

“Problem after Problem”, 1941-47

Although King Henry VIII School survived its “disastrous year”, it still faced, in the Headmaster’s words, “*problem after problem*”, which had to be surmounted before life at the School could return to something like normality.

Foremost was the question of accommodation. In the aftermath of the bombing in April 1941, parents of boys in forms II and III were canvassed for their opinions. The great majority favoured the School moving out of Coventry until the war was over and the School rebuilt. At one point, consideration was given to the purchase of Wappenbury Hall but the cost of acquiring the Hall, as well as converting it for use by the School, was considered too great. Instead, the School soldiered on using its various sites in Coventry and, initially, at Alcester.

Although the Headmaster was keen to bring the School together under one roof as soon as possible, the School remained divided until 1946. However, the sites upon which it operated changed. In December 1942, the Principal of the Technical College in Coventry informed the School that he would have to reduce the accommodation that the College had provided. At that point, only four classrooms were in use at Warwick Road, and one of those leaked badly whenever it rained. Three ‘Maycrete’ huts, which would eventually provide an additional seven classrooms, a cloakroom for the boys and a

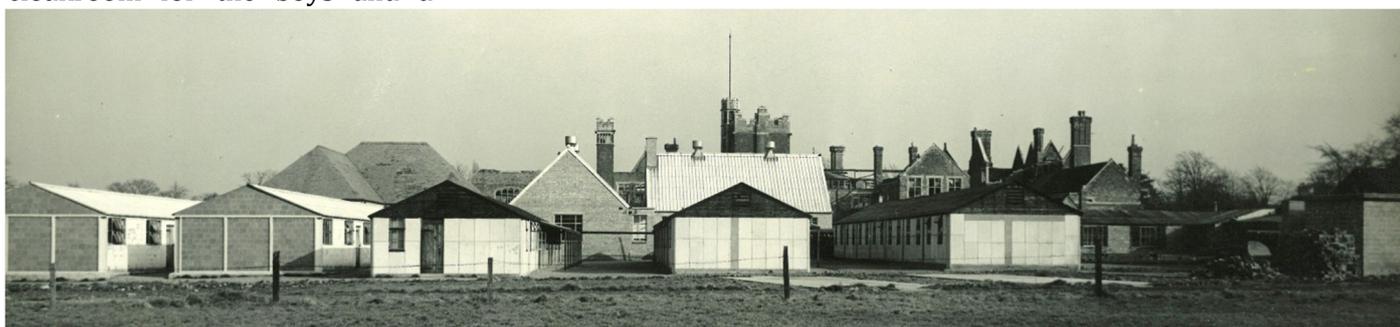


Wappenbury Hall near Princethorpe was considered as an alternative to rebuilding on Warwick Road

room for the staff, should have been completed in early January 1943. In the event, they were not finished until the end of June; officially, the huts were not ‘essential work’ and the contractor could not secure the labour required. A saviour came in the person of Mr Cleverley, an old boy of the School, who offered the use of his house at 2 Belvedere Road. Fortunately, only a small amount of work had to be done on the house to make it usable by the School. By moving the Junior School there, by emptying other rooms at Warwick Road that were being used to store salvaged furniture and by repairing another two rooms at that site, the School was just about able to carry on. It now had eight rooms at Warwick Road and four at the College.

In the summer of 1942, the site at Alcester was closed. The group there, which had numbered 175 boys in September 1941, had dwindled to 50 by the end of the School year, as boys drifted back to Coventry. By that time, staffing

at Alcester was out of all proportion to the number of pupils. Those boys wishing to remain at Alcester were given the option of joining Alcester Grammar School, although only three did so. In July 1943, the evacuation of Bablake pupils to Lincoln came to an end and King Henry’s lost the use of the Science block at Bablake. [*The great majority of the Bablake boys at King Henry’s now returned to their original School, although the parents of about a dozen preferred them to finish their schooling at Warwick Road.*] When the School year began in the autumn of 1943, there were only 15 classrooms available at Warwick Road to hold 23 classes! The only solution was to work a shift system, with the day divided into three parts and each class and each teacher working two of them. The shifts operated from 8.20 to 11.00 a.m.; from 11.20 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. and from 2.20 to 5.00 p.m., with each shift consisting of four 35-minute lessons. Sandwiches were provided for those working two



The temporary huts viewed from the field



A stack of reclaimed bricks to the left of the photo highlights the financial need to salvage as much as possible from the ruins

consecutive shifts. Stan Gough (KHVIII 1943-49) recalled that the ideal combination was shifts 1 and 2, because that left the afternoon for rugby and other activities; the worst was 1 and 3, because that meant having to go home and then return to School. During the year the situation eased somewhat, with another two temporary huts completed and the chemistry lab and woodwork shop rebuilt, the latter being converted into another science lab. Work on the two labs was not finished until the end of the School year. Again, there were delays in getting the necessary materials, and not just for the structure of the buildings – lab fittings were also difficult to obtain. Nonetheless, on March 6th 1943, the shift system was abandoned and the whole of the Main School was able to assemble for the first time since April 1941.

However, there was still no assembly hall, gymnasium or library. Assemblies and Physical Training had to be conducted outside, with a piano being wheeled out to assist with the former. Assemblies were brief if it was raining. Even as late as 1947, boys' toilets were open to the sky. For several years, there were no facilities for meals; pupils brought sandwiches with them, or returned home for lunch or went to one of the British restaurants, usually the one in Albany Road.

However, as war workers were given priority in the restaurants over school boys, many boys had a long wait for a meal and sometimes went without. In March 1945, work began on rebuilding the ruined buildings, initially the ground floor south of the tower. Such work had first to be sanctioned by Government departments, including the Department of Education, the War Damage Commission and the Ministry of Supply, who would allocate the necessary resources. In the meantime, the owner of the property in Belvedere Road, not unreasonably, wished to have his house back, with the School being given notice to quit the property in March 1946. This prompted

acceleration of rebuilding work at the School. Fortunately, by 1946, enough had been done to allow Junior School to use the first of the restored rooms. However, as noted below, the School's roll continued to rise, and the Headmaster was still reporting "grave difficulties of accommodation" affecting the School as late as the year 1946-47. For a while, two out of five half-finished rooms on the first floor of the main School buildings had to be pressed into service, with classes changing the rooms being used in accordance with the requirements of the builders. Nor had fire finished with King Henry's: in November 1945 the Staff Room was burnt out. The fire had been started deliberately and two boys were subsequently expelled.

However, there was some recovery in School sport, with an increasing number of matches against other schools being arranged. For most of the war, the barrage balloon site meant that only two rugby pitches were available on the playing field. These became heavily over-used and additional pitches had to be hired at the Memorial Park. The balloon site was surrounded by barbed wire, sufficiently close to one of the pitches to cause Roger Johnston (KHVIII 1940-46) a



Now a care home, 2 Belvedere Road housed the Junior School until 1946



The new chemistry laboratory built in on the site of the woodwork shop. This building would remain in use until demolished to make way for the new science block in 1990/91.

A PT lesson is being taught in the playground. All assemblies and PT lessons would be held outdoors, whatever the weather, until the construction of the new hall was completed in 1951 and the gymnasium in 1960.

nasty cut whilst scoring a try. The lack of a School canteen meant that School teams and their visiting opponents had to be given post-match refreshments at the British Restaurant in Albany Road. Nor, initially, were there any proper changing facilities for games. However, younger pupils were used to clean up bricks and mix cement, which senior pupils and staff used to rebuild the changing rooms around the original bathtub that had survived the bombing.

Meanwhile, Mr Burton continued to 'Dig for Victory'. The son of a farmer, he had turned the Headmaster's garden into an allotment and the lower part of the School field into a piggery. Produce was routinely sold to staff and he could be seen breaking off carrying buckets of swill to his pigs, in order to teach a Latin lesson. Mr Burton's clothes frequently reflected his dedication to his allotment and to his pigs, rather than his status as Headmaster, and visitors to the School were sometimes surprised to learn the true identity of the somewhat dishevelled figure to whom they had been introduced. The Headmaster's horticultural activities were, of course, a source of endless amusement to his pupils. Brian Taylor recounted the story, current amongst boys at the

School in the early stages of the war, that 'Monty' was developing a secret weapon in the form of his silage heap, the noxious gases from which would be released in the event of invasion!

In 1943, the School reclaimed its Tuck Shop from the A.R.P. authorities. It was renovated before being pressed into service as a classroom. The barrage balloon on the School field remained until 1944. Certainly by the middle of the war, the site was mainly operated by WAAF girls, whose activities, according to Stan Gough, "*provided great entertainment and interest, particularly for the older boys.*" [See image on pg 6.] Abandoned in early 1944, the balloon site was

derequisitioned later that year. The Nissen huts were removed, their concrete bases a legacy of the field's use by the R.A.F. and the subject of negotiations between the School and the Air Ministry, as the School sought compensation for the costs of restoring that part of the playing field. In 1943 the Ministry of Works requisitioned the metal railings that surrounded the School, although the section along Spencer Road that fronted the Headmaster's garden was spared.

Gradually, School societies were revived, starting with the Debating Society and the Stamp Club. In July 1944, after a break of several years, an issue of *The Coventrian* magazine was



No longer required as an A.R.P. Post, the Tuck Shop was handed back to the School but had to be pressed into service as a classroom



Of those who posed for the 1938 school photo, only 3 (Burton, Shore & Liddiard) remained when this photo was taken in late 1949. E.B. Shipley, like Jack Mattocks, had taken another job in 1943, while Frank Metcalf had died in 1948. Frank Liddiard and Cyril 'Piggy' Shore would remain at the School for the rest of their careers; Mr Liddiard retired in 1975 and Deputy Head, Mr Shore remained in post until his sudden death in 1972.

Despite steering the School through the dark days of war, ensuring its very survival, and laying the foundations for reconstruction, sadly Monty Burton would not see the project through to completion. Due to matters of a personal nature, in December 1949 Mr Burton was given no option but to resign. Monty would go on to forge a new life in New Zealand, teaching his beloved classics at Saint Kentigern College. The legacy of his 20 years service to King Henry VIII School would extend far beyond the bricks and mortar restored under his direction. The young men and women seen in this photo, appointed in those post-war years, would go on to form the core of the staff body for decades to come.

produced. The following year, the quatercentenary of the School's foundation was celebrated, with the publication of a School History, a service of Thanksgiving, held in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, and a play commemorating the early years of the School's life, which had to be performed at the Technical College. In general, however, School life during these years remained, in Mr Burton's words, *"austere in the extreme"*. Shortages of even basic requirements, such as books and stationery continued well into the post-war period.

One of the developments that exacerbated the problems of accommodation was the continued increase in the School roll. During 1943-44, it passed 750; the following School year, it reached 825. Despite the introduction of a four-form entry into the Main School in the autumn of 1943, the School had to turn away pupils whose parents wanted them to attend the School; there was also a waiting list for entry into the Junior School. This increase was partly caused by the return of people to Coventry, once their houses had been repaired,

partly by the influx of new workers to the city and partly by a combination of rising wage rates and static School fees, which meant that more could afford to send their sons to the School. Moreover, the evacuation of Bablake School to Lincoln, until the summer of 1943, meant that there was, in effect, less competition.

Increased numbers were, however, a mixed blessing. This was not just because of the strain it put on accommodation but also because of a continuing shortage of teachers. In his annual reports, Mr Burton continually commented on this shortage of staff and the problems it caused. Several teachers had been called up to serve in the armed forces, others to different types of war work. One teacher simply resigned during the middle of the School year and could not be replaced in the short-term. The reasons for this resignation were not given; however, Frank Metcalf commented in his diary on stories of low morale among some of the School's teachers working in Coventry. This was partly, no doubt, a result of long hours and uncomfortable conditions of

work. However, another reason, he felt, was that the different sites being used during the period 1940-43, along with the time that Mr Burton spent travelling between them, led to a number of unpopular members of staff acting *"as little Headmasters"*. Finding new teachers was understandably difficult in wartime; moreover, this difficulty continued into the post-war period. As Mr Burton observed, there were plenty of alternative opportunities for those with the qualifications and abilities that the School sought. Moreover, he felt that there was a clear reluctance for teachers to apply for jobs in Coventry, whilst he also considered that a number of existing staff wanted to move to a safer area. A shortage of teachers meant that classes were larger than they had been before the war.

Those appointed to teach at the School during the war and in the immediate post-war period included several conscientious objectors, as well as a number of refugees from Europe. Tony Burrows, who joined the School as a pupil in September 1947, divided the staff at the time into

three distinct categories: "refugees, conscientious objectors and downright eccentrics". Nonetheless, a good many of this disparate body went on to enjoy long and distinguished careers at the School.

During the First World War, when the School had faced similar staffing problems, the Headmaster, John Lupton, had appointed several assistant mistresses. By the Armistice of 1918, there were eight women teachers at the School. Although their numbers fell quickly in the post-war period, one or two remained on a long-term basis, valued members of the teaching staff. A similar number of women were employed at the School during the Second World War, primarily in the Junior School. However, Mr Burton's correspondence and reports make scant reference to them and he was certainly reluctant to appoint women for positions in the Main School. In March 1941, he told the Governors that shortages of male teachers meant that: "I have been obliged to consider women for posts in the Main School". One who was appointed was Miss Kenyon, a Classics teacher, who started work in March 1941 but soon found a permanent position elsewhere and left in December. Mr Burton acknowledged that she was "a very good teacher" but her success appears not to have overcome his general views about

the suitability of women: in June 1944, he was still regretting "the dearth of men teachers". By 1946, he was keen even to reduce the number of female staff in the Junior School, telling the Governors, in June of that year, that: "The time seems opportune to revert to our pre-war practice of having men teachers in the upper part of the Junior School." By contrast, John Lupton had lauded the School's female teachers as being part of a "band of gallant women" that enabled British schools to carry on during the First World War.

The disruption caused by problems of accommodation, staffing and other war-related matters had its effects on the School's academic standards. The Headmaster's annual reports to the School's governors inevitably dwell on these. In 1944 he bemoaned the previous summer's School Certificate results, with only 38 of 72 candidates passing. (These examinations were the rough equivalent of the later 'O' Level and GCSE exams.) Commenting on this disappointing performance, Mr Burton pointed out that the forms involved consisted, for the most part, of boys who had entered the School in 1939 and who had therefore suffered the most from the disruptions that war had brought. Lacking a proper educational grounding, their later progress was inevitably hampered. However, a year later,

the Headmaster felt that the School was making "real progress towards a recovery of our pre-war standards".

Peace in 1945 may have brought the promise of better things but it did not bring an end to the problems that war had caused for the School, any more than it did for the country as a whole. A photograph of the School, taken from Warwick Road in 1945, shows its appearance as being much the same as it was in the aftermath of the bombing raid of April 1941 – a "skeletal façade", in Roger Wilton's words. The repair of the main buildings continued for a number of years, with a new assembly hall, gymnasium and other facilities being added later. Nonetheless, in October 1948, Mr Burton was able to report on the School year 1947-48 that:

"The year has been noteworthy in that for the first time in nine years it was possible to do the daily work of the School unhampered by some disturbing or cramping factor. The years from 1939 to 1947 were marked either by dislocation caused by the war or by the harassing effects of too little space, or the disturbing noise of rebuilding. It was a great relief to be able to settle down to work undisturbed and with sufficient room to work in, and was much appreciated by those who had borne the burden of the preceding years."



Postscript

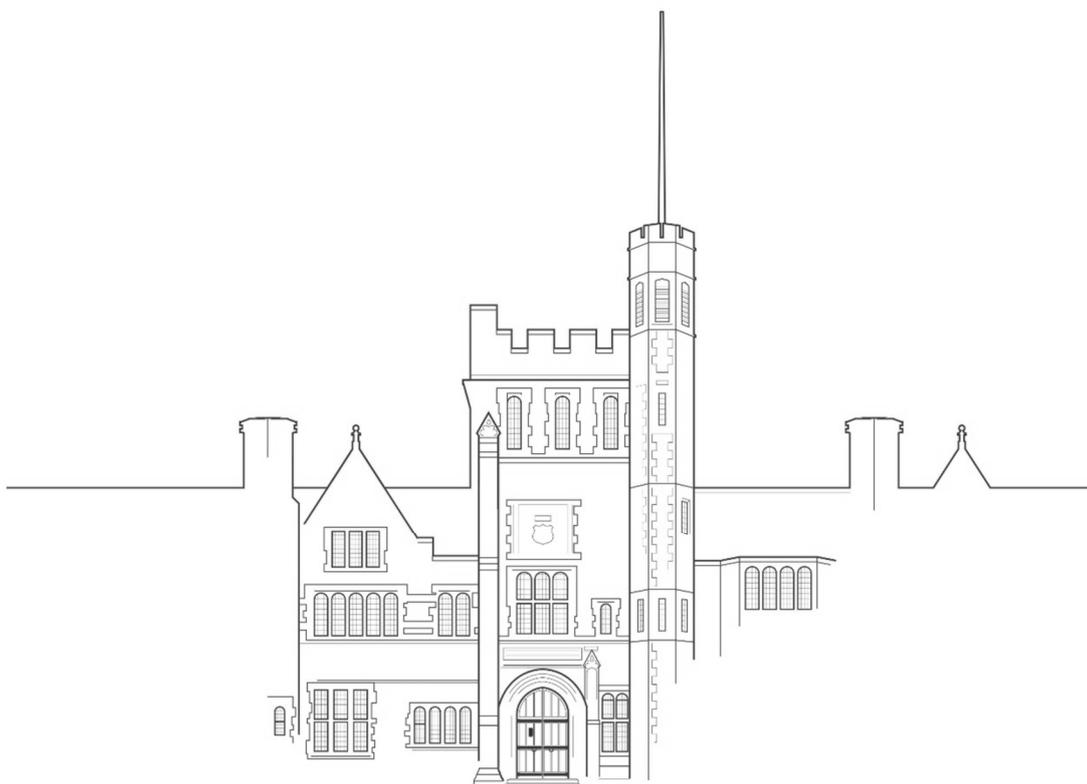
In June 1940, Winston Churchill famously urged his compatriots to ensure that the war years would be remembered as the country's "finest hour". Many subsequently felt that they were. How much impact oratory had on those involved in the School's struggle to carry on is, of course, impossible to assess. In all probability, the task was too prolonged for rhetoric to have more than a short-term effect, although there was certainly more than a touch of the 'Blitz spirit' in the events of April 1941, and their immediate aftermath.

The job of restoring the School to some semblance of normality took several years and these were times of considerable hardship – and not just in terms of the conditions in which the School operated. The war years saw rationing and widespread shortages. Although the threat of bombing receded from 1942 onwards, it did not entirely disappear; moreover, the impact of the 'Blitz' on Coventry was still very plain and the memory of the losses suffered was still fresh.

Hardship and privation continued into the post-war years. Kenneth Richardson described the centre of Coventry in the winter of 1945-46 as "*still a grey, unpainted waste of cellars and temporary corrugated-iron buildings where once prosperous shops had stood; but something more than shops, cinemas and public houses had gone. The life of a whole community had been dislocated...*" Rationing continued and shortages included food, clothing, building materials and fuel. The winter of 1946-47 was one of the harshest on record. Recalling his time at school during that winter, Fred Holland (KHVIII 1941-49) wrote: "*heating in the huts was totally inadequate. Paraffin heaters were installed, but for weeks we worked in overcoats and gloves. The free school milk (one third of a pint per pupil) froze in the bottles ... ink froze in the inkwells.*" It is for good reason that the post-war period in Britain is often called "*The Age of Austerity*".

Yet throughout those difficult years, the School maintained fixity of purpose. After the initial

impact of the bombing in April 1941, when Mr Burton's objective was simply to "*carry on somehow and somewhere*", there was unwavering resolve to re-unite the School on one site, to rebuild or replace damaged School buildings and to restore, or even surpass, pre-war academic standards. In order to fulfil those aims, a catalogue of problems had to be overcome. That the School succeeded, whilst at the same time experiencing a very considerable expansion in the number of its pupils, was a considerable achievement. However, the School's success is merely a small example of what Coventry as a whole achieved during that same period; and, just as Coventry's citizens in general took pride in what they accomplished, so must those who were more specifically associated with the School. Looking at those years now, what impresses is not so much the rhetoric of the country's leaders but rather the resilience and determination of a generation that simply 'got on with it'.



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FORMER PUPILS:

We are indebted to the recollections of the following former pupils: Bill Adams, Tony Burrows, Stan Gough, Fred Holland, Roger Johnston. We are particularly grateful to Brian Taylor for allowing us to quote from his autobiography and for the use of the photos listed below.

PRIVATE PAPERS:

Metcalfe, Frank: Diary; extracts published by kind permission of Peter Metcalfe

KING HENRY VIII SCHOOL ARCHIVES:

Admission Register, 1935-39
Headmaster's Reports to the School Governors, 1936-48
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The Coventrian Magazine: various editions

OTHER SOURCES:

The Midland Daily Telegraph: various editions
Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Preston Grammar School Archive
The National Archives
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The Imperial War Museum: Pg6 – A Balloon Site (ART LD 2750); Pg8 – Potato Harvest (ART LD 5982)
Brian Taylor: Pg7 – ARP Messenger; Pg16 – Boys in conversation; Pg17 – Burnt out Hall; Pg18 – two images
Bablake School: Pg13 – Mr E.A. Seaborne
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