

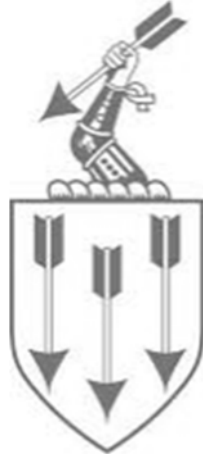
The Most Disastrous Year

September 1940 – July 1941

**A year in the life of King Henry VIII School
- and how it was survived**



Chris Holland and Rob Phillips



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by

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“The good fortune, which attended the School the previous year when we were as yet untroubled by the effects of war, deserted us completely in the year under review, which has to be described as the most disastrous in the history of the School.”

A.A.C. Burton: Headmaster’s Review of the School Year ending July 1941

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The School before the Second World War

In 1935, King Henry VIII School celebrated the 50th anniversary of its move to the Warwick Road site. It did so with growing confidence in its future, as the School seemed finally to be fulfilling the expectations that had accompanied its move, in 1885, from Hales Street to modern premises on Styvechale Hill.

The early years at Warwick Road were difficult. Specifically, the School found it hard to attract the number of pupils needed to give it a sound financial basis. In 1890 the School roll was only 110; by 1910, when John Lupton took over as Headmaster, it had risen slightly to 146. However, Mr Lupton was told by his predecessor that *"the School at the top of the hill"* was referred to in Coventry as *"that bankrupt concern at the top of the hill"*. During John Lupton's tenure as Headmaster, from 1910 to 1931, there was a steady improvement in the School's situation. By the

time of his retirement, there were about 250 boys in the Main School, plus those in the Preparatory Department. Nonetheless, the School's income was barely enough to meet expenditure and there was no reserve in the bank.

John Lupton's successor, Mr A.A.C. Burton, was also a classicist; thereafter, the similarities between the two men cease. Kenneth Richardson, in his book *"Twentieth Century Coventry"*, made the point that Mr Burton's predecessors had *"all been public school men"*, who *"looked for their educational ideal to such places as Shrewsbury and Rugby"* and, in effect, tried to turn Coventry's ancient grammar school into a minor public school. Mr Burton's approach was different. He came to Coventry after five years as Headmaster of Burnley Grammar School, where he had gained a reputation as an efficient organiser. Richardson said of him: *"Academically Burton*

lacked much of the quality and public school background of his predecessor but was far superior to him in business sense." Within a few years he had transformed the School. He developed the Preparatory Department into a proper Junior School and he took far more pupils from the local authority – the Special Place Holders. Aided by an improving economic situation, numbers on the School roll increased steadily and a three form entry was introduced into the Main School in 1937. During the School year 1938-39, there were nearly 500 boys in the Main School and just over 100 in the Junior School. To accommodate these rising numbers, a significant building programme took place in the 1930s, which included new classrooms and laboratories, as well as the conversion of the ground floor of the Headmaster's house into premises for the Junior School.



Alfred Charles Burton was invariably referred to as A.A.C. Burton, or 'Monty' Burton by boys at the School. Born in 1889 at Shillington in Bedfordshire, the son of a local farmer, George Burton, and his wife, Emma, Albert was educated at Hitchin Grammar School and St Catherine's Society, Oxford. He then taught at Wigan Grammar School and Cowley School, St Helens, before moving to Preston Grammar School in January 1915, where he became the Senior Classics Master and a House Master. In May 1917, he went to France as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Garrison Artillery. He was wounded the same year; it was subsequently disclosed that he had been left with fragments of his metal helmet in his skull. He returned to Preston before moving to Burnley Grammar School in 1925, where he was Headmaster until 1931.



It was also a time of rising academic standards, although the number of boys staying on beyond the age of sixteen was still small, especially by comparison with the present-day School. In his annual report to the Governors for the School year 1935-36, Mr Burton stated that there were only 17 boys over the age of sixteen years at the start of that year. It follows that the number going on to higher education was also very small: at the end of the year 1937-1938, a successful one for the School, four boys went on to Birmingham University, three to St John's College, Oxford, one to Liverpool University and two to teacher training colleges at Saltley and Winchester. The great majority of leavers went directly into employment locally, many among the firms underpinning Coventry's prosperity: Courtaulds, Alfred Herbert, GEC, Dunlop, Armstrong Siddeley, Armstrong Whitworth, Daimler, Triumph Motor Company etc. Others took jobs with Coventry Corporation or with local banks, or with firms of accountants and solicitors; some entered family businesses. A few entered the armed forces, including Derrick Bailey, who joined the R.A.F. in 1939 and was killed in 1942.

Essentially, the pre-war School remained the city's "Grammar School", and was still frequently referred to by that name. ("King Henry VIII School" was only commonly used as a name following the move to Warwick Road in 1885.) The great majority of its pupils came

from the city: of 107 boys entering the School in September 1938 (including 39 into the Junior School), only seven came from Warwickshire. Of the 68 admitted to the Main School, 37 held Special Places and another four Governors' scholarships. The large number of boys holding Special Places had significantly widened the social basis of the School, with a smaller percentage of pupils being drawn from the local professional classes than was the case before the First World War. The Admission Register for the Main School in 1938 records entrants coming from a wide variety of backgrounds. The largest group are the sons of men working in engineering and other jobs in local industry – tool room machinist, engine fitter, jig designer etc; several are inspectors in local factories. Others are the sons of civil servants, local government officers, clerks, commercial travellers or men working in the retail sector. One boy is the son of an accountant, and two have fathers who were company directors but the list also includes the sons of a boiler room attendant, a bus driver, a railway guard and a farrier. Indeed, the list is so varied that it defies easy classification.

Behind the transformation of the School in the 1930s was the forceful and dominant personality of A.A.C. Burton, who was to remain Headmaster until 1949. If the pupils called him 'Monty', it was probably not with any great affection, and certainly

not to his face. Mr Burton was a disciplinarian of what is sometimes termed 'the old school', a firm believer in corporal punishment. Boys at the School seem to have regarded him with a respect born, to a considerable extent, of fear. He harangued the boys attending his first assembly in 1931 in no uncertain terms; they might have been consoled had they known that he had addressed the staff the previous day in much the same way! His relations with his staff appear always to have been formal. C.B. Shore, an Art teacher at King Henry's during Mr Burton's tenure, and Acting Headmaster for nine months in 1949-50, said of him: "*he was a man you worked for rather than with, for he was a man who made his own decisions; and with him an instruction was always an order.*" Yet Mr Burton brought energy, determination and an exceptional grasp of detail to his position. If Kenneth Richardson said of him that he had "*a touch of ruthlessness*", he also thought that this "*was probably very useful in the difficult years with which he had to deal*".

Whatever people felt about Mr Burton, there is no doubt that he had turned his School into a much more viable concern by 1939. In the words of the School History, published in 1945, the School "*now seemed likely to enjoy an era of prosperity and stability*"; however, "*the advent of the second European War proved fatal to any such hopes*".

The School in the First Year of the War

By comparison with the problems of 1940-41, the first year of war had only a minor impact upon the School. Nonetheless, the School could not start the autumn term in September 1939 because it lacked air raid shelters. The problem was not unexpected: from early 1939 the School had known that, in the event of war, it would be in Coventry's 'neutral area', as opposed to its 'evacuation' or 'reception' areas. This meant that the School could operate, but only if it had shelters for its pupils. The construction of shelters had been discussed by the School's Governors and plans for them had been drawn up. However, it was decided not to proceed with structures that had no direct educational use, and which entailed a cost that the School could ill-afford, until their need was obvious.

Soon after the outbreak of war, the local A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions) authorities permitted gatherings, of not more than 50 pupils at a time, in an unprotected school. Accordingly, at the end of September, the School's Governors decided to open the School on that basis, thereby allowing boys to collect assignments of work to be done at home. This arrangement lasted from October 2nd to November 18th, 1939, during which time most of the pupils in the Main School attended for about two hours per week. Meanwhile, work started on shelters at the School. In the event, these shelters were paid for by Coventry Corporation, on the understanding that they would be available for use by the public out of school hours. In addition, "black out" had to be provided for all the windows in the School – no small matter – and some temporary protection had to be provided in the corridors, for use

in the event of an air raid warning.

As 1939 drew to a close, confidence grew that air raids were not immediately likely and the Government decided that schools in neutral areas could re-open, as long as shelters were in the process of construction and parents were in favour of the move. At a meeting of the Governors on November 16th, the decision was taken to open the School as soon as possible, boys attending with the written consent of their parents. To reclaim lost schooling, the Christmas and Easter holidays were drastically curtailed. Among other changes, Saturday morning lessons were moved to Wednesday afternoon, in order to save fuel. Until the end of January, the School closed at 3.15 p.m., so as to allow boys to get home in daylight (as black-out restrictions were now in force once darkness fell). To compensate, the lunch break was reduced to one hour and each lesson shortened by 5 minutes. There were no after-school activities until daylight was sufficient and sporting fixtures with other schools were greatly reduced. However, many of the boys who had been moved by their parents to safer districts at the beginning of the war had now returned to Coventry. Over the year as a whole, the loss in numbers of pupils in attendance caused by the war was estimated to be about 40-50 boys. Part of this loss was the result of boys finishing their schooling earlier than usual because of the high demand for juvenile labour in the local economy.



Window frames in the IT corridor still have wartime additions to hold black out screens

The Coventrian



EDITORIAL - APRIL 1940

"The school has taken on a different appearance and is littered with curtains, buckets, hoses, sand, pumps, shovels, rakes, men and balloons. Life at first was altogether different, summed up best by fanatical reverence for the sacred curtains, a life-shortening scurry to get home and back in an hour for dinner, and the patient voice of a master faintly heard above the munching of multifarious sandwiches explaining that there is a difference between *dining* and *eating*. The Sixth, with the prospect of a mere couple of years' grace before being called up, have grown somewhat frivolous, and their renderings of songs composed by themselves have become a regular feature of school life."

The Midland Daily Telegraph

20th February 1940

Closing King Henry VIII School for two days and the notification that twelve people each week are falling sick of influenzal pneumonia are indications that Coventry's influenza epidemic has not yet reached its zenith. The epidemic is of mild type, but, as Dr. A. Massey (Coventry Medical Officer of Health) told a Midland Daily Telegraph reporter to-day: "Every office and works has a large number of absentees. It was found necessary to close down King Henry VIII School yesterday and to-day because 25 per cent of the boys and staff are away owing to the epidemic. Influenza is highly infectious and has a sudden onset with headaches, shivering, and raised temperature," said Dr. Massey. "There is often a sore throat and sometimes a short, dry cough. The possible complications are bronchitis, and in bad cases pneumonia. The big majority of cases make an uneventful recovery, although convalescence may be a little slow. In any case, medical care is advisable."

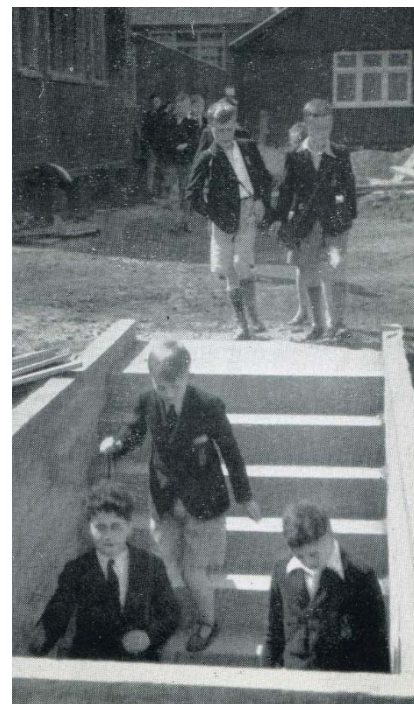
Inevitably, some of the teaching staff were called up for military service, a process that started in the first year of the war. The first to go was the Second Master, Arthur Sale M.C., O.B.E. He had served with distinction in the First World War, rising to Acting Second in Command of a battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, and he was now given responsibility for the defence of bridges and other strategic points in a wide area of the south Midlands. Most of those who followed Sale into the Forces did so in 1940 and 1941. By the



Second Master A.B. Sale

end of the war, 12 had joined the Armed Forces, including one of the Bablake teachers who came to King Henry's in late 1940. Another teacher was called away for other war work. Three of those called up returned before the end of the war to teach at the School, having been discharged from the Services. Sadly, two teachers were to be killed: E.A.A. Webb and A.R.R. Bower. The loss of teachers to the Forces, or to other war work, clearly added to the disruption that the war caused.

The completion of the shelters took a considerable amount of time, partly because work came to a standstill for about eight weeks during the harsh winter of 1939-40. The shelters were not properly finished until the summer of 1940; once completed, pupils had to practise getting into the shelters quickly. However, the shelters were prone to flooding in wet weather



Junior School boys entering the shelters during an air raid drill

and had constantly to be pumped clear of water. To the annoyance of the Headmaster, the construction of the shelters had left deep ruts to the playing field, as well as mounds of excavated material that had been "*tipped in a very unsatisfactory way*". Another inconvenience was the loss of the School 'tuck-shop', which was transformed into an A.R.P. Warden Post 604, its entrance protected by sandbags. January 1940 saw the installation of a barrage-balloon and its crew on the School field by 917 Balloon Squadron. The pavilion was requisitioned for use by the crew, although Nissen huts were built later. The thinking behind the balloons was that they deterred

STAFF CASUALTIES

Lieutenant **Edward Arthur Alexander Webb**, Royal Armoured Corps, died on June 11th, 1944, aged 31; he is buried at Hottot-les-Bagues War Cemetery in France.

Lieutenant **Anthony Reginald Richard Bower**, Royal Artillery, died on April 12th, 1945, aged 38; he is buried at Pihen-les-Guines War Cemetery in France.



E.A.A. Webb

low-flying enemy aeroplanes, which risked having their wings torn off by the heavy cables that the balloons supported. The School site was, of course, elevated in relation to most of the city – ‘the School on the hill’ – and thus suitable for the purpose; a point no doubt raised by the Squadron Equipment Officer, H.N. Reynolds. [*Norman Reynolds attended KHVIII 1907-1912 and went on to serve with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment during the Great War, rising to the rank*

of Captain, as well as being awarded the Military Cross and bar.] On one occasion, the School’s balloon broke loose and drifted off over the city, its trailing cable causing some damage to Queen’s Road Baptist Church.

Despite the problems, the Headmaster was able to report to the Governors that the School year 1939-40 had been a satisfactory one. With respect to examination results, “*the School has never fared better*”. Philip

Larkin was one of 11 pupils going on to take up places at university or college, in his case at St John’s College, Oxford. Almost without exception, other leavers had obtained employment, mostly with firms and businesses in the city. The war “*had curtailed many of the amenities of school life*”, which had not been “*so pleasant or so full as in peacetime*” but, in general, the School had been able “*to carry on with the minimum of interruption to its work*”. Its good fortune was about to end.



A Balloon Site, Coventry: Dame Laura Knight (1943)

Laura Knight was commissioned to produce an inspiring artwork to support recruitment for Balloon Command, which by this time was predominantly staffed by WAAFs (Women’s Auxiliary Air Force).

Dame Laura visited the balloon on the School field (now the site of the swimming pool) on 8th July 1942 with Flt/O A. Stewart, Public Relations Officer at the Air Ministry.

IWM

November Blitz, 1940, and Evacuation

Air raids in the area began in August 1940. At first, the novelty was such that bomb craters were subjects of considerable interest. Bill Adams (KHVIII 1934-1941), who recorded his wartime experiences in 1993, recalled cycling with a friend to inspect bomb craters at Pailton. He commented: *"afterwards we agreed that we need not have bothered"*.

In 1940, the School introduced a fire-watching rota. Each night, a small team, consisting of a master and six older boys, most likely drawn from the School Air Defence Cadet Corps, would be on duty from 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. The team would be divided into three squads, each squad doing two two-hour stints. Whilst one member patrolled the ground floor of the School and outside, the other was on watch on top of the tower. The city, of course, would be completely blacked out and the fire-watcher on the tower would remain there, often in total darkness, until relieved. Those who were not on watch would bed down for a few hours, unless placed on alert by those who were. After their night on duty, the pupils and teacher attended School as normal. One fire-

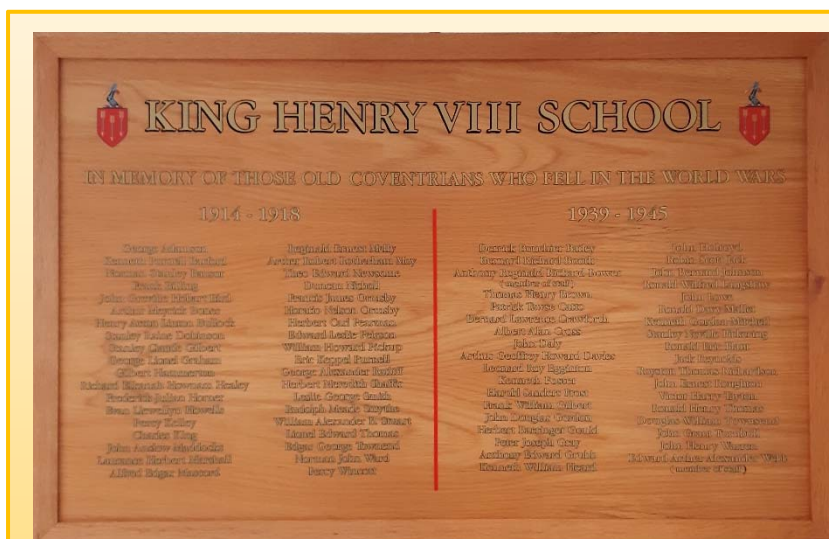
watcher was Bill Adams; looking back, he wondered how he ever passed his exams and remembers *"writing a long essay on Hamlet at between 2 and 3 a.m. one morning!"* Fire-watchers were expected to volunteer, although one volunteer, Brian Taylor (KHVIII 1935-1941), recalls receiving an extra fire-watching



When not on fire-watching duty at School, Brian Taylor volunteered as an ARP messenger alongside school friends Harry Furminger and John Stringer

duty, as part of a punishment handed out by Mr Burton, for an indiscretion. There was a pool of about 40 boys and eight staff for the job, so that the duty came round one night in eight. Another five teachers were involved in the local Home Guard.

As nights lengthened, raids increased. There were a number of attacks on Coventry in October. Sadly, one of the School's pupils, John Holroyd, was killed in a raid on October 21st, 1940. He died at 4 Percy Street, his home in Coventry; he was 14 years and 3 months old and was in form V at the School. *[At the time the lowest form in the Main School was numbered II; therefore, form V was what was later known as the 4th form, now Year 10.]* The School escaped damage during these early raids, although two bombs fell on Warwick Road on October 22nd. However, its life was disrupted, as lack of sleep and frequent absences on the day after a raid affected pupils' work. Moreover, by the end of October, some 40 boys had been moved away from Coventry by their parents. A more unusual cause of disruption was the decision by the Headmaster to allow a good many boys to help out in October with the local potato harvest, a



A new war memorial was dedicated on 11th November, 2004, finally replacing the Great War Roll of the Fallen, lost in the blitz

Although the number of pupils killed during the bombing of Coventry seems to have been restricted to **John Holroyd** and **John Roughton**, 34 old boys died serving in the forces during the war. How many former pupils died in air raids on the city is not known, as the School appears not to have kept a record of such fatalities. However, one was **Francis Charles Wright**, aged 16, who was killed on the same night as John Holroyd, October 21st, 1940. He died at his home at 3 Dalton Road, Coventry. He had left the School in 1939 in form VL. Given the scale of casualties in Coventry during the war, it seems likely that other former pupils, who were civilians, must also have been killed.



Potato Harvest - with Warwickshire school children helping: Norma Bull

It is not known which farms KHVIII pupils assisted during the 1940 harvest but this location, thought to be just beyond the Foleshill gas works, shows a typical scene.

IWM

task that took longer than he had anticipated. Nonetheless, by early November, it was hoped that the School could return to something approaching normality. These hopes were destroyed by the raid of November 14th-15th, 1940.

As is well documented, the November 'Blitz' caused enormous physical destruction in Coventry, as well as taking the lives of more than 500 of its inhabitants. One of those killed was a pupil at the School, John Ernest Roughton. He lived at 4 Beanfield Avenue, Green Lane, although he was killed at 28 Beanfield Avenue, along with his father, Alfred. John was aged 13 years and 11 months and was in form IV. The School escaped with only very light damage to its buildings, the Headmaster noting that: "no bomb was dropped

within a hundred yards of the School". Some windows were broken and tiles dislodged, and the School field was left with one or two craters, of which one was large.

Although the School avoided material damage, the raid still had a considerable impact. Not surprisingly, fewer than 20 of its pupils presented themselves for school the next morning. One of them was Brian Taylor. Despite an eventful night in the bombing, not to mention the damage inflicted on his home in St Agatha Rd, he made his way through the shattered city on the Friday morning to Warwick Road:

"I turned to the school and to my surprise it looked untouched, apart from the barrage balloon on the school field that hung limp and punctured beside its tethering lorry. The Headmaster was out in

the school yard as I arrived and welcomed me,

"Good morning, Taylor. Keen to come to school, I see. But it's best you return home today."

"Is everything alright, sir?"

"It seems to be, but come back on Monday. We should have sorted things out by then."

In fact, a lack of water, light and gas meant that the School had to remain closed for the next 10 days. Moreover, the authorities now took the decision to make the whole of Coventry an evacuation area. This meant that provision had to be made for all those boys whose parents wished them to be evacuated.

Finding accommodation of suitable size and location to take the evacuees proved difficult. However, with the assistance of the Board of Education and the

local authorities in Coventry and Warwickshire, Alcester was chosen, although the Grammar School there was unable to offer much by way of classroom provision and ruled out the operation of a double-shift system. Additional premises in the town had to be hired. As soon as the decision to go to Alcester was taken, those boys who wished to evacuate were given a day's notice to prepare themselves. On November 25th, just 11 days after the raid, 125 boys and nine masters assembled at the School and then left for Alcester. In addition to sufficient clothing, each boy would have taken with him his ration card, identity card and gas mask.

School resumed on November 25th, following the restoration of water and light, with some lessons dedicated to filling in nearby bomb craters. Initially, about 150 boys remained in Coventry; however, as the term went on and families moved back to Coventry, the number of pupils at the Warwick Road site increased, rising to about 200 by the end of term.



25th November, 1940 - parents look on as boys line up with their suitcases outside the woodwork shop, ready to depart to Alcester

AIR DEFENCE CADET CORPS

No. 91 (KHVIII School) Squadron

The School ADCC was formed in the summer of 1939 under the command of PT Master, **Jack 'Gymmy' Mattocks**. The Squadron met at School on Sunday mornings and no doubt provided a significant number of fire-watchers.

In 1941 the ADCC was officially incorporated within the RAF and was re-branded the Air Training Corps.



J.M. Mattocks

The Squadron appears to have survived the bombing and the departure of Jack Maddocks in 1943.

The Coventrian,
December 1939

THE AIR DEFENCE CADET CORPS

THE School has at last formed its own squadron of the A.D.C.C. About sixty boys have so far joined and we hope that before long we shall have reached the hundred mark. As we now have our uniforms, we all feel a lot smarter and as a consequence our squadron drill has improved. We have been one route march and the squadron performed very creditably, satisfying the officers. Apart from squad drill we have done very little with the exception of lectures on the organisation of the R.A.F. and, recently, preliminary lectures on airmanship and the Morse Code. We hope before long to have our engines, air-frame, etc., from the Air Ministry and then we can go straight ahead with our practical work.

The work of the Air Cadets consists of the following :—

- (i) Squad drill.
- (ii) Physical Training.
- (iii) Boxing.
- (iv) Air Force Administration.
- (v) Airmanship and Navigation.
- (vi) Theory of Flight.
- (vii) Principles of Aircraft Engine Erecting, Running and Repairing.
- (viii) Rigging.
- (ix) Meteorology.
- (x) Wireless Operator's Course.
- (xi) General A.R.P. work.

After passing satisfactorily through the above syllabus, the older cadets, with their parents' consent, will be taken gliding and afterwards, will be given instruction in flying power-driven aircraft. Gliding will take place in Derbyshire and actual flying at one of the local aerodromes.

I should like to make it perfectly clear that there is no compulsion on an Air Cadet, when he leaves the Corps., to join the R.A.F. He will find it useful when he comes to do his Militia Training in that first preference will be given to ex-members of the A.D.C.C. to serve their six months with the R.A.F.

The officers of the School Squadron, No. 91 Squadron, are as follows :—

Squadron Leader	..	..	..	J. M. Mattocks.
Adjutant	..	..	..	H. L. B. Saint.
Fl/Lieutenant	..	..	..	W. A. Kyte.
Fl/Lieutenant	..	..	..	P. J. McGill.
Fl/Lieutenant	..	..	..	C. W. Norris.

We have only decided definitely on one of our N.C.O's. Cadet Ridgewell has been appointed Sgt./Major to the Squadron. We have a special N.C.O's class where we are giving our potential N.C.O's an intensive course. Promotion, however, in the A.D.C.C. is given solely on merit and not age. In the A.D.C.C. there are no School Forms, only flights which are part of the squadron. A Fourth former has as much influence as a Sixth Former; in fact, he may get promotion sooner.

Now, any of you "waverers" who are thinking of joining the A.D.C.C. make up your minds and join in with us. We can assure you of an interesting life and good friendship, and also the knowledge that you are doing something that may be of use to your country if need should arise.

J.M.

Life at Alcester

Those pupils evacuated to Alcester continued their education in a variety of buildings. Alcester Grammar School was used for two classes in the morning and five in the afternoon. A large room in the Town Hall became a classroom in the mornings, and rooms at the Baptist Church Hall were used in both parts of the day. The Junior School evacuees briefly made use of the Church House, before finding accommodation in the village hall at Arrow, just outside Alcester. The School, of course, rented the accommodation – for example, 2½ guineas a week for use of the Town Hall, and 3½ guineas for the Baptist Church Hall. Early arrangements were not always satisfactory. In his diary, Frank Metcalf, head of the King Henry's Junior School, described how he had *"a very pleasant and comfortable room"* in which to teach but had to share it with another teacher and his class. This proved *"rather difficult"*, so they gave up the attempt.



*Head of the Junior School,
F.H. Metcalf*

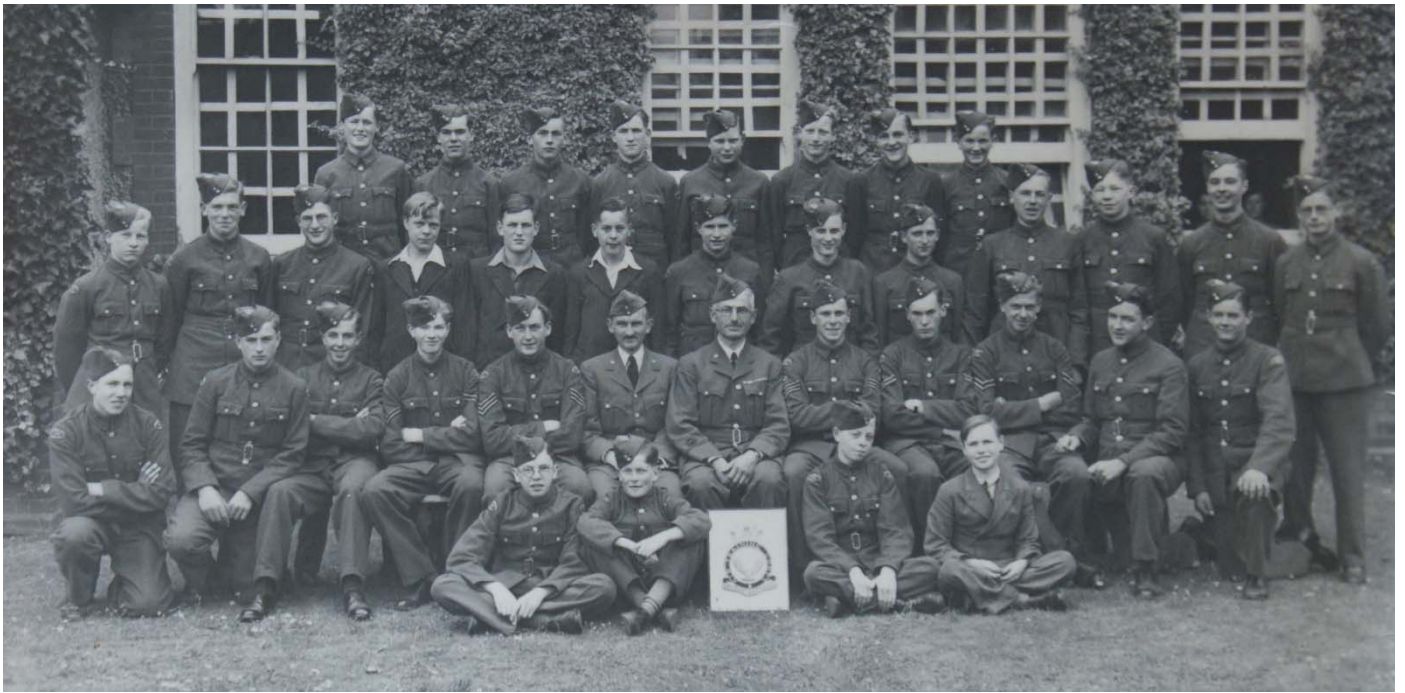
The School's pupils did not share lessons with their counterparts from Alcester Grammar School and they continued to be taught in their age cohort. Classes were obviously smaller: end of year reports for one of the pupils at Alcester shows that he was in a class of 11, whereas, in Coventry, his classes usually numbered about 25. The timetable appears to have been much the same as had been followed in Coventry, with the exception that lessons in handicrafts and singing were discontinued. Boys were billeted on families in the town, the

arrangements being made by the local Billeting Officer. Accommodation for staff is mostly unknown; however, Frank Metcalf initially found *"a good billet"*, along with A.R.R. Bower, with Miss Evans, senior Mistress at Alcester Grammar School. Subsequently, Frank Metcalf rented a flat, where he lived with his wife and two children. Their house in Earlsdon, in Coventry, had been damaged in the raid of November 14th and left temporarily uninhabitable. They put their furniture into store and joined the party that went to Alcester. It may be that similar practical considerations helped determine the composition of the staff accompanying the pupils to Alcester.

Relations between pupils and staff at Alcester appear to have been closer than at Coventry. F.S. Atkinson, one of the teachers there, wrote at the time: *"Life here is much more communal ... Most of us are savouring the sheer*



Junior School boys smile for the photographer despite working at desks constructed from planks resting between saw horses



Alcester Grammar School Air Training Corps, including several evacuated KHVIII pupils

delight of comradeship." He described their existence as combining some of the features of a boarding school with those of an ordinary day school. In 1946, A.E. Maddison (KHVIII 1938-1945), who had been a pupil in the Alcester party, paid his teachers a somewhat back-handed compliment when he said that *"they seemed to be much more human than they had been at Coventry"*. All the teachers, recalled Maddison, worked hard to ensure that the pupils enjoyed their stay, *"as, in consequence, we did"*.

The people of Alcester played their part in making the visitors feel at home. A rent-free room was placed at the disposal of the boys to be used as an after-school club. This was presumably the additional room at the Baptist Church Hall that was mentioned by A.E. Maddison, where the school club met three times a week. The teachers paid for the purchase of books, magazines and papers, whilst the School's Parents' Association made a grant of £5, provided a wireless and made an appeal for old furniture, games and books. Maddison recalls pupils at the club playing billiards and cards, reading or just talking. Half-way

through the evening, one of the staff appeared with cocoa or Oxo. *"Some nights Mr Metcalf would bring confectionery which we could buy."* Most pupils learnt the rudiments of chess during their time at Alcester, *"for Mr Atkinson was a good tutor"*. The club, in Frank Metcalf's opinion, was *"a blessing"* for the boys, especially in the severe winter of 1941-42. Despite the cold weather, Mr Metcalf considered that the boys' health was good.

Church services were held each week and the 'Alcester Crusaders' were set up, with senior Crusaders coming from Coventry to speak to the group. During the summer, cricket was played at the ground at Great Alne, the pupils re-painting the pavilion there. Despite a walk of three miles to the ground, there was plenty of competition for places in the School's Cricket team, which was a good one. In addition, the team regularly played Alcester Grammar School at their *"fine ground at Ragley"*, where Maddison also recalls games against the Police, the Home Guard and the Farmers' Union. Another summer recreation was swimming in the pond at Hoo Mill. During the winter, the football ground at

Bleachfield was successfully converted to rugby, once posts had been *"hewn from Oversley Wood"*. Both the winters spent at Alcester saw snowfall and boys went tobogganing down Primrose Hill as soon as school was finished. A report in *The Coventrian* described local excursions that took pupils to Coughton Court and Ragley Hall, the latter being used at the time as a convalescent hospital for soldiers. Some pupils even attended a meeting of the foxhounds at Ragley Hall, *"the more energetic boys following all morning"*, whilst another trip was to the *"scientifically planned piggeries"* at Oversley Castle. Other than through sport, contacts with the pupils at Alcester Grammar School seem to have been limited, although a few pupils did join the local A.T.C.

Pupils adapted to their new life with varying success. A report by 'S.S.P.', of form V, described their *"new independence"* at Alcester. With all the worldly-wisdom of his age, S.S.P. enumerated the different groups and their characteristics. There was the *"artificial manliness"* of those who *"were seen strutting through the little town in flashy ties, their hair brilliantined, their*

school caps abandoned. They raised their voices and monopolised the pavements” and took local girls to the pictures. Others, *“especially the smaller ones”*, looked despondent and unhappy. Generally, their parents ignored their entreaties to return to Coventry, whilst their *“hostesses were not always considerate”*. Shy boys did not dare confide their troubles to anyone and *“were often thought obstinate and thick-headed”* by those upon whom they were billeted. However, *“the really independent boys”*, presumably including S.S.P., knew how to make the best of everything and how to adapt themselves to their new circumstances. Their hostesses *“considered themselves fortunate to have evacuees who were practically no trouble at all”*. These boys, he pointed out, usually had some experience of camping out or previous evacuation.

It seems that some boys remained in Alcester during the holidays, whilst others returned for a while to Coventry. In June 1941, the Billeting Officer in Alcester expressed concern that arrangements for the recent Easter holidays had not always been satisfactory, with boys left at a *“loose end for most of the day”* and, in consequence, making a nuisance of themselves. With the summer holidays approaching, he was hoping that more acceptable arrangements could be made. Part of the problem was that parents of the boys were concerned that, if the boys returned to Coventry for any length of time, they might lose their billets in Alcester.

Over time, there was a steady drift back to Coventry, no doubt encouraged by the diminishing threat of bombing following the Germany invasion of Russia in June 1941 and the diversion of the Luftwaffe’s main strength. This move away from Alcester was usually orderly and done with the approval of both parents



Breaktime in Alcester

and the School. Occasionally it was not. In May 1941, Mr Burton roundly criticised a boy who had left on his own accord, without any word to Mrs Jephcott, his hostess in Alcester. The boy’s excuse, that he did not like Alcester, *“seems very thin ... because he should have found that out many months ago”*. He pulled no punches with the boy’s father: *“It would have been no more than what your boy deserves had I sent him away and told him to shift for himself.”* He insisted that the father should apologise *“to the hostess, to Mr Atkinson and to*

me”; whether such an apology was tendered is not known.

By the summer of 1941, the School was coming under pressure from Alcester Grammar School to relinquish some of the accommodation at the Grammar School. The Grammar School’s numbers had increased by about 20, although Mr Burton clearly felt that the demands of the Grammar School were disproportionate to this modest increase. In the end, these problems resolved themselves. By the early summer of 1942 there were only about 50 pupils left in the evacuated party and the ‘Alcester site’ had become untenable. Although brief, the Alcester evacuation must have left its mark on all those who were involved and *“formed a unique part of the School history”* (A.E. Maddison). More immediately, the evacuation to Alcester had provided for the wishes of those parents who had wanted their sons moved away from Coventry. The education of these pupils had continued, although operating different parts of the School, separated by some 30 miles, had obvious difficulties and added to the mounting problems that the School was facing.



Lessons in Alcester Town Hall

Bablake Boys at the School

In addition to those evacuated to Alcester, very nearly 100 boys, who had left the School in the autumn of 1940, had not returned by the end of January 1941. Many had gone to other schools in neighbouring towns – such as Nuneaton, Rugby, Leamington and Hinckley – but others were scattered much further afield, including Shropshire, Berkshire, Nottinghamshire, Cumberland, Cambridgeshire, Wales, Cornwall, Yorkshire and even Ireland.

Yet, in the topsy-turvy world that was 1940-41, when School resumed in January 1941, the roll was not far below what it had been when the School year began – counting those at Alcester as being still on the School's 'books'. The reason for this was the inclusion of 67 boys from Bablake.

Bablake had not escaped as lightly as King Henry's on November 14th. The School's brand new library was destroyed in the raid. Far worse, a bomb had fallen on one of the School's shelters, in which local residents had taken cover, and a large number of people had been killed. The History of Bablake School records how the School's corridor was used as a makeshift mortuary



Mr E.A. Seaborne

and bucketsful of human remains could be seen in the Headmaster's garden. A few days later, the School buildings were commandeered for a Company of Royal Engineers and the decision was taken to evacuate. An invitation from the Lincoln authorities was accepted and, on November 23rd, two days before the King Henry's party departed for Alcester, nearly 300 Bablake pupils left Foleshill Station for Lincoln.

However, not all Bablake's pupils were evacuated and, during the Christmas holidays, King Henry VIII School was asked to take on those who had remained in Coventry. Accord-

ingly, 67 Bablake boys and two teachers from the School arrived at King Henry's. Mr Seaborne, Bablake's Headmaster, was insistent that the boys remained Bablake pupils and should wear Bablake uniform. Their parents continued to pay Bablake fees, with Bablake School making a per capita payment to King Henry's of £17 10s per year. However, as the History of Bablake School points out, Mr Seaborne was hardly in a position to insist that his pupils "received Bablake-style treatment". One of the Bablake pupils subsequently recalled that he considered Mr Burton's regime at King Henry's to be far more relaxed and less fearful. Given Mr Burton's autocratic approach and vigorous, if infrequent, use of the cane, these sentiments would have come as something of a surprise to King Henry's pupils at the time. Brian Taylor, who appears to have had a good deal of respect for his Headmaster, was still happy to admit that "the fear of being reported to Monty Burton was enough to terrorise every man jack of us". It is, of course, possible that Mr Burton was reluctant to treat pupils from another school with the same strictness as he reserved for his own.

The Easter Week Raids, April 1941

Following the November bombing raid on Coventry, enemy activity over the city had been sporadic. However, German aircraft returned in force during Easter Week, 1941, and the city was subjected to two heavy raids. The first of these was on the night of April 8th-9th, the second on the night 10th-11th. These raids inflicted further massive damage on the city, with St Mary's Hall, the churches of St John's, St Mark's and Christ Church among the historic buildings damaged. The raids were even more destructive of Coventry's industrial capacity

than the November raid, with Courtaulds, Armstrong Siddeley, the main Daimler plant and the GEC works at Copsewood all badly damaged. In the first raid, the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital received 10 direct hits, causing heavy loss of life; three George Medals were awarded for acts of heroism at the hospital during that terrible night. The death toll in the city for the two raids was in the region of 450, with more than 1,000 injured, not far short of the figures for the November raid. As in November, the victims were given a mass

funeral at London Road Cemetery.

It was during the first of these raids that almost all the buildings at King Henry VIII School were either burnt out or levelled. Fortunately, no loss of life was suffered at the School and, by comparison with the city as a whole, the School might be considered to have got off lightly. However, within the narrower parameters of the School's life, the events of April 8th-9th, 1941, were a disaster from which it took several years to recover fully.

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!

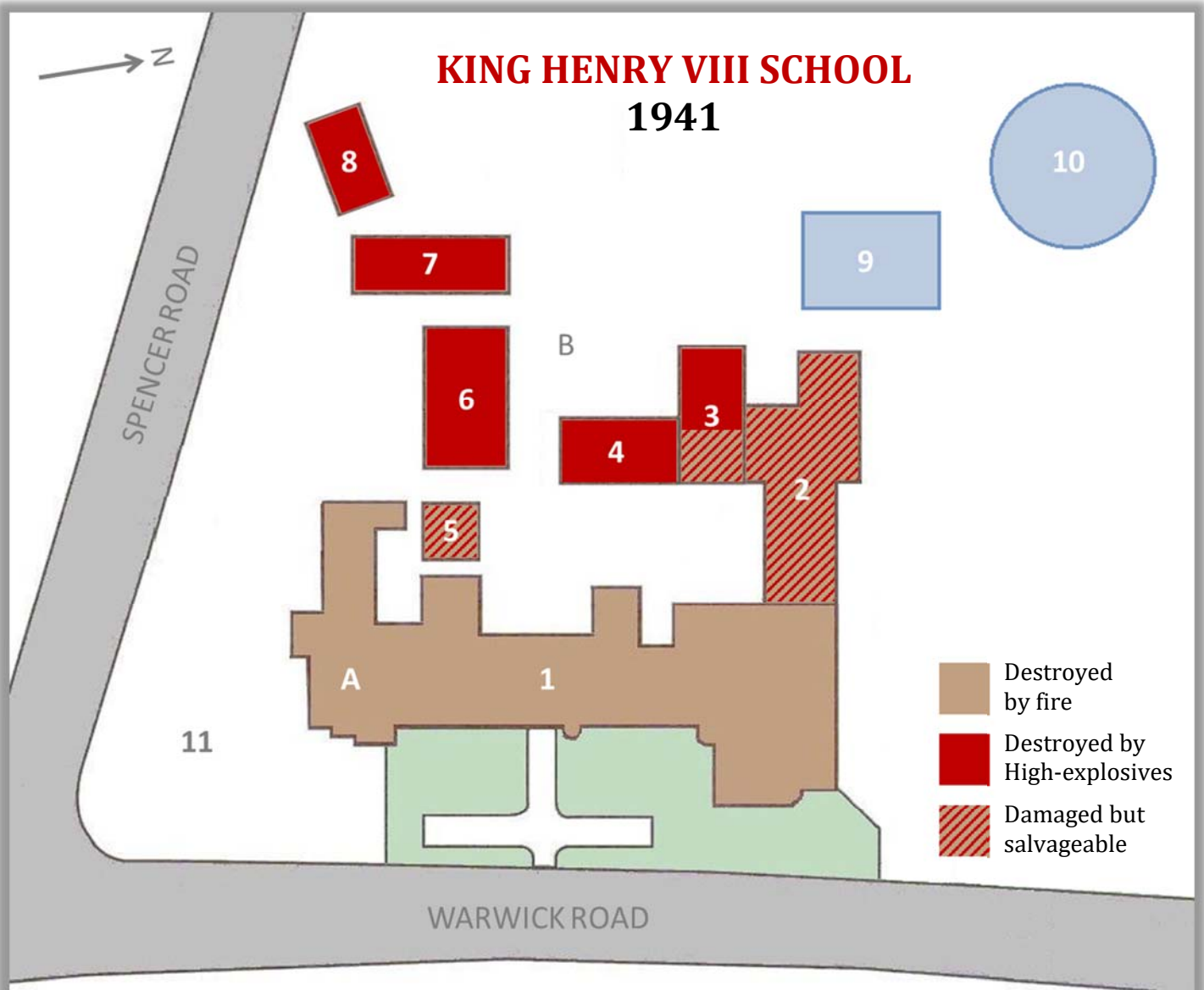


One of the first to arrive offering assistance was Deputy Head Warden Alfred John Ward, a 35-year-old capstan operator from Moor Street in Earlsdon. He was awarded the British Empire Medal in September 1941 for his devotion to duty on the night 8th/9th April. The official citation in the London Gazette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



- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 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.

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



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"*.



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*

“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

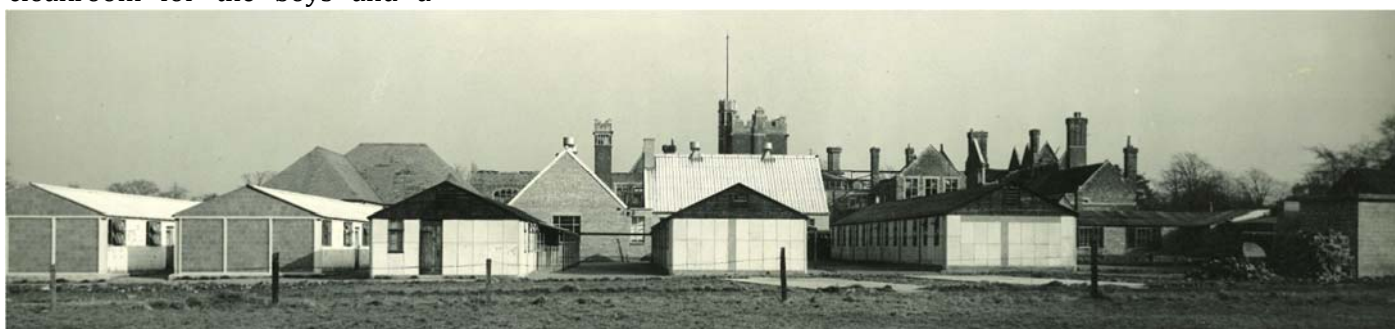


Wappenbury Hall near Princethorpe was considered as an alternative to rebuilding on Warwick Road

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

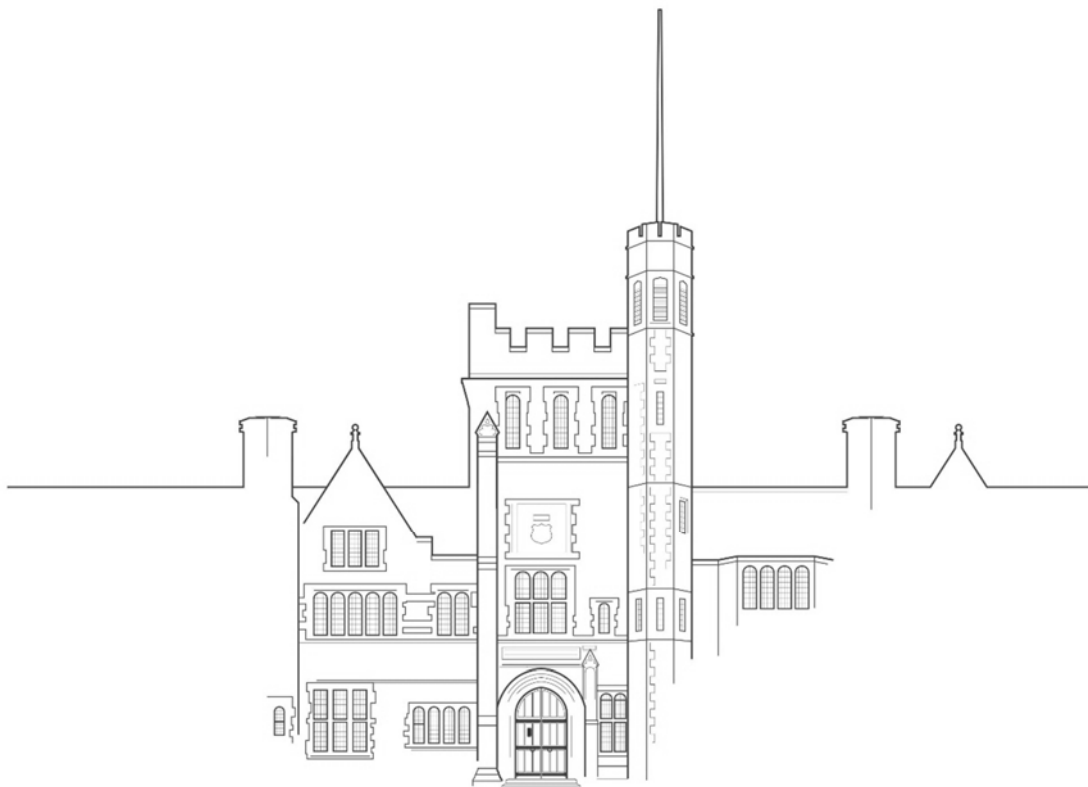
In June 1940, Winston Churchill famously urged his compatriots to ensure that the war years would be remembered as the country's "*finest hour*". Many subsequently felt that they were. How much impact oratory had on those involved in the School's struggle to carry on is, of course, impossible to assess. 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

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Admission Register, 1935-39
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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)
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