

# **'Death in the Afternoon' : The Chesterton Air Raid**

## **Duncan Hindmarch**

A lone German raider, flying low, made a daylight attack on a township in the Midlands on Saturday afternoon. (Evening Sentinel 16<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p1)

As daylight was fading on the afternoon of December 14<sup>th</sup> 1940, and a long winter night was about to set in, World War Two came directly to Chesterton, in the form of a deadly Luftwaffe raid.

This article sets out to find out when, how and why the attack happened, what type of aircraft was used, as well as suggest that the commonly quoted death toll needs to be increased. The research includes contemporary and later newspaper reports, as well as the experiences of people who witnessed the raid. Beginning with a sketch of life in Chesterton at the outbreak of war, it moves onto the raid and the devastation it caused. It also covers how the community responded in the aftermath of what turned out to be the most destructive raid on North Staffordshire throughout the war.

### **Memories of Chesterton at the Outbreak of War**

As with the rest of the country, many men had volunteered or been called up for National Service, meaning Chesterton was largely populated by women, children and older men. Dorothy Farrington (recorded in an audio interview, 2005<sup>25</sup>), lived in Dixons Row off Apedale Road, and remembers her father volunteering as soon as the war began. She was at her auntie's house in Church Fields for the summer holiday when her father came to tell them the news of the outbreak of war. Her Auntie cried out, 'Good God! The lads!', referring to how many local men had been killed in the First World War. Her father volunteered straight away, but not for the armed forces, saying:

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<sup>25</sup> All witness reports, unless otherwise stated, were accessed or recorded in 2005

I've no enemies in Germany - I have no quarrel with the Germans. It says in the Bible 'Thou shalt not kill', so I'm not going to kill. I'm going to save lives.

To this end he joined the fire service, though this was no soft option. He was sent to areas such as Coventry, Birmingham, and Wellington, which, Dorothy points out, were where, 'the worst bombing and the worst air raids were.' One day, he even came home covered in pin holes all over his uniform from a fire in a pin factory which rendered his waterproof uniform useless. Such heroics earned him medals for his rescue work.

Dorothy's family worked their small field in Chesterton on Chain Bank, which is now a housing estate. They kept pigs, fowl and even a pony which they had bought from local gypsies. Having their own smallholding allowed them to barter with the local shops and people so they were never too short of food despite the harsh war time rationing.

Though many left to join the armed forces, Chesterton also saw many evacuees from as far afield as London take refuge in what everyone thought would be a safe haven. Though war had undoubtedly affected Chesterton with the loss of familiar faces going to the front, rationing and other controls, nothing had prepared the locals for what was to come. Indeed, Dorothy remembers that her family had not even taped over their windows since they did not expect the township would be bombed.

### **The War in the Skies**

In the fifteen months of war with Germany preceding the bombing, Britain and her allies had suffered a series of defeats. With Poland and France overrun, the Soviet Union in a non-aggression pact with the Nazis and the United States still neutral, Britain had become isolated and on the defensive. However, victory in the air in the Battle of Britain earlier in the summer had denied Germany the cover needed for a sea-based invasion. While the Royal Navy and the U-Boats fought the battle of the Atlantic, air raids were the only means to strike directly at each other's homeland. The front pages of the Evening Sentinel often carried reports of German and British raids side by side. On the day of the Chesterton attack, 14<sup>th</sup> December

1940, the Sentinel reported: 'RAF Night Raids on Bremen, Kiel and U-Boat Base'. (p1)

Civilian morale might have been raised by the first major British land victories of the war. Daily reports were coming in of rapid victories against the Italians in North Africa following the beginning of offensive operations on the 12<sup>th</sup>. This was the main news in the Sentinel on the day of the bombing, which went to press before the raid: 'Swelling Tide of Italian Rout'.

### **Bombing Strategy**

In the early days of the war, both sides attempted daylight raids on specific targets. The loss of pilots in these missions became so high in comparison to the meagre results of the often inaccurate raids that both sides took to more indiscriminate night time raids. The Chesterton raid came at a time of this transition, when small-scale opportunistic daytime raids still took place.

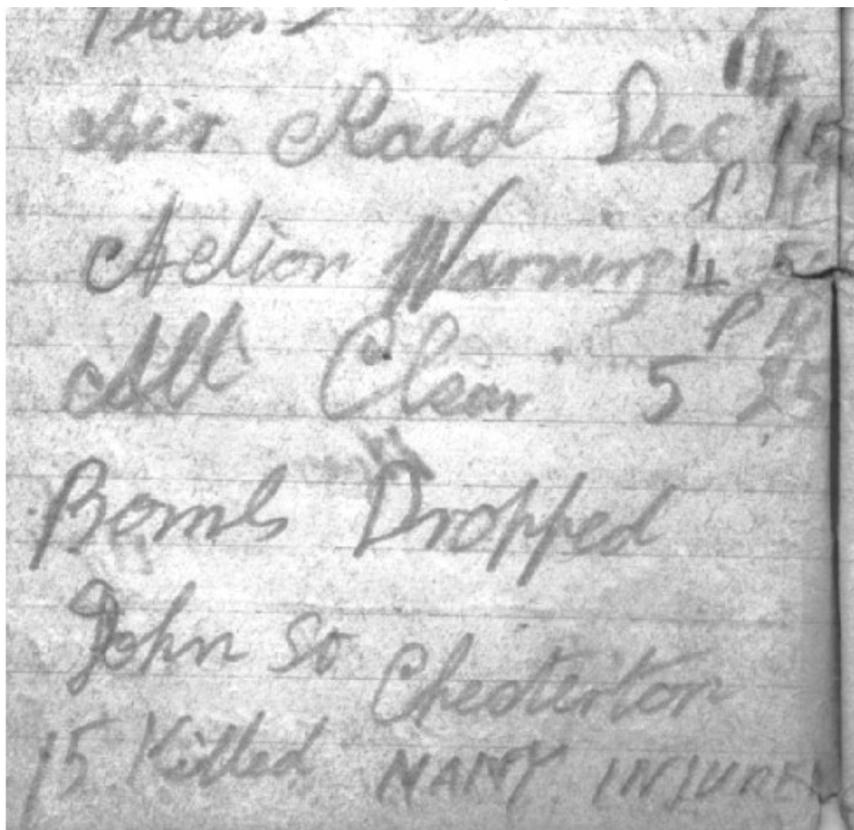
### **The Timing of the Raid**

Though no precise timing of the bombing has been fully established, reports both in the Sentinel and the interview with Dorothy suggest that the raid was in the fading daylight of a very gloomy winter day, when many locals were returning from doing their Christmas shopping. Other information was accessed from the BBC website (see bibliography): May Foster estimates it was around 4pm whereas Hadgett estimates it took place at about 4:30pm. Though Hall states that it had been sunny earlier, when the attack came it was 'cold' and 'cloudy' according to Hadgett and Beckett, and 'dull and dreary' according to John. Though censorship probably prevented the journalist from reporting the exact time, the later eye witness reports appear to correspond to those of a contemporary report:

The raid occurred at a time when most of the people in the district were about to have their afternoon meal or returning home from shopping expeditions and a performance in a cinema in one of the affected streets was drawing to a close. This programme had been watched by a large number of children, including some who had been evacuated to the district from London. (Evening Sentinel December 16<sup>th</sup> p1, and repeated in the Weekly Sentinel Saturday Dec 21<sup>st</sup> 1940 p4)

This is supported by a letter to the editor in the Evening Sentinel of the same date which claimed the raid was in 'half light' and 'before the official blackout time' (p4). This means it was almost certainly before the official blackout time reported in the Sentinel on the day of the raid as being 5:20.

Mr Smith, an Air Raid Precaution (ARP) Warden recorded the incident in his diary at the time, with the 'Action Warning' coming at 4.50pm (see below). Presumably the bombs were dropped very close to the time that the warning came, meaning the raid was slightly later than remembered by the eye witnesses 60 or so years after the event. I believe this is the most likely indicator of the actual time of the raid, as it was recorded at the time, and fits in with all the circumstantial evidence of the raid being in gloomy conditions but before the official blackout time of 5:20pm.



Previous page: copy of Air Raid Precaution Warden Diary of Mr Smith, courtesy of his son Les. Also thanks to Ray Johnson for bringing it to my attention.

As will be suggested later, the weather was possibly a crucial factor in explaining why Chesterton was hit. The time and weather also meant that the initial rescue work was hampered by darkness.

## The Attack

Beckett (1977) wrote that 'A lone German raider dived out of the clouds', which left around 14 dead, 'scores' injured and 6 houses destroyed. Many of the eyewitness reports state how low the plane swooped. A lack of experience of witnessing aircraft could account for an exaggeration of how low the plane really was; as Hall states, 'the plane **sounded** low'.

However, the consistency of the eye witness reports suggest that the plane did indeed dive low to drop the bombs, a view even echoed by a German news report discussed later. John was able to see the pilot and even a white disc on the tail of the twin-engined plane. Furthermore, the 1977 report mentions that Doris May, who was 10 at the time and had both legs broken in the raid, told her mother that the plane was so low she could see the pilot's helmet and then something opening up underneath the plane – presumably to unload the bombs. May Foster adds:

My sister was coming from the village and saw him coming over the treetops in the plane and she could see the swastika. If anyone had had a rifle they could have shot at him he was so low.

These eyewitnesses are supported by the contemporary Sentinel (1940, p7) report, with the sub-heading 'Raider Dived Low' which claimed that '(t)he raider was seen to dive low out of the clouds, one witness describing it as 'scraping the chimney pots.' Only the City Times (20<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p1) directly quotes an (anonymous) eye-witness, who, as the 1937 map shows later, was very close to one of the blasts:

The steward of a British Legion Club gave a vivid account of the raid: 'I was in the Legion with about 10 other men when we heard a plane,' he said. 'We all rushed outside. Then we heard a swish of

bombs and we flung ourselves back. There was a deafening explosion and the building was filled with dust. The gas main was fractured and had to be plugged and everything was thrown about.'

Though the 1984 Sentinel report only mentions one large calibre bomb, and Hall and Major only heard one loud bang, there appears to be irrefutable evidence from many sources that several bombs were dropped. The 1977 report refers to 'a stick of bombs'<sup>26</sup>, quoting directly from the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1940 report it appears to be largely taken from. Most eye-witness reports also favour several bombs: John states, '...there were several explosions and bombs', as do Hadgett, Baddeley and the contemporary City Times and Staffordshire Advertiser reports (1940). Dorothy, who claims there were three bombs, explains the contradiction: one of the bombs landed harmlessly in a field, suggesting that while some witnesses may have only heard one large explosion, there were actually several bombs. This is partially supported by the contemporary Sentinel report, which though it does not mention any bombs landing in a field, or the number of bombs, certainly suggests there were several: 'The one bomb which failed to strike property direct landed on a metalled roadway and the blast from its explosion severely damaged a house on one side and the Salvation Army hut on the other.' (1940, p7)

### **The Plane**

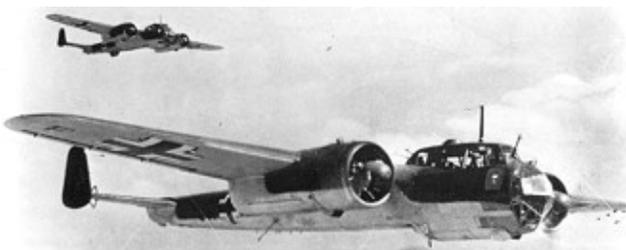
All the reports agree with the Sentinel (16<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p1) headline, 'Attack by Lone Raider', rather than a wave of bombers. John witnessed a dark-grey, twin-engined aeroplane with a white disk on its tail. It is not clear what type of plane was used, though. There were a few raids on Britain by Italian planes from bases in Belgium, but the overwhelming majority were by the German Luftwaffe (RAF website). Further evidence that it was a Luftwaffe raid is that the German News Agency and High Command claimed responsibility (15<sup>th</sup> December, cited in the Sentinel 16<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p1).

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<sup>26</sup> I would appreciate any suggestions as to the number and power of bombs in a 'stick'

According to the Germans, as cited in the Sentinel, the raid was made by a reconnaissance plane. This is supported by the fact that it was flying alone rather than as part of a formation and that it unloaded relatively few bombs. A lone bomber would probably be flying solo due to problems such as battle damage, mechanical fault or disorientation, none of which would be conducive to diving down to make a deliberate attack.

The claim by the German News Agency that the raid was made by a reconnaissance plane is backed up by the assertion made on the official Battle of Britain website that in 1940 the Luftwaffe sent reconnaissance planes on opportunist raids when the weather was too bad for groups of bombers. Since the accounts state that the weather was bad on that day, there is considerable evidence that the raid was indeed made by a lone reconnaissance plane. Many such planes were flying boats, which would have been clearly identified by the witnesses. This means that, according to the RAF website, there are only three possibilities which match the criteria of being twin-engined reconnaissance planes:



## In the Shelters

Dorothy remembers hiding with her family in the shelter during the raid, which was in their garden behind their house. This was possibly an 'Anderson' shelter, named after the politician who commissioned it. It was made of sheets of corrugated metal, *which* 'We as kids used to dance on it cos it was a metal table'. When they came out, none of the five houses in their row had any windows left. May Foster also notes the lucky escape of her relatives:

A bomb fell just down the road next to my mother's and between my mother's and my sister's house and it cut the house in half. It was heartbreaking but the people were safe in the shelter. Cut right in half, it was, the back bedroom, the living room and you could see the bedroom furniture ready to slide and fall onto the ground.



A picture of an Anderson shelter being built. Source:  
[http://www.thepotteries.org/memories/anderson\\_shelter.jpg](http://www.thepotteries.org/memories/anderson_shelter.jpg)

## Bomb Damage

The damage from the blasts extended to as far as half a mile away, as testified by John Baddeley:

I can remember we had a big window in the front room, and in the window an Xmas tree. What happened next was over in seconds: the window was blown out, and I was under the bed. My mother was in the bed at the time. Where we lived was about half of a mile away from where the bombs were dropped – the High Street.

Though minor damage occurred over a wide area, where the bombs actually fell was utterly devastated. The following is a contemporary report, which is probably accurate, as there would be no propaganda value in exaggerating the damage:

Entering the bombed streets, the Duke (of Kent) saw several houses, some completely demolished. Roofs were stripped by the blast, windows and doors were blown in. In one case a whole bedroom wall was torn away... Tiles and bricks littered the streets, and the Duke watched men toiling to salvage property, and to make some of the houses habitable.<sup>27</sup>

Due to censorship, none of the contemporary reports even mentions the village by name, let alone specific streets. The reports are certainly about Chesterton, as subsequent articles refer to appeals by the mayor of Newcastle; there are the death notices in the Sentinel; and the subsequent Newcastle Times funeral reports under the title 'Other Sad Scenes from Chesterton'.

The City Times (20<sup>th</sup> Dec 1940, p1) noted four streets were badly affected. Brookes (2000, p136), states Heathcote and Sandford Street were hit. However, the commemorative plaque still outside Chesterton Community Centre states that the deaths of several families were in John Street and does not mention any other affected streets. Due to its proximity to the other streets, Edensor Street was possibly the other badly damaged street, though I have not found any reports of damage there.

According to the Sentinel in 1940 and 1977, the Salvation Army hall next to the factory, fortunately unoccupied at the time, took a direct hit (1977). The City Times supports this: 'He [The Duke of Kent] saw one place, where formerly stood the Salvation Army Hut, which is now merely a pile of debris'. The 1984 report even claims that a drum stick found later was all that remained intact of the hall. In the middle of Heathcote Street, a pot in perfect condition containing rabbit stew was discovered – blasted from someone's kitchen. This street was the location of the Alexandra Cinema, and perhaps the place of the luckiest escape, according to all the Sentinel reports, as

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<sup>27</sup> Stoke-on-Trent City Times Friday 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 1940, p1

it had been packed with children watching the Saturday matinee performance which had finished just minutes before a bomb caused extensive damage to the roof and blasted the windows.

At John Street at the Sandford Street end, 'The entire street was covered with shattered brickwork and splintered timber...shrouded beneath a pall of choking dust' (Bourne 1984). The Evening Sentinel at the time noted,

Houses, Chapels and Shops Damaged...Some working class houses wrecked and others damaged. One or two retail shops were also involved and two chapels damaged. (December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1940 p1).

The reports also noted damage to 2 churches though it is not clear if these were the two Methodist churches (1 bottom right and 1 top left of featured area), or the Holy Trinity church (left of the featured area).

The first reports from the Sentinel (16<sup>th</sup> December, picture caption p1) describe the devastation in vivid detail:

The blast of the explosions shook practically the whole of the township. Windows were smashed, rooffiles ripped off, and doors battered throughout a wide area.

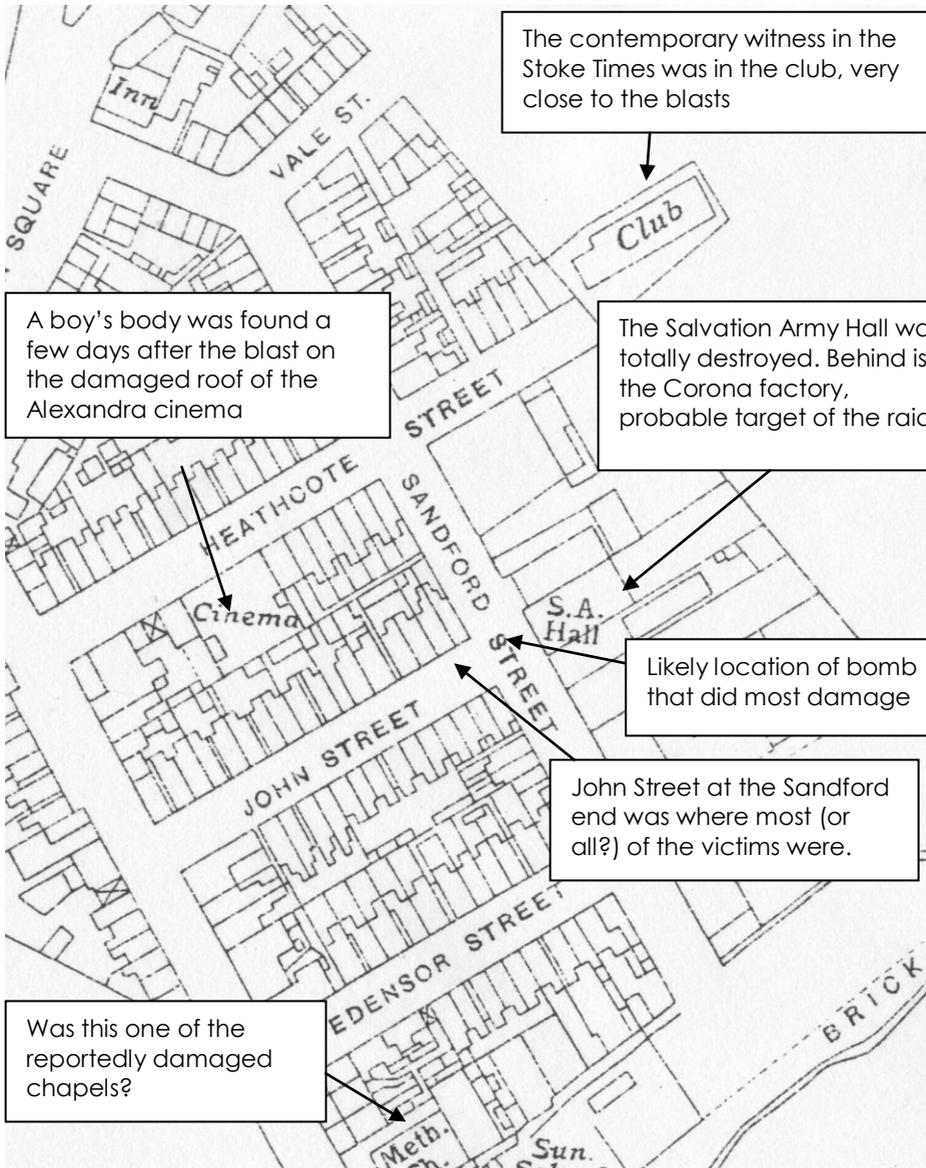
Hadgett, a resident of John Street describes his lucky escape:

...my family were downstairs when it happened. A fin from one of the bombs went through my bedroom window - the upstairs was a shambles!

Contemporary reports in the City Times (20<sup>th</sup> December 1940) feature several lucky escapes, possibly as uplifting propaganda for what was negative news, though this does not mean the stories were not true: 'In one case a whole bedroom wall was torn away. The occupants of the bedroom – three children – were unharmed.'

Another escape is detailed under the subheading 'Bombed Twice Before':

Mrs MacFadden, of Liverpool, who has been bombed twice before, and Mr and Mrs Cotteril, who with their seven children escaped injury, received words of sympathy from the Duke.



The contemporary witness in the Stoke Times was in the club, very close to the blasts

A boy's body was found a few days after the blast on the damaged roof of the Alexandra cinema

The Salvation Army Hall was totally destroyed. Behind is the Corona factory, probable target of the raid

Likely location of bomb that did most damage

John Street at the Sandford end was where most (or all?) of the victims were.

Was this one of the reportedly damaged chapels?

Crown copyright (1937). Reproduced from the 1937 Ordnance Survey map.

The Sentinel (1977) also describes another lucky escape where a baby was rescued from a wrecked back bedroom by an uncle who was at home from army leave, though this appears to have mixed up some of the details from its original source, the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1940 Sentinel report:

The back bedroom of a house immediately behind some which suffered a direct hit was completely smashed but a baby sleeping there was found quite unhurt. In the room below the baby's grandparents, mother and brother were about to sit down to tea when they felt the shock of the bomb. The grandfather and brother were injured by flying debris, but the others were unhurt. The baby's father had just gone down the street, but rushed back when he heard the explosion, and it was he who recovered the baby. An uncle of the baby was, at that moment, on his way home, and he arrived home to find the house wrecked and its occupants evacuated.

As with the City Times, to try and boost morale in spite of the depressing news, the Sentinel (16<sup>th</sup> Dec 1940 p6) focuses on such lucky incidents. Under the title 'Remarkable Escapes', it details several other stories:

Neighbours in one street most directly affected told how they were just about to sit down to their meal when they heard a plane sweep down. Mothers grabbed their children and dashed into pantries for safety. In one of these cases the pantry door was wrenched off by the blast.

People were being served in shops when the blast blew the windows in and tales are told of purchases being blown out of customers' hands. Debris mingles with the goods on counters and some of the shops were left in pitiable condition. One boy of 14 picked up a small child lying in the street and carried it to safety.

From one house, the walls of which were bulging and from which all doors had vanished, a cage was carried containing a budgerigar, quite unaffected and chirping cheerily! In another house, the rear of which had tumbled down, and where everything was in confusion, the favourite cat of the family wandered disconsolately. She was unhurt but had lost her kittens.

Unfortunately though, the luck did not hold for everyone: 'When the bombs dropped, the houses across from us took a direct hit'. (Hadgett)

I would be interested to hear from anyone who could authenticate these or supply any other such memories. On the following pages are photos of the aftermath; I would be grateful for any further information, such as where they were taken and who was in the pictures.



"Many residents were about to sit down to tea when a lone German raider dived out of the clouds on Saturday afternoon and dropped his bombs on their homes, giving them no chance of escape from death or injury, as this picture of some of the demolished houses shows (Original caption from Evening Sentinel December 16<sup>th</sup> 1940) Image Courtesy: Staffordshire Sentinel



“Bricks and timber piled high from the blast of a heavy bomb. The death toll is heavy, 15 were taken to hospital, and scores received first aid treatment on the spot.” (16<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p6) Image courtesy: Staffordshire Sentinel News and Media. Is this John Street?

### **Casualties & Injuries**

The bomb hit the heart of the community. Though all innocent deaths are tragedies, fate seems to have been particularly cruel in this raid, with members of the same family and London evacuees from the bombing being victims. All but one of the victims were women, children, or older men past call-up age:

<b>Women</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Men</b>
8	5	3, 2 of whom were over conscription age

It is likely that the blast, by missing the Corona factory and hitting private houses caused so many fatalities within the same family groupings. A total of five members of the related Webb and Platt families, who were also neighbours, perished, along with George Bartels a young evacuee staying with the Webbs to escape the London Blitz. One family member narrowly escaped death, but the sudden loss must have been horrific:

Mr Platt, one of the householders, was in the back kitchen at the time a bomb fell. He was rescued from the wreckage, but the others, who were in other parts of the house, were killed. (City Times, 20<sup>th</sup> December).

Mother Rosa Smallman and child Stephen, London evacuee Rosetta Cooper and three members and generations of the Frost family all died in the same house in John Street. This was also the case with the Boston family on the same street; Drummer James Boston, son James (Junior Drummer) and Record Sergeant Gladys Boston, all active members of the Chesterton Salvation Army, were killed in their house. According to neighbour Mrs Rouse, it took a direct hit (Newcastle Times 27<sup>th</sup> Dec 1940), also supported by the City Times;

'the victims were in their house when it received a direct hit.'

Only Mrs Boston survived, having lost her husband, son and daughter:

'The mother of one family owes her life to the fact that at the time she was visiting friends in another district' (City Times 20<sup>th</sup> December, p1).

Miss Rosetta Mary Cooper, 19 year old evacuee from London staying in John Street (Newcastle Times 27<sup>th</sup> 1940), as well as a young boy evacuee, orphaned by a London raid, were killed (Dorothy & Hadgett). Dorothy thinks he might have been called Selwyn, but is possibly confusing him with Stephen Edwin Smallman or Selwyn Jones, who was reported as injured by the City Times, but I cannot find any evidence of his subsequent death. She heard the boy had been in the front room watching the raid through the window and was killed by the blast of the bombs, though Betty Hancock (2005) thinks the boy was a schoolmate of hers and had been lying ill in bed when the bombs struck. Both agree that his whole family had already been killed in London. Dorothy and Hadgett (2005), think his body was not found until a few days later on the cinema roof. This

ties in with Betty Hancock's account that a body was found by workmen repairing the roof of the Alexandra cinema a few days later. Looking at the contemporary records (see below) in the Sentinel, it is more likely he was George Bartles as he had no family at his funeral, whereas Stephen's mother died with him and his father attended their funeral.

The precise number of fatalities is not exactly clear because of wartime censorship in contemporary reports which referred to the funerals but did not specify how they died; presumably there was censorship over exact numbers of casualties at the time. The death notices, as detailed in the table below are on different days, indicating that some later died of their wounds or that several bodies were found after the wreckage had cleared. The latter is supported by contemporary reports; even as late as the following Saturday, there was uncertainty: 'A number of persons was killed, and some are still missing' (Stoke-on-Trent City Times Dec 20<sup>th</sup> 1940). The Sentinel (1977) later reflected this uncertainty, quoting the figure to be 'about 14' deaths, and Brookes (2000), holds it to be 14 exactly. However, after analysing contemporary reports, funeral reports and death notices I suggest that the actual figure could be 16.

The contemporary Sentinels and Staffordshire Advertisers avoided quoting figures, but the City Times (20<sup>th</sup> December 1940) was not so circumspect: 'Twelve people lost their lives, two are already posted as missing and it is feared that two more will be added to the list'. If the missing were later confirmed dead, this would concur with my total of 16. The Sentinel (16<sup>th</sup> December 1940) also suggested the initial total of deaths would increase:

It is feared the death toll will be increased when the whole of the piled-up mortar and bricks has been sifted. In addition, a number of people are in hospital suffering from injury and shock. People of all ages received first aid from doctors, nurses and first aid workers on the spot.

To demonstrate the confusion of the reports, there is inconsistency even within the same edition of the City Times as the continued report on another page lists 13 deaths and no mention of the missing. John Baddeley, John Haggett (2005) list 15 as does the AWP report on the day of the raid (see above). However, if the body

found 3 days later is added to the AWP report, this also comes to my total of 16.

The death notices in the Sentinel are interesting for several reasons. Firstly there is a minimum of a delay of a day or two for the victims. Most natural deaths on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> were reported in the Monday 16<sup>th</sup> or Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> editions, though some deaths were even reported on the same day. However the first bomb victims were only announced four days after on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Was this due to wartime restrictions on reporting such deaths, identification problems or simply the shock and displacement of the event among surviving relatives? A second difference is that they are the only reports to use the lines, 'Died suddenly in December', 'Suddenly, in December' or simply 'In December' rather than giving a specific date. The Evening Sentinel (21<sup>st</sup> December, p4) and Newcastle Times (27<sup>th</sup> December 1940) reported some of the funerals in detail under the euphemistic titles: 'Sad scenes at Chesterton Funerals' and 'Other sad scenes in Chesterton' – the most direct reference in all the contemporary reports to the location of the bombing.

There is also difficulty caused by the similarity of several names and the interrelationship of the Webb and Platt families. For example, Baddeley & Haggett list Ann Platt aged 31 as a victim, but this was presumably the same person as Annie Webb of the same age as the Newcastle Times notes that Mrs Webb was the daughter of Mrs Platt. Furthermore, Ann Webb's mother was called Elizabeth Ann Platt, which could have caused confusion.

The following is a list of 16 probable victims compiled from the various records in the Sentinel, Newcastle and City Times, and the eye witness accounts to be found in the BBC website.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Evening Sentinel 21<sup>st</sup> December 1940, Newcastle Times December 27<sup>th</sup> 1940, City Times (Friday 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 1940 Vol. 6 #318), Baddeley & Haggett (bbc.co.uk accessed 2005)

<b>Title</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Known Personal Details All quotes are from Evening Sentinel 21<sup>st</sup> December</b>	<b>Death Notice (all from the Evening Sentinel)</b>
Mrs	Frost, Margaret (nee Jones)	50 or 51	Also referred to as Marion or Maria. 'Survived by husband Elizah, Mr W Frost (son), Mrs F Hood (sister), S,T, J & A Jones (brothers)'  House in John Street	In December suddenly, Margaret Maria the dearly loved wife of Elizah Frost aged 51 years. Chesterton Parish Church
Ms	Frost, Alice (nee Baggley)	30	Daughter in law of Margaret Frost. Initially posted as missing in City Times; the death notice comes 10 days later. Married to Mr W Frost. J & G Baggley were her brothers	Interred at Chesterton Cemetery in December, Alice and Gordon William beloved wife and son of William Elijah Frost
Master	Frost, Gordon, W	8	Initially posted as missing in City Times. Attended Church Street Infants school	See above
Mrs	Smallman, Ross or Rosa (nee Jenkins)	38 or 32	Married to Mr James Smallman from Essex. 'In the case of Mrs Smallman and her son, chief mourners were the husband and father, Mr E J Smallman... Brothers C & S Jenkins' Her funeral, on 20 <sup>th</sup> December, was with the others in the same house; her son, the Frosts, and Rosetta Cooper. The mayor of Newcastle attended	Also from the same address (as the Frosts) Rosa and Stephen Edwin Smallman, the dearly loved wife and son of Edward James Smallman

Master	Smallman, Stephen Elwin	8	'Mr S Slaney (headmaster) and eight schoolmates of Stephen Edward Smallman from Albert's Street Council Junior Boy's School attended, and formed a guard of honour.'	As above
Miss	Cooper, Rosetta Mary or May	19	Evacuee from London bombing. Lived with the Frosts and Smallmans in John Street 'Chief mourners in the case of Miss Cooper, the London girl, were her brother, Mr J Cooper...and workmates at Enderley Mills'	'Also Rosetta May Cooper, of London, the dearly loved daughter of Elma and Elizabeth Cooper of London'
Mr	Boston, James	47	Father of Gladys and James, survived by Mrs Boston.	'Suddenly in December James, beloved husband of Hannah Boston; also James and Gladys, son and daughter of the above'
Miss	Boston Gladys	23	Salvation Army Record Sergeant	As above
Master	Boston James Booth	19	Salvation Army Junior Drummer	As above
Mrs	Webb, Dorothy	44	Was she the sister of Alfred Webb? The Evening Sentinel notes that Alfred Webb lost his child, wife, sister and mother-in-law (21 <sup>st</sup> December )	No death notice
Miss	Dorothy Eileen Webb	4		See below

Mrs	Annie or Ann Webb	31	Wife of Gunner Alfred John Webb. He lost his wife and child, mother-in-law and sister in 2 adjoining houses). Mr Webb was one of the people consoled by Duke of Kent during the visit on Wed 18 <sup>th</sup> Dec. Jack Platt was Annie's brother.	In December Annie, the beloved wife of Alfred John Webb, aged 31 also Dorothy Eileen Webb daughter of the above, aged 4 years also George (evacuee) beloved son of George and Alice Ann Bartles aged 14 years. Service in Chesterton church on Friday 20 <sup>th</sup> at 3pm
Mrs	Platt, Elizabeth Annie or Ann	51	The Webb and Platt families were related; Mrs Webb was the daughter of Mrs Platt. Mr Platt and Mr Webb, both worked for Rowley Brothers (Tiles). The directors attended the funeral at Chesterton Parish Church where there were 'many mourners' for the 'stricken family' Husband was Mr William Platt.	In December, suddenly Elizabeth Ann, beloved wife of William Platt, aged 51 years; also Winifred Mary, daughter of the above aged 15 years. Service in Chesterton Church Friday 20 <sup>th</sup>
Mrs	Platt, Annie	31	Is this the same person as Annie Webb as their ages are the same? Also, the Sentinel 21 <sup>st</sup> December notes that <b>Miss</b> Annie Platt attended – so did Elizabeth	No death notice

			Annie Platt have a surviving daughter?	
Miss	Platt, Dorothy Eileen	4	Is this the same person as Dorothy Eileen Webb as their ages are the same?	No death notice
Miss	Platt, Winifred Mary	15	Daughter of Elizabeth Annie Platt, worked at Mr AE Johnson's shop	See Elizabeth Ann Platt
Master	Bartell , George or Bartels	14 or 15	From West Ham. His death is listed with the death notice for Annie Webb. Staying with the Webb family as an evacuee. Buried in the same service as Elizabeth Annie Webb, Annie Webb and Eileen Webb Parents were Mr and Mrs George Bartell	See above
Mr	Maddock, Daniel	75	Initially reported missing. Bachelor who had worked for 50 years at Rowley Brothers  Was Thomas Maddock, injured, the son of Daniel?	In December, suddenly Daniel, the beloved son of Thomas and Loisa Maddock, aged 75 years Chesterton Church

Although injuries are mentioned in many sources, only the City Times (Friday 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 1940) lists them in detail. Presumably these were only the most serious: Thomas Maddock 53 (was he the son of Daniel Maddock, the oldest fatality?), Arthur Wright 17, Jesse Kennedy (no ages given for the subsequent casualties), George Edward Emeray, Harvey Rouse, Reg Coops and Edwin Jones (was he the Edwin referred to by Dorothy?).

### **The Aftermath**

Due to the timing of the bombing, rescue services and volunteers had to work through the night to remove the rubble in the search for victims. This was made more difficult by the blackout regulations, so rescue and ambulance services worked by shaded torchlight to extinguish fires and rescue survivors. Indeed, Hartshill infirmary was reportedly overflowing with casualties, using 'every available space on the floor' according to the 1984 report, though at the time it was said that, 'a number are in a neighbouring infirmary suffering from major injuries, cuts and shock.' (Evening Sentinel, 16<sup>th</sup> December 1940). Presumably, honest reports of a crowded hospital struggling to cope would have been bad for morale.

### **Rescue Work**

Despite the loss of three of their personnel, the Salvation Army reportedly played an important role, helping to remove people from the rubble and providing morale-boosting tea and biscuits to the locals the following day: a councillor told a City Times reporter:

The Salvation Army was also wonderful. Their mobile canteen was sent everywhere, and it did a tremendous amount of work.'

He also paid tribute to the head of a well-known firm of cooperative grocers who replenished the stores in the mobile canteen. (20<sup>th</sup> December)

The Stoke-on-Trent City Times (20<sup>th</sup> December 1940) details the rescue effort of the locals:

Tribute to ARP Personnel

High tribute is paid to the ARP personnel, who worked for about 24 hours unceasingly.

Rescue workers, demolition squads, air raid wardens and other civil defence workers under the direction of the police were today still searching among the debris and wreckage of dwellings, following the dropping of a stick of high explosive bombs by a lone raider in a midland township late on Saturday afternoon.



'Although they lost their headquarters, the local Salvation Army unit did a wonderful work throughout the night and the following day after the bombing by a lone German raider on Saturday afternoon. Food and hot drinks were supplied to the rescue workers and personnel of other services who toiled to find victims.' (16<sup>th</sup> December) Image courtesy of Staffordshire Sentinel News and Media.

To prevent looting, Bourne (1984) notes only people who had suffered loss were allowed to enter to claim personal belongings from the damaged area. Edith remembers how she and her friends, as children, hoped to get some severely rationed sweets:

On my next journey to school, after this event, because all the shop windows had been blown out, the contents of our local sweet shop were scattered over the road. Because sweets were so scarce, we thought we were in for a treat but were warned not to touch them because they might have been contaminated.

Ken Hall also notes how, as a child, the whole event had been impossible to comprehend:

The next few weeks children were swapping small bits of the bombs for other things at school! I don't think at 10 years old we could actually understand, or take in, the destruction and life lost on that December day in the village of Chesterton.

In what should have been the festive season, the Sentinel and Newcastle Times detail the sad procession of funerals which followed the attack. Below is one example, taken from the Sentinel of 28<sup>th</sup> December 1940:

### **Services to Salvation Army**

#### **Chesterton Plays Tribute**

Tributes to the faithful service to the Chesterton Salvation Army corps by 3 members of the Boston family were paid at the funeral, on Saturday, of Drummer James Boston senior and son, and YP Record Sergeant daughter Gladys Boston.

The service at Chesterton was conducted by Lieutenant Colonel HC Norman (Div Commander Stoke Salvation Army) in Newcastle Cemetery. The songs 'Above the waves of Earth' and 'There's a land that is fairer than day' were sung and Bandsman Thorne offered prayer.

#### **A Great Loss**

In the course of the address May Daniel said the service that the 3 members of the family had rendered to the village could not be summed up in words. Their passing was a great loss to Chesterton and beyond. Lieutenant Col H.C. Norman added his tribute to the memory of 'three faithful soldiers of the army'. The chief family included Mrs Boston – widow and mother.

## Royal Visit

The bombing prompted Staffordshire to receive its first royal visit during the war in which the Duke of Kent spoke to survivors and the bereaved on the 18<sup>th</sup> December. The following is reported in the Sentinel (21<sup>st</sup> December 1940), which is almost identical to parts of a report in the City Times the previous day:

The Duke spoke to several victims of German bombing including Mrs MacFadden who was bombed out of Liverpool and then rendered homeless in another raid...[and] to Mr and Mrs Cotterill of whose 14 children, nine are living. Seven were with her and her husband in their home when it was bombed recently. All escaped without injury. He spoke to women Salvation Army workers and to Gunner Alfred John Webb who lost his wife and child, mother-in-law and sister in two adjoining houses.

The Staffordshire Advertiser (21<sup>st</sup> Dec 1940) also reported the royal visit to the county, but did not even mention the visit to bombed areas. Indeed, presumably to avoid lowering morale in areas not affected by the bombing, the paper only mentions it on page 6 in the 'News from Town and Village' section. This is in direct contrast to the more local City Times (Friday 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 1940), which was much more direct, with the page 1 headline: 'Duke of Kent sees Stricken Homes'. Under the sub-heading 'Air raid Damage', the City Times continues:

In addition to the visits to the City and Newcastle, the Duke visited an area which was recently bombed. Large, cheering crowds, waving Union Jacks, greeted him. As a symbol of the spirit of the people, other Union Jacks hung from the windows.

This patriotism was also noted in an earlier Sentinel (December 18<sup>th</sup> p6)

### BOMBED AREA

His Royal Highness later visited an area which suffered as a result of enemy action some time ago.

News of the visit circulated shortly before his arrival, and he was welcomed by large crowds, including children waving Union Jacks and cheering enthusiastically.

On the pavement in one street, portraits of King and Queen were mounted on easels.

I would like to hear from eyewitnesses to verify whether this enthusiasm was a true example of the 'Blitz Spirit' or wartime propaganda. Certainly there appears to be something of a contradiction later in the report: 'Tenants of the bombed houses stood bewildered where formerly the doorways had been.'

The Advertiser does not even give any details of the attack, casualties or damage, instead focusing on charity efforts, with Knutton Modern School and Orme Boys donating £5 each. It further mentions the mayor's fundraising efforts:

Appealing for contributions to the British Red Cross Air Raid Distress Fund, the Mayor of Newcastle (Mr R.M Ford) writes: 'This fund is necessary in many ways. A mobile canteen with equipment is being provided by the Mayor's Charities' Committee, but the running expenses and the food to be stocked, and used in time of emergency must be paid for...Sufferers need financial help, and practice shows that help given by the county through the relieving officer is not nearly adequate. One generous person has promised £50, and an appeal in a cinema on Sunday brought in a further £15. The Mayor, however, needs a large sum and appeals to you all to give quickly and generously.'

The City Times (20<sup>th</sup> December 1940) also notes the fundraising efforts for the survivors:

Prompt action in starting a relief fund was taken by two councillors. They were to be seen near the damaged houses making a collection among sight seers and sympathisers. Several subscriptions have been received and it is hoped to raise at least £500

The Hadgetts as many other survivors, had to move out of their damaged house in John Street (Hadgett 2005) whereas Dorothy's family chose to move to Audley for safety as they lived near an old tile works which was serving as an ammunition dump.

The raid seemed to affect the area's whole approach to the war, with a change of attitude to the air threat from local government as

well as the population. Under the title 'Air raids – an urgent appeal' the area made provision for further attacks:

The **change** [my emphasis] in enemy tactics has made it necessary to prepare for the effects of raids of a new type. We appeal to every citizen of Stoke-on-Trent to play his or her part in adding to the public services. (City Times 28<sup>th</sup> December p4)

This included donating the use of vehicles, pledges to donate cutlery, offer billets and so on. Councillor T Bentham suggested use of vacant houses in slum clearance areas though the Town Clerk stated it could not, 'be considered at the present time.' (ibid) Nevertheless, the City Times (28<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p6) noted other changes: 'One would be glad to hear that the (Newcastle) corporation was taking action in regard to the provision of rest centres for those people forced by enemy action to leave their homes' and had also set up plans for communal feeding centres.

Three nights after the raid, Shelton was hit, killing 3 children, in a failed attempt to damage the steel works (1977). However, there were no more attacks on the scale of the Chesterton raid throughout the war.

### **Blitz Spirit?**

The raid prompted a charity appeal for the survivors, led by the Mayor of Newcastle, Mr Ronald M. Ford, reported under the headline, 'The Mayor of Newcastle's Appeal' in the 17th December Sentinel:

'The mayor, however, needs a large sum and appeals to you all to give quickly and generously. Donations should be sent to The Mayor, Newcastle, Staffs and will be placed in the British Red Cross Air Raid Distress Fund which deals with all cases of distress caused through enemy action in the borough

Gifts of blankets and bedding are specially wanted or any other household goods that can be spared.'

This appeal was also carried in the Staffordshire Advertiser, though neither paper made a direct mention of the bombing in the report.

Indeed, all of the papers attempted to nurture patriotism by praising the strength of the people: 'The district mobilised itself and worked unceasingly, meeting this wanton attack in the true British spirit.' (City Times 20<sup>th</sup> December 1940)

The Sentinel (16<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p6) details how the locals pulled together:

As soon as the plane had disappeared whole families were evacuated from houses which although still standing were in a dangerous condition. They were received by other families whose houses had escaped the worst of the damage, and they shared the provisions of their hosts.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the positive stories of lucky escapes, even the Sentinel cannot avoid some negativity:

Throughout yesterday there was the pathetic spectacle of returning occupants inspecting their ruined homes and carrying away odd chairs and personal effects which were still usable. (16<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p6)

However, an angry letter to the editor of the Sentinel (16<sup>th</sup> December 1940, p4) suggests that the reaction was not quite so united, though perhaps conscious that the view might not be popular it is written under the pseudonym 'ACTION':

#### First Aid for Air Raid Casualties

The wantonness of the attack is not the object of my writing...

Naturally casualties resulted, which, it would appear, necessitated immediate summoning to the help of the sufferers all the ambulance aid in the vicinity because everyone knows that prompt attention may save life, particularly in cases of heavy bleeding or shock

In the circumstances, why was the Mobile Unit not called out, but left standing at its depot with everything ready but with nothing used.

The whole circumstances of first-aid to these poor injured people calls for an immediate and prompt inquiry.

Since the raid happened late on the 14<sup>th</sup>, this letter must have been either hand delivered or from an employee of the Sentinel to have made publication on the 16<sup>th</sup>. There was no response to this letter and it would be interesting to hear if there is any truth to this claim.

One curious item was in the City Times, where each edition had a 'Blitz Joke'. In view of the British victories in Africa some of these were about Italian soldiers, but on the January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1941, just weeks after the Chesterton and Stoke attacks, they printed the following:

The roof spotter was excited. 'There's a bomb falling' he telephoned down. 'It's coming so near I could catch it.' A moment later there was a terrific explosion. His colleague below snapped one word into the telephone: 'Butterfingers.' (p4)

At first glance, this seems to be really tasteless, but what did the people think at the time? Was this an example of 'trench' humour which was a part of the 'blitz spirit'?

### **Why Chesterton?**

On the face of it, Chesterton does not seem like a prime target for the wrath of the Luftwaffe. This section will examine the possible motivations and suggest why the attack took place.

The day after the raid, the German News Agency (cited in the Sentinel 1940 16th, p1) was reported to claim that:

A German reconnaissance plane yesterday carried out a successful raid on a factory in Stoke-on-Trent in the Northern Midlands. Bombs dropped from a low altitude caused severe damage, as was shown by flames followed by clouds of smoke that rose from the workshops.

This claim was repeated by the more general German High Command communiqué:

In the course of Saturday, single German planes attacked several targets of military importance in South England and the Midlands, some of the attacks being low flying ones. In the midlands, an important industrial plant received effective hits from heavy bombs. (ibid)

However, the Evening Sentinel, under the front page headline 'Casualties of Brutal Bombing of Midland Township' (Monday 16<sup>th</sup> December 1940) claimed 'There was no military target in the neighbourhood'. The Staffordshire Weekly Sentinel (21<sup>st</sup> December 1940, p7) repeated earlier reports, saying it had been 'indiscriminate

bombing at its worst - for there was no military target in the neighbourhood'. As supporting evidence it states:

Another who saw it approach said she saw the stick of bombs released and the plane was so low that the pilot must have known that he was not over any military objective, and that all that lay below him were working class homes.

Beckett reiterated the above in 1977, saying the area had 'no military objectives'.

So who was right? As is often the case, the answer does not seem to be so clear. Certainly, the German reports are inaccurate as there is no evidence of any military targets being hit. It is interesting propaganda that the 'workshops' hit in the first German report becomes a 'heavy industrial plant' in the second. Civilian housing took the brunt of the damage, but was this really the target? Contemporary British reports would not mention any actual targets due to wartime necessity; they would not reveal whether the pilot had just missed several military objectives, as it would have only served to invite further raids on the area. Furthermore, to say that the raider deliberately attacked civilian houses gives a sense of moral superiority, especially as the reports of British raids on Germany, sometimes on the same pages, emphasise the military targets rather than mentioning any collateral damage.

It was common for planes to randomly unload unused bombs before returning to base as it saved vital fuel on long distance raids and allowed them to travel faster and with greater manoeuvrability from hostile fighter planes. This view is supported by Betty Hancock, who suggests it was unloading bombs on the way back from a raid on the Radway Green munitions factory. However the consistency of eyewitness and German reports stating that the plane dived low before dropping the bombs suggest that the pilot was aiming for a deliberate target rather than a random bombing of houses; this suggests it was an opportunistic attack rather than a random bombing.

So what target did the pilot see? Dorothy, Albert, John and others all point to the Corona fizzy drinks bottling factory as the target. Edith suggests the pilot might have thought the factory was a vital part of the war effort such as the Shelton steel works or Etruria gas works.

Though located a few miles away, with no radar or local knowledge and poor visibility, the pilot could have easily been mistaken; indeed the Shelton area was hit three days later. There is a consistent view from the eye-witnesses that the factory attracted the attention of the bomber due to its lights being on. John intelligently explains why the lights were on and visible from the air:

I was told the reason this factory was targeted was that the bombing happened before the blackout time when all lights should have been covered, but in fact the lights in the factory were switched on due to the dismal weather conditions.

These recently reported accounts are given support by a letter to the editor of the Sentinel on December 21<sup>st</sup> 1940, titled '*Black-out in half light*'

SIR- It has been suggested that an enemy attack on a village, which resulted in a number of casualties, was due to the fact that some premises were brilliantly lighted.

The attack was before the official blackout time; but the enemy may not always wait for the official blackout, and a brilliant illumination of any premises may give him even in half light, a definite spot at which to aim his deadly missiles. The building in question may escape, but others may suffer.

I would urge all occupiers of factories, business premises and houses to black-out immediately an 'alert' is sounded, if it is necessary to use artificial illumination, however early in the day it may be. – Yours faithfully W.S.B. (p4)

I have found no reports of damage to the Corona or any other factory in the area. This is supported by the fact that none of the casualties came from the factory, which presumably would have been in operation and full of workers as it had had its lights on. However, this does not mean it was made an innocent scapegoat; as noted in the above letter the lack of damage does not indicate innocence, just that the pilot missed his target. The German reports of success could have been the pilot's genuine opinion or exaggeration as neither the airman nor the Luftwaffe would have wanted to admit failure.

In contrast to the initial Sentinel reports and the 1977 story, there probably was a legitimate target in the area. According to the 1984

Sentinel report, the Rose Vale & North Staffs brickyard was full of munitions (1984) and Dorothy thinks there were munitions in an old tiling yard, which was possibly called 'Downing's', 'Metallic Tiling', or part of the 'Rowley Brothers' factory.

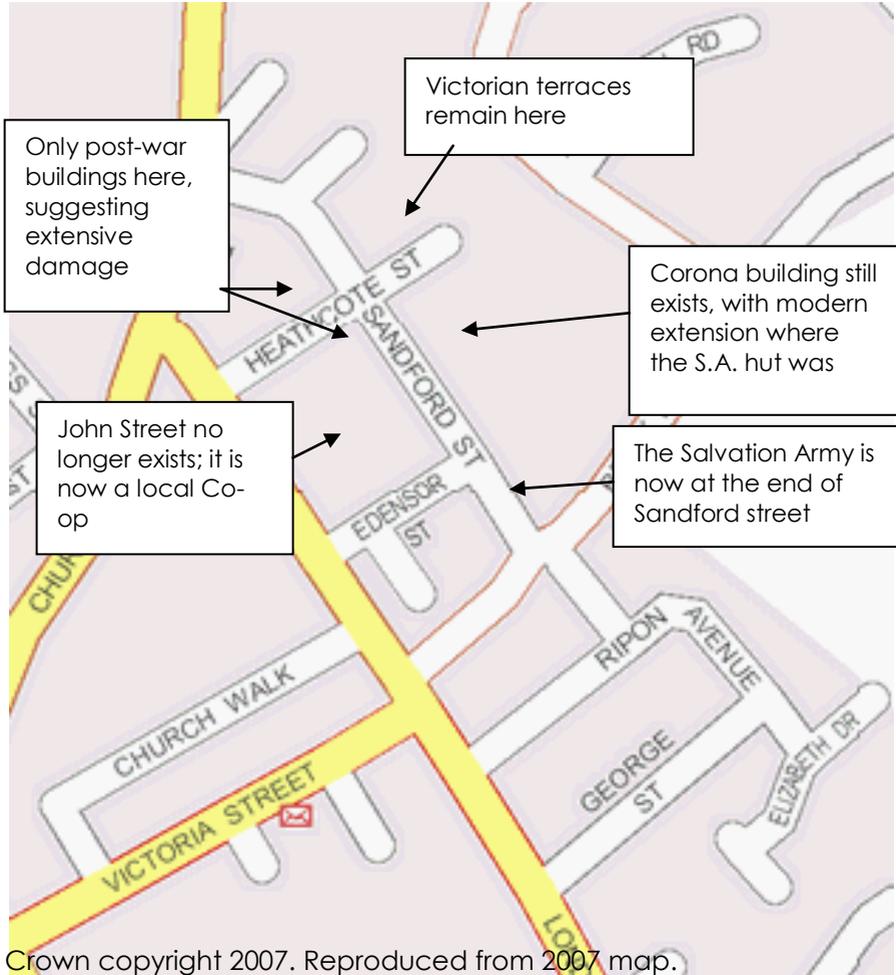
I have also heard from some locals that there was a tank assembly plant as well. However, this appears to be a mistake; the only concrete evidence of this I have found so far is from Whalley, a former borough mayor, who worked for W. McCann and Son to recondition self-propelled guns on Matilda tank chassis as explained in the Newcastle Reporter (2005). However, Whalley says that this facility in the Apedale engine sheds was set up *after the war* to recycle military hardware.

In summary, the tragedy occurred due to a combination of circumstances, meaning Chesterton was extremely unlucky to have been hit. Had the weather been better, the lights in the factory would have been off and Chesterton would not have presented an alluring target just before the official blackout time of 5:20 pm (14<sup>th</sup> December 1940 Sentinel). The probable time of the raid, 4:50, suggests that had the pilot flown over around half an hour later they would have seen nothing to dive down upon.

Finally, perhaps the lack of previous action in the area had caused complacency in the factory owners following the letter of the law rather than the spirit. Certainly, Dorothy suggests that the locals did not expect a raid; her family had not even put tape across their windows at the time to prevent the splintering of glass.

## Epilogue: Chesterton now

A walk around Chesterton today still reveals the impact of the bombing on the area. While most of the streets have retained their Victorian terraced housing, where the bombs fell has a completely different character. There old houses have been replaced with large shops. Heathcote and Sandford Street still exist today, as does the club.





This is Heathcote Street, with Sandford Street going across. No pre-war buildings remain, suggesting the damage was extensive here. On the left is now a carpet warehouse.



Heathcote Street from the other side. On the left, the terraced houses remain, and on the right is the Corona Park, presumed target of the raid



Above: Chesterton Ex-Serviceman's Club, presumably rebuilt from the British Legion club. This is where the only contemporary eye-witness account came from.



Left: The view from the club of Sandford Street. The large building on the right is the carpet warehouse on Heathcote Street, scene of much of the devastation



One of the accounts suggests the bomb landed in the road, about where this photo was taken. It is the former location of John Street, where the Frosts, Smallmans and Rosetta Cooper and possibly the Bostons died. It was also where witness Hadgett lived. None of the pre-war buildings remain; was the whole street cleared as a result of the bombing or post-war development? It is now the local Co-op and car park. Opposite this was the location of the Salvation Army hut which was destroyed.



This plaque outside the Forum on the high street is interesting as it only mentions the families who died, not the single evacuees or Mr D Maddock. It also only notes that deaths occurred on John Street. Were there also victims on Sandford Street and Heathcote Street?

Below is the Trinity Church: was this damaged?





The former Corona factory –the assumed target - which still bears its name. The rear of the building appears to be pre-war, with a modern façade facing onto Sandford Street where the Salvation Army hut was. The Modern Salvation Army building has moved down Sandford Street about 30 metres to where this photo was taken.

It is opposite the heavily damaged John Street, which no longer exists and has been replaced by the local Co-op.

## Further Research

Though there will be natural inconsistencies in people's memories due to the time between the event and now, I have been struck by how consistent the eye-witness memories are with contemporary and later published reports. I would like to hear from anyone who witnessed the event in order to further build up a picture of the event and life in Chesterton at the time.

I have not been able to find much information about the raid in local history books; it is not mentioned in Briggs's account of Newcastle and only briefly so in Dyble's, 'A History of Apedale and Chesterton' (2002), where the claim of 14 deaths is repeated. I would like to hear about any published material on the bombing. In addition to this, some crucial issues of the Newcastle Times for the week were frustratingly missing in the Newcastle archive library.

I would be most grateful for anyone who could provide me with further information about the raid, in order to further the research so this tragedy is never forgotten. Please feel free to contact me at:

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