

# Appendix 8



## Stories from Eastbourne

Including extracts from:

*“The Intriguing Story of Saint Christopher's Eastbourne”*, [from Phil Distin]

*“Front Line Eastbourne – An Illustrated Record of a Famous Holiday Resort under Enemy Air Assault, and a Tribute to the Stout-hearted Residents who kept the Flag Flying”*, [from John Graham].

The text at right is taken from "*The Intriguing Story of Saint Christopher's Eastbourne*", authored by Peter Wickens & Jose Stimpson

## Farewell, St. Christopher's

**S**t. Christopher's Main School struggled on for a further six months after relinquishing Denton Grange, but on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1932 the school was closed. In spite of best efforts, this school with its great traditions fell victim to the Depression.

Dorothy Rooks (née Oldham) the Main Trustee of the school, whose father George Townsend Oldham had built it, was glad that he had not lived to see its demise.

The Rev. G H West, Deputy Headmaster and Chaplain, whose family had for so long been connected with the school, must surely have felt heartbreak, that so many years work and dedication had come to an end. The inspiration that devoted staff had brought to their pupils and the achievements thus made remained as a lasting memorial to the school.

After the closure of the school and certain gifts to the chapel had been returned to the donors, the buildings stood empty until 25<sup>th</sup> June 1934.

Hillbrow School in Bolsover Road, under Headmasters Robert Gidley Thornton and Francis John Matthews, had come to the end of its lease. The School had not had its own playing fields, so were therefore pleased to come to the St. Christopher's site, where the boys could enjoy these excellent facilities.

Hillbrow remained there until it was evacuated to Somerset Court, Brent Knowle, Somerset, in May 1940.

Captain H Levy of the Admiralty, Southeast Command (Underwater Weapons Research Establishment,) Portsmouth requisitioned the Main School on behalf of the Navy on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1941 and the Chapel on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1942. The Navy favoured the site because it had sports fields and the chapel for the use of the Wrens and sailors.

Thus the school became part of HMS Marlborough, the remainder being based at Eastbourne College and surrounding buildings.

At Hillbrow a large concrete 'water tighting' tank, 186' long x 36' wide and 8' deep was constructed within the grounds, so that vehicles could be driven through the water to see if they were 'water tight.' This was an essential requirement in order to facilitate the safety of personnel who were required to operate in all terrains. The buildings were also used as a testing establishment to trial new devices.

The site was de-requisitioned in September 1947; but Hillbrow School remained in Somerset. Thereafter, it was bought as the new home for the Chelsea College of Physical Education, opening in September 1948. At this point the chapel was converted to a physiology laboratory. Finally, in 1964, the chapel was demolished to make way for classrooms, new gymnasiums and a swimming pool.

The following text comes from a wartime magazine: “*Front Line Eastbourne – An Illustrated Record of a Famous Holiday Resort under Enemy Air Assault, and a Tribute to the Stout-hearted Residents who kept the Flag Flying*”.

**Note:** the text on the following pages refers to a German pilot landing on Aldro School in Eastbourne. It was of course the roof of the building in Gaudick Road which had housed Hill Brow School before its evacuation to Somerset, onto which the German pilot fell.

Aldro Preparatory School for Boys had also been located in Eastbourne until the war, but like Hill Brow had been forced to evacuate in 1940 – see <http://www.aldro.org/about/history>.

## Front Line Eastbourne



Grove-rd.

June 4th. 1943

*An Illustrated Record of a Famous Holiday Resort under  
Enemy Air Assault, and a Tribute to the Stout-hearted  
Residents who kept the Flag Flying*

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## CHAPTER 2

# *The Ordeal Begins*

IT was on Sunday morning, July 7, 1940, during the historic Battle of Britain period, that Eastbourne suffered its first blow from the air. But some three months before then, early in April, the townspeople had been brought close to the realities of war by the fate of S.S. *Barnhill*, a cargo-laden vessel, which was heavily battered and set on fire when attacked by an enemy bomber in the Channel, and ran ashore near Langney Point, where she subsequently broke in two. Of this drama of the sea more in a separate chapter.

The sudden shattering of the Sunday morning peacefulness on July 7 occurred shortly after 11 o'clock with the crash of high-explosive bombs which, released by a lone German medium bomber, fell in the Whitley Road area, causing considerable destruction and damage. There were two fatal casualties, a number of persons were injured and many others had remarkable escapes.

The plane came in from the sea east of the town and when inland was challenged by the fire of A.A. guns in the neighbourhood. Rumour had it that the machine was hit, but of this there was no confirmation. Deterred, maybe, from proceeding further inland by the gunfire, or perhaps following a pre-arranged design, the plane then circled, flew over Eastbourne from the direction of Willingdon, sent down its load of destruction, and went out to sea, passing over Royal Parade between the Redoubt and the Pier on its way.

Along the stretch of Whitley Road, from near St. Philip's Avenue to the Recreation Ground, fell the bombs, demolishing houses on both sides and damaging many others, not only in this residential thoroughfare but also in a number of neighbouring roads. One of the properties wrecked was Birchfield's grocery stores at the corner of Whitley Road and Clarence Road. To the scene of devastation was added the spectacle of two pillars of

flame rising from the roadway due to the fracture of gas mains by high explosive.

Rescue workers, wardens, and other A.R.P. personnel, together with police and firemen, responding to their first call of this nature, were speedily in action, dealing efficiently and expeditiously with an unaccustomed situation. Casualties were given prompt attention, the fires were subdued, and advice and assistance was given wherever it was needed.

Two fatal casualties were caused by the raid. Mr. Robert Woollams, aged sixty years, who was found dead but without injuries, is believed to have died from heart failure. Mr. William Thomas Turner, also elderly, was taken to hospital with a fractured arm and shock, and died the following Wednesday. Nine or ten other persons were taken to hospital with injuries, and a number were treated at first-aid posts. There were many instances of narrow escapes from injury, particularly from the flying glass of many shattered windows.

Bombs were heard on two more occasions in July, but they were on open ground in the outskirts of the borough. On Monday, August 12, after a good deal of plane activity during the morning, excitement was caused about one o'clock by the sound of guns from vessels lying offshore and by the sight of two enemy planes racing inland. One was seen to swerve downward and was believed to be a Messerschmitt which came down in a field near Berwick. The pilot was wounded and was taken to hospital.

Four days later, on Friday, August 16, came Eastbourne's second sharp attack, with damage and casualties at Hampden Park, and the thrill for many townspeople of seeing a German plane destroyed by a pursuing fighter, the wreckage falling in the Meads district.

Towards five o'clock in the evening, shortly after the siren had sounded, the roar of aircraft approaching from inland was heard. An



*Dead Nazi airmen hanging by parachute  
from the roof of Aldro School.*

enemy force was racing homeward, pursued by British fighters. Soon came a pandemonium of sound; crash after crash of exploding bombs, mingled with the rattle of aerial gunfire, and then suddenly a weird, breath-taking

noise, increasing rapidly in volume to a terrifying crescendo—the sound of an enemy bomber hurtling earthward, shot out of the sky by an avenging R.A.F. fighter. It disintegrated, the wreckage falling in the Meads area, some of the portions being found half a mile or more apart. The pilot's body crashed on to the roof of Aldro School, and the other member of the crew who baled out descended with his parachute into the sea and was drowned.

Retribution also overtook another of the raiders, which was shot down into the sea off Beachy Head.

Nearly thirty bombs had fallen in the neighbourhood of Hampden Park, two-thirds of them in the residential area. No houses received direct hits, but many were extensively damaged by the blast of bombs exploding in gardens and on roadways, and there was damage to windows and roofs over a wide radius.

There were three fatal casualties, the victims being Corporation workmen who were engaged in the collection of scrap during Salvage Week. They had sought refuge beneath their lorry as the raid began, but a bomb exploded in the road a few yards away and the lorry was pierced by fragments and set ablaze. When help arrived, it was found that two of the men, Frank Bertram Edwards and Harry Frederick White, were dead, while the third, Samuel Henman, was so gravely injured that he died in hospital. Their homes were at Eastbourne.

Of this raid has to be recorded examples of outstanding devotion to duty and coolness on the part of two young telephone operators at the Hampden Park exchange, Miss M. L. May, aged nineteen, and Miss M. D. Sewell, aged seventeen.

An instance of unflinching application to duty was shown at a well-known Eastbourne nursing home, where a surgeon was engaged in an eye operation as the raiding planes reached the town.

This air attack had a stimulating effect upon the townspeople and led to the acquisition by the Royal Air Force of a gift Spitfire bearing the name of Eastbourne. The story of this enthusiastic answer to enemy terrorism is told in the next chapter.