

## **The bombing of Goldsmith Street 1941**

### **And the event encompassing it**

During the second world war on the night of the 8/9th May 1941 Nottingham suffered a devastating air raid that became known as the Nottingham Blitz. This is the story of that night ,the events surrounding it and its impact on the Masonic Hall in Goldsmith St.

Nottingham was the first city in Britain to develop an Air Raid Precautions network and its preparations for the impending conflict were judged as being amongst the best in the country. For this it had to thank the foresight and energy of the man in charge , its legendary Chief Constable Capt Athelstan Popkess.

The city was divided into five zones controlled by report and control centres The main control centre was located in the basement of the Central Fire Station in Shakespeare St. No detail was overlooked Boy cyclists with local knowledge were even recruited to carry messages in the event of communications failing in the aftermath of a raid All volunteers had to be at least twelve years of age and posses their own bike. They were issued with a tin hat,an ARP armband and a leather belt and pouch.

Some 229 wardens posts were set up to be manned around the clock by a force of nearly 4000 Wardens..The wardens job was to assess the extent and type of damage in their area so the Control Centre could send the appropriate rescue services. They were also responsible for getting the bombed out to some sort of shelter or a Rest Centre. Over 90% of wardens were part timers and one in six were women

Rest Centres were located in schools and church halls etc. Their purpose was to provide temporary shelter and hot meals to anyone who had been bombed out .They were mainly staffed by the Womens Voluntary Service and the Salvation Army who also manned the mobile canteens which were deployed following a raid.

Fire watching teams were formed .Some were stationed on the rooftops of important buildings such as the Council House and Shire Hall Equipped with buckets and stirrup pumps their task being to extinguish small fires before they could take hold and spread..Many local factories such as Boots , Raleigh and Players made their own arrangements As did the Masonic Hall in Goldsmith St.

First Aid Posts were established consisting of a doctor, a trained nurse and nursing auxiliaries. Victoria, Northern, Noel St, Portland and Radford Swimming Baths were drained and designated as temporary mortuaries.

Under the direct control of the Control Centres were the First Aid Parties.Each party consisted of four men and a driver.All were experienced first aid workers having been trained by either the Red Cross or St John's Ambulance.Their main task was to assist the Rescue Men to release trapped casualties and then administer what first aid they could before deciding whether or not further treatment was needed.

The rescue squads usually consisted of ten men and were equipped with picks and shovels,crowbars, levers,ropes and jacks well as propping and shoring equipment.Many of the rescue men were recruited from the building trades although some local Companies set up rescue teams from amongst their own employees.The miners at Radford Pit fielded several such squads..

To warn of impending air raids and signal the All Clear 13 electric sirens were located around the city. There were also 11 steam whistles located at various factories which were also incorporated into the ARP warning system. When the sirens sounded at the John Players factory in Radford the workers were spurred to the shelters by the playing of the Post Horn Gallop over the tannoy !

A comprehensive range of air raid shelters was established throughout the city. Anderson shelters named after Sir John Anderson the Secretary of State for Home Affairs became a familiar sight at the bottom of many gardens. They were simply constructed of corrugated steel which was set three feet into the ground and covered by at least eighteen inches of earth they could accommodate up to six people and could withstand almost anything except a direct hit. Cellars were also fitted out with beds and similar comforts. Not all houses had gardens or cellars however so Communal Shelters built of brick and cement were built to protect up to fifty residents of a particular street or block of flats. By 1941 two hundred and sixty of these shelters had been built capable of providing shelter for some 13000 citizens. Also a number of public surface shelters were built for schools ,railway stations,hospitals and shopping areas etc though similar in design to communal shelters they could accommodate many more people. Nottingham's extensive system of caves was also utilized and further ones were excavated.

In the 1930s the city already possessed a highly professional Fire Brigade which had fire stations at Triumph Rd , Shakespeare St and Bulwell. At that time it was under the control of the Chief Constable. Under his direction this became augmented by no less than forty five Auxiliary Fire Service stations manned by 1046 firefighters. They were equipped with 106 trailer pumps and appliances. Trailer Pumps mounted on two wheels were designed to be towed behind any suitable vehicle which was available. Powered by four cylinder petrol engines depending on type they were capable of delivering between 120 to 900 gallons per minute. In 1939 the weekly rates of pay for full time AFS crews was £3 for men and £2 for women

Total ARP expenditure for Nottingham in the year 1938/39 was £41,000 of which £17,000 was charged to the rates with the remainder being met by government Grants. At its peak in 1941/42 this had risen to £860,000 with £94,000 being provided by the ratepayers.

With the onset of war the Government began to implement policies designed to minimize the impact of bombing on the civilian population. Large public gatherings were prohibited. Cinemas, Theatres and other places of entertainment were closed and sporting fixtures such as football matches were cancelled. Inner city schools were closed and children with the consent of their parents were evacuated to safer areas although out of the 23,000 Nottingham children entitled to be evacuated only 5000 went. As early as the 8th Sept United Grand Lodge had responded by suspending all Masonic meetings and in Nottingham the annual Goose Fair had been terminated by the City Council.

The feared aerial armageddon failed to materialise and the country settled into an uneasy peace which became known as the " Phoney War ". Places of entertainment were gradually reopened and football matches were resumed although spectators were limited to the capacity of the air raid shelters provided. Schools were reopened and against official advice children began to trickle back home

.On the 28th Sept United Grand Lodge rescinded its order suspending Masonic meetings. The blackout regulations however rendered movement at night difficult and even dangerous. Street lighting was non existent and traffic lights were hooded with what became known as "Popkess Covers" Many Lodges including Nottingham Rotary Lodge resorted to holding their meetings mainly at lunchtime. The brethren were called from labour to refreshment at the hour of high twelve and having finished their devotions they returned from refreshment to labour at half past one. Profit and pleasure however were not universal. One senior brother of the lodge W/ Bro Frank Skerritt complained " That for those involved directly or indirectly in essential war work lunchtime meetings was not convenient "

The phoney war came abruptly to an end in the spring of 1940 .Following the fall of France the Luftwaffe initiated a sustained onslaught on the RAF which became known as the Battle of Britain. Starting at the beginning of August the intention was to incapacitate the RAF and clear the way for an invasion. In September in retaliation to an RAF air raid on Berlin Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe to redirect its attacks to the Bombing of London. Freed from the incessant raids on its airfields a resurgent RAF began shooting down increasing numbers of German bombers. In order to mitigate these losses the Germans resorted to bombing by night. This had the desired effect of reducing losses but presented them with another problem especially when the attacks were extended to elsewhere on mainland Britain. At night even with a high degree of technical competence the average bomber crew had difficulty in locating their intended target with any accuracy. Hence the German air force developed radio direction systems such as "Knickebein" or "crooked leg" Knickebein consisted of a radio beam which when directed towards the target from land would lead the bombers to their target.

The RAF were aware of Knickebein and an electronic counter measures unit had been formed. Designated No 80 Wing of the RAF. One of its functions was to detect the beam and substitute an erroneous one.

Starfish Sights were also created. Starfish consisted of steel drums mounted on towers. They were filled with combustible material which when ignited would simulate a burning target and induce the bombers to drop their bombs on what they thought was a burning town or city. A starfish sight was created close to Nottingham at Cropwell Butler.

Nottingham began to suffer sporadic air raids of varying intensity but the big one came in early May 1941 .On the night of the 8th May a mixed force of one hundred and twenty German long range bombers took off from their airfields in occupied Europe and headed for Nottingham and Derby. The leading wave consisting of twenty five planes headed for the Rolls Royce works in Derby. However 80 Wing successfully intercepted the Knickebein beam and the bombers were induced to drop their bombs harmlessly on the moors to the NE of the town. The Starfish sight at Cropwell Butler had been activated and the following bombers on sighting the fires assumed that it was Derby which was burning. They took a visual navigational fix ,flew over what they thought was a blacked out Nottingham and proceeded to bomb empty fields in the Vale of Belvoir. Not all of them were fooled however and at just turned midnight the first raiders appeared over the centre of Nottingham. Some flying as low as 1500 feet.

. One of the first bombs to be dropped scored a direct hit on the Masonic Hall in Goldsmith St. The Doric Temple and Dining Room, Nos 4 and 5 committee rooms and the staircase to the second floor were completely destroyed along with portions of the 1st and 2nd floor corridors

and the roof over. The main staircase and anti rooms to the Ionic and Corinthian Temples were damaged. The central portion of the front elevation in Goldsmith St was badly shaken and the very heavy mahogany entrance doors were blown into the street. Several walls were badly cracked and nearly all the doors throughout the building were blown off their hinges with some being reduced to matchwood. The caretaker of the hall a Mr Sandell along with a companion was on fire watching duty. He is reported as saying "I was on the roof which is about forty feet high when we heard the screech of a falling bomb. We ducked down just as the building received a direct hit. The next thing I realised was that I was on the ground floor" He suffered concussion but his wife and child who were in the building at the time, as well as the other fire watcher were all uninjured.

This was not to be the case elsewhere. At the Co op Bakery in Meadow Lane the night shift had been at work. It was struck by two high explosive bombs one of which penetrated the air raid shelter in the basement forty nine people were killed and another twenty injured. An air raid shelter at Dakeyne St in Sneinton also received a direct hit resulting in twenty one fatalities. During that night a total of one hundred and fifty one Nottingham people were to lose their lives.

As the bombs continued to rain down the swathe of destruction extended from the edge of Mapperley Park across Woodborough Rd and St Annes Well Rd to the Lace Market, Sneinton and Sneinton Dale Leenside. Station St, Carlton Rd, Carlton Hill and the Meadows were hit. So too were the Colwick Rd, Meadow Lane and Trentside districts.

In the central areas of the city bombs fell in Shakespeare St destroying part of the University College and causing the partial collapse of the Public Assistance Building. Armitages stores the Moot Hall and shops at the corner of Friar Lane were seriously damaged and a new office block in Castle Gate was wrecked. Bombs also fell on the LMS station destroying 26 passenger coaches. Bombs inflicted serious damage on the Boots buildings at its Island St site and the Printing Works in Station St which was destroyed. Two gas holders at the nearby Eastcroft works were hit and provided a spectacular but grim site as the gas burned off. The fires in the Lace Market were on the verge of joining and becoming one massive inferno. St Marys Gate and Halifax Place were declared conflagrations which was a term used for fires officially out of control. Several churches were badly damaged. Firefighters successfully tackled a fire in the south transept of St Marys church when an incendiary bomb burned through the roof. St Christopher's on Colwick Rd and St John the Baptist at Leenside were completely destroyed. A total of twelve serious forty major and forty two medium fires were started. In all some 424 high explosive bombs (139 tons) along with 6,804 incendiaries (6.8 tons) landed on the city. Destroying 200 houses and rendering a further 250 unfit for habitation. A further 200 were badly damaged. The six rest centres which were in operation dealt with 1,268 people who had been bombed out.

First on the spot at Goldsmith St at 3.45 am some three hours after that bomb had been on the Masonic Hall was Bro G.F. Gibson the Asst Provincial Grand Secretary. In his anxiety he must have set out immediately the bombs stopped falling without waiting for the all clear. This was not sounded until 4.58 am which was over an hour later. His immediate anxiety was for the safety of the portrait in oils of W. Bro F.H. Starling which the PGM Viscount Galway had unveiled only the previous afternoon at a meeting of PGL. Fortunately this escaped damage, it had been placed in the PGMs private room and the heavy mahogany door which had been blown across

the room stopped short of the portrait itself It presently hangs in the North West corner of the Ionic Temple.If one studies the portrait closely you can almost discern the look of stunned relief on his face.The Pr Grand Sec office received little damage so the Provincial Records were safe.The contents of the Museum were affected but the Lodge Regalia and Banners etc survived intact in the untouched basement.

Measures were immediately taken to render the building safe for use.The unstable facade was shored up and a curtain replaced the missing main entrance doors also scaffold boards with handrails were installed so that the heaps of debris could be negotiated safely With a view to posterity a set of photographs was taken to record the extent of the damage.Some of which are currently displayed at the entrance to the Corinthian Restaurant . Fortunately the North portion of the Hall containing the Ionic Temple ,dining rooms and kitchens suffered little or no damage.Temporary accommodation was found for club members although it was to be several weeks before the Corinthian Temple and Dining Room were returned to use .Nottingham Rotary Lodge held a meeting there on the 5th Nov.The Doric Temple and Dining Room were to take years to restore rather than weeks.The base of the bomb which did the damage was presented to the museum although its exact whereabouts is now unknown. The next meeting at the Hall was scheduled to take place six days after the bombing..It was the installation meeting of the Royal Ark Mariners Lodge No 344 It took place as planned with improvised furniture and the usual three course dinner was held.W/Bro Charles Lymn ( our founder) was a Past Commander N of the Lodge and its current Chaplain so no doubt he was present.

Nottingham suffered a total number of eleven air raids during the war. The last being on the 24th July 1942 when a lone raider dropped four bombs on Sneinton Dale killing a fire watcher. When victory in Europe finally came and Nottingham could celebrate VE Day a huge crowd gathered in the Old Market Sq to listen to Churchills victory speech relayed over loudspeakers.This was followed by a fireworks display of a different nature on the Forest Recreation Ground.At the first AGM of Provincial Grand Lodge after the end of war which was held on 20th Sep 1945 the PGM began his annual address with the following words.

" With joy and rejoicing we meet in PGL today for the first time in six tremendous years in the benign atmosphere of peace in our homeland.By the mercy of the G.A.O.T.U and the heroism of the fighting forces of our Empire and her great allies we have been preserved from the evils of enemy domination, and have been able to celebrate a supreme and glorious victory .Had it been otherwise it might easily have been the end of our normal life for generations. The blackout is gone,the lights are up again everywhere , we no longer live under the menace of death from the air and the way is once more clear for progress and prosperity."

Records relating to the post war rebuilding of the Hall are sparse. Being limited to a brief memorandum relating to the steps being taken in 1949.The Corinthian Temple was redecorated in the summer of 1954,Nottingham Rotary Lodge was the first to use it after this had been done.It is possible that this marked the final stages of the Halls refurbishment.

The events of that night have all but receded from living memory.The only tangible evidence we have here in Goldsmith St is a few fading photographs lining the corridor leading to the Corinthian Restaurant

What must never be forgotten however is that if it was not for the resilience of the people of these islands strengthened by their institutions Europe as we know it today with its freedoms and democracy would not exist.