out *"an odd assortment, ranging from football boots to typewriters"*, which were placed on the field or in the playground. *"Among the more trivial memories"*, recalled Mr Shipley, *"was one squad of boys clearing the masters' room of the staff symbols of office, their gowns, which were placed with some of the books from the top corridor in heaps on the field. With a bicycle or two they lay quietly enough till the next morning."* One of the fire-watchers, Peter Davies (KHVIII 1935-41), recalled the rescuing of the School Charter. Other valuable papers and records, as well as the Headmaster's desk, were placed near the cycle sheds, but for them, as Mr Shipley noted, *"the fates were less kind ... they had the misfortune to be relatively near the high-explosive bomb which came down later on."* Amongst the possessions lost was the portrait of the School's founder, John Hales, reputedly painted by Holbein. However, Henry VIII's letters patent to John Hales, authorising him to found the



A pre-war photograph of King Henry VIII's Great Seal, validating the School charter of 1545. Although the charter survived the bombing in a fire-proof safe, the wax seal melted in the extreme heat.

School were kept in a fire-proof safe and did survive, though the heat melted the wax on the seal.

Only when the firemen insisted that they were getting in the way did the School's fire-crew discontinue their salvage work. By then, slates were rattling off the roof. With resumption of the raid, the party withdrew to the School shelters. The School was now well ablaze. In Mr Shipley's words: *"the outline of the main building was standing up richly sombre to the background of flame, an illusion of beauty, like pigments on some fantastic canvas"*.

The fire brigade was, of course, facing huge demands on its services. By the time it was able to reach the School, it was unable to deal effectively with the fire, which had spread rapidly along the whole front length of the buildings. During the lull in the raid, the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, the Reverend G.W. Clitheroe, returned to his house in Earlsdon. In doing so, he saw several heavy fires in the direction of his home, *"and soon found the most serious of these to be King Henry VIII Grammar School ... this fine school was being burned out."*

Even with the arrival of the fire brigade, Mr Shipley's gallant



Boys in conversation with one of the firemen in the back playground. Thick smoke from the still burning building obscures the tower.



A fireman continues to 'damp-down' on the morning of 9th April

The high-explosive bomb that destroyed the Headmaster's desk and valuable records also wrecked the School gymnasium, the woodwork shop and one chemistry laboratory, as well as stripping roof tiles and destroying windows in the portions of the School as yet unaffected by fire. The fire was not halted until the morning of April 9th, when it reached the newer rooms, erected in 1934-35. There was less timber here to feed the fire, which was finally brought under control.

The scene on the following morning must have been heart-breaking to those who held the School dear, although one that was replicated throughout much of the city. Writing in the School history, published in 1945, the Headmaster, Mr Burton, said:

"The sight that morning was of indescribable confusion; the whole length of the front was a smoking ruin; the woodwork shop was in ruins, there was no trace of the gymnasium save a heap of bricks; glass, tiles and pieces of furniture lay all over the playground or scattered over quite a large area of the playing field."

To E.B. Shipley the School had "passed from the visible and actual, the events of the night turning into rubble much that had long been familiar".

Many of the School's pupils were initially unaware of what happened on Warwick Road and began to make their way to the School, despite a night spent in air raid shelters, or, like sixth-former Brian Taylor, on fire-duty in other parts of the city. In his autobiography, Brian Taylor describes what he found as he made his way across the city:

"At 8.45 a.m., I had the bitterest shock. There as I picked my way across torn up roads and pavements, I saw from the railway bridge in Warwick Road the smoking shell of KHS. I was in no mood to rush to reach it, but as one or two other boys came along we climbed the hill together. The tower and flagpole looked safe, but the main school doors, where only the previous afternoon we had posed in shorts and jerseys for the 1st XV photograph, stood broken and dislodged. The gymnasium we had changed in, the main hall, classrooms, laboratories, workshops, were shattered, and we heard that the Head, severely wounded during World War One, was now wounded in this. Twenty or thirty of us shuffled forlornly past the battered walls of the

building, stamping hopelessly on the smouldering ashes in a vain attempt to dampen the sparks and to see if anything remained. The trophies and the pictures, the desks and the books had disappeared forever, and there was nothing we could do to bring them back. A few staff arrived but no-one wanted to speak, and after I had fortunately found my own locker still intact beneath a heap of fallen masonry, I took out the books I kept there."

With several friends, including fellow 1st XV members Charlie Dupenois, Ron Parkes and Ron Shreeve, Brian Taylor cycled to the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital in the hope of finding news of Mr Burton. However, by the time they reached the hospital, which had been badly damaged during the raid, a full evacuation of patients was already under way. Unable to find news about Mr Burton, Brian and his friends "volunteered to clear bricks and rubble from the main drive to allow the ambulances a freer access."

It is believed that the injuries that Mr Burton sustained were to his back. However, he soon returned to his job and began the daunting task of keeping his school in business.



The burnt-out shell of the hall

“Somehow and somewhere”, April – July 1941



By mid-morning on 9th April, the task of ‘picking up the pieces’ had already begun

Several photographs, taken on the morning of April 9th, show the scale of the damage to the School buildings and the task confronting the Headmaster and the Governors if they were to keep the School running. Some of these photographs were taken by Brian Taylor. After coming into school at 8.45 a.m., he returned home for his camera in order to record the scene. One of his shots shows two boys on the roof of the science lab replacing tiles. Given the extensive damage suffered by the lab, with one side ripped open and the main part of the roof sagging, it seems a pointless task. In fact, they were trying to make good a section of tiling to one end of the building so as to protect equipment beneath it from the possibility of rain damage. Brian Taylor also climbed up onto the roof and, from there, took a photograph of the main School buildings. This would have been about 11.00 a.m. Despite the devastation, a couple of wheelbarrows can be seen, one in use, and some of the rubble in the playground has been cleared to the side in order to create a path. Even at this very early stage, an attempt was being made to ‘pick up the pieces’.

It is not clear when Mr Burton resumed control of the School’s affairs but an advert was posted in *The Midland Daily Telegraph* on April 14th stating: “All boys who normally would have attended School next term please report at the School at 11 o’clock to-morrow, TUESDAY, APRIL 15, 1941. A. A. C. BURTON. Headmaster.”

By April 22nd, Mr Burton was operating from “some sort of office” at the site, presumably in one of the few rooms to survive more or less intact. One of the first letters, dictated on the 22nd, was to Mr Mason at the General Charities Office at Coventry, with whom he liaised about the Bablake pupils. He told Mr Mason:

“Our plans for the future are not yet determined but we shall make an attempt to carry on somehow and somewhere to get the School going again as soon as possible.”

Mr Burton’s letters over the days and weeks that follow give a valuable insight into the practical difficulties that he faced. He was soon writing to the GPO to ask them to deliver letters to the School, using the usual letter box in the front door; he reluctantly agreed to purchase a much-used typewriter from the Leamington Typewriter Bureau for “a very heavy price” of £24 10s; and he negotiated for a new telephone and for the restoration of electricity to the undamaged part of the School. The Headmaster and his family had, of course, lost their own home, as well as their furniture. Attempts at finding furnished accommodation in Coventry proved unsuccessful and the family eventually had to settle for lodgings in Frankton, some nine miles from the School. Commuting to work and back six days a week, which included regular trips to Alcester, ate into the Headmaster’s petrol allowance and Mr Burton was soon pleading with the authorities for an increase.

The Headmaster was able to move back to Coventry in October 1941. The School’s Caretaker had been called up for war work and



Roger Johnston and friend on the chemistry lab roof replacing tiles to make the room below weatherproof



"The Headmaster of Coventry Grammar School yesterday registered details of the future addresses of his boys."

The Midland Daily Telegraph

"Among the ruins of their bombed school Coventry boys receive instructions from the Headmaster, Mr. A.A.C. Burton, who is seen in the centre of the assembly."



no replacement had been found. However, this released the two rooms in which he had been living and Mr Burton moved into them, even though he was obliged to do a good deal of the Caretaker's work himself.

The School's main priority was, of course, to find accommodation that would enable it to continue its work. Mr Burton gratefully accepted the prompt offer of rooms at the Technical College for use by the Main School, but turned down an offer from Mr Swallow, the Headmaster of Coventry Preparatory School, for use of their buildings, now empty because the 'Prep' had been evacuated from Coventry. Instead, it was decided that the King Henry's Junior School should use the remaining rooms on the Warwick Road site, with repair work being carried out immediately to make them usable. In early May, the Governors of Bablake School agreed to King Henry's taking over the Science Block at Bablake. In the meantime, a search was made for suitable premises near to Coventry that would enable the whole School to be brought back onto one site. The Board of Education was approached to use its influence to secure the whole of the Bablake site for King Henry's use; the approach failed.

King Henry's commenced its summer term later than usual, on Monday, May 5th 1941 – yet this

was less than a month after the bombing. Once the Science Block at Bablake had been cleaned and made suitable for use, the School operated on three sites: forms VI, V and IV at Bablake, where they worked from 9.30 to 11.30 a.m. and from 1 to 5 p.m.; the Lower School at the Technical College, working there from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. during the week, with a further three hours on Saturday morning; and the Junior School using the rooms at King Henry's during the normal school day. With Woodwork, Physical Training and Games being fitted in when possible, Mr Burton was confident that no more than 10% of teaching time on core subjects would be lost. As for the longer term, the situation still looked difficult. The School did not have security of tenure on two of the

sites being used. Nor was there any immediate likelihood of repairing the main buildings at Warwick Road: building materials were subject to wartime restrictions, and the Governors, in any case, lacked the money for such an undertaking. Fortunately, the outer walls seemed sound, although the weather took its toll and the Headmaster told the Governors that *"from time to time one hears bricks and other debris falling"*.

Quite apart from these major issues, Mr Burton still had to deal with a range of smaller, but important, practical matters. He can be found writing on behalf of three employees who had their health insurance cards destroyed in the raid; one of them was Mr Thorogood, the School porter,



Picking through the rubble

who had been involved in fighting fires on the night of April 8th-9th. He also has to deal with questions of liability and insurance for boys involved in helping local farmers and in fire-watching. It was perhaps without irony that, on the second matter, he observed: *"I do not suppose that there will be any more fire-watching here"*. In fact, it would seem that fire-watching continued at the School, at least into 1942. Staff had to be instructed to return before the start of term in order to make an inventory of furniture and other movables destroyed in the raid. The School had lost many of its papers and records, including the names and addresses of the Bablake pupils who had joined the School. Registers had been destroyed and had to be replaced, along with invoices sent to the School. Higher School Certificate examinations were due to be conducted in the summer term and the exam board had to be contacted for a copy of their regulations, the original having been destroyed. An order was placed with the Midland Educational Company for a wide range of goods, including large quantities of pen nibs, chalk, pencils, drawing pins, paper clips and ink, as well as a bottle of 'Gloy'. Mr Burton was clearly



mindful of the financial restraints within which he was operating, and asked a local firm for less expensive headed notepaper than had been supplied in the past: *"our resources are so straightened, I must have something cheaper"*.

Nor was the more usual work of the School neglected. One of Mr Burton's first letters was to advise the Governors of Bablake School of the progress made by their pupils at King Henry's. He felt that they had settled in quickly and had adapted themselves well; their progress was satisfactory, as was their attendance, apart from one boy who was a cause for concern because of too frequent absence. Mr Burton was particularly gratified by the

number of Bablake boys who had volunteered for fire-watching and who had come in after the fire to offer their help. He also wrote briefly to the Headmaster of Leamington College about two boys who were transferring there. One was “*a very good boy and should do well*”; the other he considered “*a well-behaved youth, whom we have never succeeded in teaching very much*”, adding: “*Perhaps you will be more successful*”.

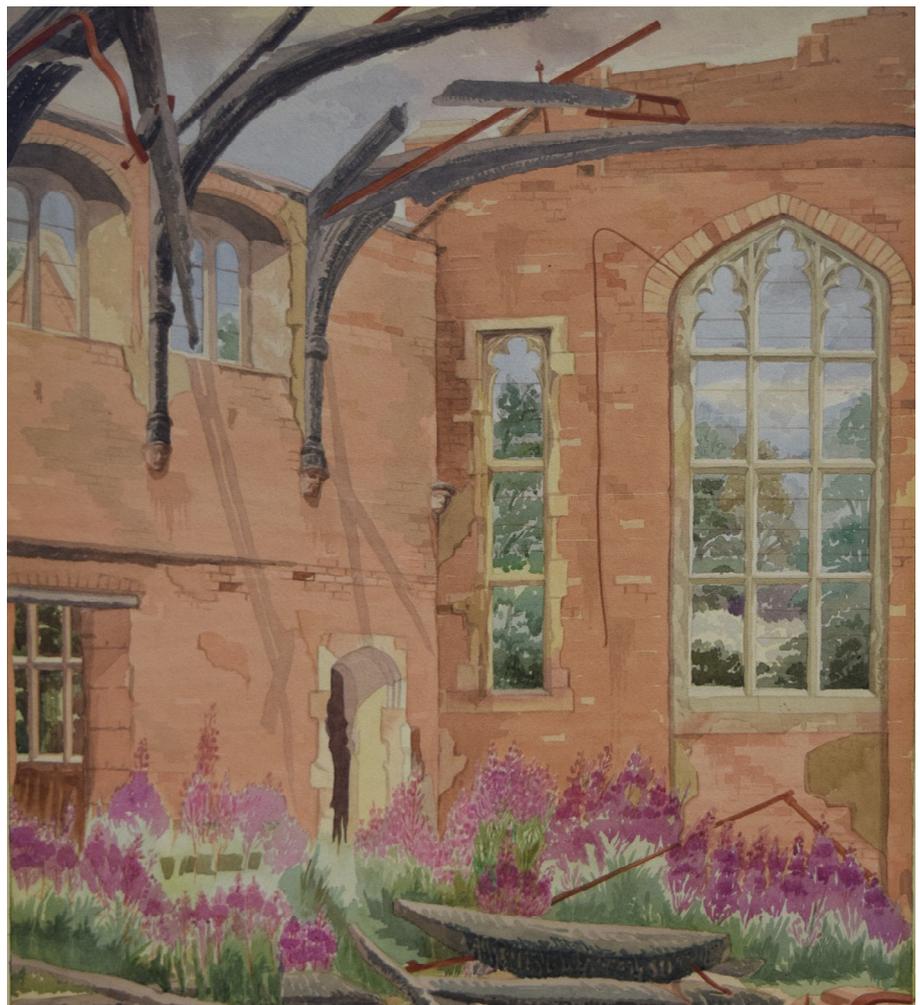
The tone of the Headmaster’s letters is sometimes peremptory and always formal. Arthur Sale was the School’s Second Master, before he returned to military duties in 1939, and presumably as close a colleague as Mr Burton possessed. Yet a letter responding to an offer of help in the aftermath of the bombing starts simply “*Dear Mr Sale*” and concludes “*Yours faithfully*” – exactly the same style as adopted in a letter to a newly appointed member of staff. Mr Sale is requested to come into School so as to list the contents of a cupboard in Room 3, yet this was a man who, in the early stages of the war, had been entrusted with considerable responsibilities in the defence of the south Midlands. [*Arthur Sale, having been invalided out of the Army, returned to teaching duties in May 1941, although he gave up his role as Second Master. He retired in December 1944.*]

However, other letters reveal a more considerate approach. In May, the Headmaster’s Secretary, Miss Jones, resigned. Although a loss he could ill afford, Mr Burton wrote a generous testimonial for her. Several members of his teaching staff also applied for other posts during the summer term. Although two got little support from the Headmaster, those whose work had clearly impressed were given lengthy and generous backing, for example: “*a first rate schoolmaster ... it will be difficult to find a man as good if he goes.*” Mr Burton can be found writing to enquire after a pupil

who had lost both his parents in the raid on April 8th and he wrote a short letter to the mother of another of his pupils, wishing the boy well in his new career. It would seem the letter included some financial assistance; in view of his scrupulous concern for the School’s finances, this help was most probably from his personal resources.

Nor does Mr Burton’s correspondence at this time leave any doubt as to his total commitment to the best interests of his School, as he perceived them; nor to his unwavering attention to detail. As early as April 22nd 1941, his School a ruin, he still found time to reprove Coventry Farmers Dairies for the number of their milk bottles that were lying about the School: “*As bottles are bottles in these times, I shall be glad if you will kindly*

arrange to collect them.” He chased up parents over unpaid School fees, or underpaid fees, in two cases the sums outstanding were as small as 6d and 10d. On May 5th, just four weeks after the bombing of the School, he complained to Flight Lieutenant Lawrance, at the Headquarters of No. 917 Balloon Barrage, that lorries were being driven directly across the School field to the balloon, “*having no regard as to the value of the field as a playing pitch*”. Damage, he insisted, should be restricted to the area that the RAF actually rented; otherwise, the RAF would be approached with a view to the rental agreement being revised. In its way, it was as clear a statement as any other of the School’s determination to resume its normal life.



Above: C.B. Shore’s 1944 painting of the remains of the School Hall Page 20: (top) The ruins of the Dining Room (later the Junior School Library, now ML1) and Geography Room (restored as an art room and now RS1) above; (bottom) C.B. Shore’s painting of Reception in 1944