

Stoke Local History Group

Newsletter November 2020

Under normal circumstances some major events might have been expected this month to mark the 80th anniversary of the Coventry Blitz. But the coronavirus crisis has seriously curtailed such plans. Even this year's Remembrance Day service at the War Memorial Park was cancelled, as was the usual ceremony at the communal grave at London Road Cemetery. But this does not mean that we can't remember that terrible moonlit night on November 14th 1940...



Remembering the Blitz

Even before the Second World War began, Coventry's factories were gearing up for massive war production. The city's car factories and engineering works were ideally placed to meet the needs of war and, backed by the government, large shadow factories were built to boost war production.

Factories in the city made Whitley and Lancaster bombers, armoured cars and troop carriers, aero-engines, aircraft parts, and guns for planes like the Spitfire.

All this war production made Coventry a possible target for bombing when war began in 1939.

One of the first serious raids on the city came in August 1940 when German bombers attacked the centre of town, causing substantial damage and destroying the plush new Rex Cinema in Corporation Street. Other raids followed, the most serious being on October 14th when bombs hit the Owen Owen store and the 16th century Ford's Hospital, an almshouse for the elderly, where the

warden and six residents were killed. Coventry endured 41 actual raids during the war, including two particularly bad raids in April 1941.

But the worst raid of all took place on the night of November 14th 1940. Codenamed “Moonlight Sonata”, it lasted non-stop for eleven hours, making it the most concentrated bombing ever on an English city. Incendiary bombs caused devastating fires; high explosive bombs destroyed factories and ripped the heart out of Coventry’s medieval centre. Shops and homes were severely damaged or destroyed. **Nothing like it had ever been seen before.**

These are the words of Gwen Ford, a resident of St George’s Road in Stoke, who worked as a clerk at Coventry’s Central Fire Station during the Blitz, one of the first women to take on such a role:

“On November 14th the raid started early and our phones rang continuously with members of the public reporting fires from incendiary bombs. Quite soon the phones went dead and our only communication with fire crews was through young messengers or anyone reporting back...

Eventually, all the water in the mains had been used up and the firemen had to cope as best they could without water – a hopeless task!



George VI visits Coventry after the Blitz

There was little we could do at the station without telephones and we had to sit out the long night, trying to comfort anyone brought to us who had been injured.

When dawn came I started out for home and was appalled to see the devastation in the city – tram lines sky high, buses and cars in craters. Shops were on fire in Broadgate and there was a dreadful smell of burning which seemed to go on for weeks.

After clambering over craters and rubble, carrying my bicycle, I eventually arrived home in St George’s Road to find that a land mine had fallen two blocks away. It was deathly quiet and not a soul about but later that week bodies were discovered under these homes. Fortunately my family had got safely through the night – I took one look at them and burst into tears.

A few hours later, back at the fire station, I was given the task of escorting Home Office officials and chief fire inspectors to some of the sites of devastation.

Our first call was to the Cathedral and it was unbelievable to see piles of masonry within the shell which had once been the walls... Our next call was to the GEC in Stoke and as we went through Earl Street and Jordan Well, I was surprised to see that shops which had been untouched during

the night were now on fire. Whole blocks of these shops opposite the Council House burned down during the next few days.

November 15 was a dreadful day when we realised how many of our firemen were not accounted for. Some of them were traced days later, having been taken injured to various hospitals outside the city, but others were taken to the mortuary.

The evening of the 15th was again a bright moonlit night and we braced ourselves for another attack. We could hardly believe our luck when morning came with no sign of an air raid."

Official figures suggest that 554 people died during the raid, though it's recognised that many more might have perished in the chaos. More people were killed in the following year, during horrific attacks in April 1941 - sometimes referred to as the "forgotten raids".

● Gwen Ford's recollections were originally quoted in *Coventry's Blitz* (1990), a book published by the *Evening Telegraph* thirty years ago to mark the 50th anniversary. More recent pictorial accounts of Coventry's experience during the Second World War can be found in David McGrory's books, *Coventry at War* (2009) and *Coventry's Blitz* (2015).

More tales from Jabet's Ash

Last month's newsletter featured an article about Stoke's most famous tree, Jabet's Ash, which marked an ancient city boundary and was often a place where important visitors to the city were met, including royalty. A recent inspection of Blyth's book *The History of Stoke* (published in 1897) has unearthed a graphic example: a description of the visit of Princess Elizabeth Stuart in 1603. She later married Frederick of the Palatinate and briefly became Queen of Bohemia.

April 3rd 1603

"On this day the Princess Elizabeth, eldest daughter of James I, came into this City, from Coombe Abbey, with Lord and Lady Harrington, and many other Ladies of distinction. To shew that due deference which the respectability of the party demanded, the Mayor and the Alderman, with the rest of the livery, rode out of the town, in their scarlet gowns, as far as Jabet's Ash on Stoke Green, where they met the Princess. The Mayor alighted from his horse, kissed her hand, and then rode before her into the City, with the Aldermen, etc. Lord Harrington went bare-headed before the coach along the streets (which were lined with the different companies of the City, standing in their gowns and their hoods) from Gosford-gate to the Drapery door, near St Michael's Church, where having arrived, and heard a sermon, the Princess went from thence to St Mary's Hall, attended by her train; a chair of state was placed at the upper end of the room, in which her Highness dined; from whence, having finished her repast, she adjourned to the Mayoress's Parlour, which was fitted up in a most sumptuous manner for her reception. Lord Harrington, the Mayor, with the rest of the Ladies and Gentlemen, then dined. The Mayor afterwards presented to the Princess a silver cup, double gilt, which cost the City £29 16s 8d. She then left the Hall, and rode down Cross Cheaping, attended by the Mayor, etc., to Bishop-gate, Spon-end, Spon-street, Gosford-gate and Jabet's Ash, where the Mayor left her with Lord Harrington and his train, who re-convened her to Coombe."



Who drowned at Jabet's Pit?



Photo: John Marshall

We discovered last month that a pool once existed opposite Jabet's Ash. It was called Jabet's Pit and was drained after an unfortunate man walked into the pit and drowned. An area of hollow ground (pictured above) still exists in what is now called Gosford Park and this is probably the site of the old pool. But who was the man who drowned? The following account of an inquest has been found in Blyth's book. It does not mention Jabet's Pit by name but - could this be a reference to the curious incident of the man in the night-time who drowned at Jabet's Pit?

Oct 14th 1861

"Inquest at the Bull's Head, Stoke, on the body of Joseph George, 61 years of age, who was found drowned in a pit on Gosford Green, on the previous Sunday morning. It appears that on Oct 5, he had left the Hertford Arms, in a state of intoxication, and was on his way to Stoke. The jury returned a verdict of 'Accidental Death', but expressed an opinion that the authorities ought to better fence the pit, which was considered to be very dangerous."



Final words on the Blitz

With the benefit of hindsight it now seems fortunate that Stoke Local History Group, together with StokeScreen Film Club, staged a very early event this year to mark the 80th anniversary of the Blitz. The event, attended by local residents at Sacred Heart School, featured dramatic film footage of the Blitz, together with filmed recollections from survivors and selected readings from pupils at the school. People in the audience, including Lord Mayor Linda

Bigham, were visibly moved by horrific stories of destruction and uplifting tales of survival. In a year dominated by Covid, the commemoration turned out to be a rare event in this 80th anniversary year.