

The Big Bang.....1942

The Second World War, long expected and several times postponed, broke out in the Autumn of 1939, Britain entering it by declaring war on Nazi Germany on 3rd September. Optimists foretold that hostilities would be over by Christmas, but meanwhile the situation was taken seriously; young men and women enlisted in the armed forces, air-raid shelters were prepared, gas-masks were carried, and in every home heavy black-out curtains were hung over the windows.

In York six of the abler nuns volunteered as air-raid wardens and after a brief training were issued with instructions and metal helmets. The children practiced going down to the cellars, which were considered to be the safest shelters in the city. But for two and a half years York experienced no raids, and many were lulled into a false sense of security. Then came the night of 28th- 29th April, 1942. It was a fine, clear moon-lit night and the German planes could be seen circling overhead when the sirens wailed. Children, nuns and secular staff made their way to the cellars. Only the wardens remained above ground. The scene was set for the tragedy.

Sister Christopher, in a letter to her friend Sister Andrew described the event with a vividness and poignancy that no subsequent pen could equal:

“Of course you know everything by now. I shall never forget that night. I was with M. Agnes when she went for M. Bernard. She doesn't generally come down to the cellars but when we heard the machine-gunning and knew a 'blitz' had come M. Agnes said she must. We reached her room which is at the end of the now destroyed East Wing. M. Agnes put her shutters up and I was putting her dressing gown on and then M. Agnes went out and along the passage to get something.

Suddenly she gave a scream I shall hear until I die it was so agonizing. I left M. Bernard and was just going to run down the passage. M. Agnes started screaming and called out to me to stop because she had fallen through a hole. I told her to flash her torch and I crept along and found myself at the edge of a hole in the middle of the passage and M. Agnes lay below on the laundry floor.

Above there was a hole in the roof and I could see the dive-bomber shooting up again into a sky lit up by the flames from the station. He had dropped a delayed-action high explosive bomb which is very quiet and then explodes in a short time. We didn't know that then. I suggested to M. Agnes that I should jump down beside her and help her up the laundry steps, but she said she was so heavy and her leg felt broken and I must run for a man.

I returned to M. Bernard, pushed her under the bed, ran back to the hole and by a miracle crawled round it and then flew down the passage and along the community passage down the cellar steps and had just reached the laundry cellar. I was just behind M. Vincent and M. Patricia when there was a loud report and we were all thrown to the ground. A blinding dust filled our mouths and eyes and a terrible noise of falling bricks followed. It was pitch dark and the smell of gas filled the cellar.

Our men quickly arrived from the street through a coal hole and began to carry out casualties. M. Patricia was quite near me and I thought it was a man she was so dusty and her habit looked like trousers. I was so dazed and yet so wide-awake and wanting to get back to M. Agnes that the sight made no impression on me. I followed the men who carried her out through the hole over the ruins of the East Wing into the street.

My own veil and habit had been blown off but I never knew until hours after. Then all the A.R.P. men and soldiers came running and I told them M. Agnes was in the laundry and would they dig her out. They all began but it was a hopeless task. We didn't know yet that we had lost three others.

The party in the cellar did not go unscathed. When the bomb exploded the whole world seemed to shake; beams and rubble were dislodged and fell indiscriminately. Everyone's eyes, ears and mouths were filled with dust, the exit was blocked with masonry and most frightening of all — gas was leaking from a broken pipe. After what one member described as 'the longest twenty minutes of my life', an escape hole was discovered and men in the street helped to lead the children into Nunnery Lane. In the morning light the community assessed the situation.

Old, blind Mother Bernard was discovered safe and sound; Sister Andrew's action of pushing her under her bed had saved her life, because the blast had blown the shutters across her room, and a heavy cupboard had fallen on to her bed. But five of the six nuns were missing and it was eventually realised that all had lost their lives.

The material losses, though in a different category, were also serious. The East Wing was destroyed, and with it the laundry. A corner was blown off the main building, leaving gaping holes on every floor, the kitchen was unusable and at least half the windows were blown out. Glass and rubble lay everywhere. The Convent Journal, chronicler of current events, had been blasted from the Superior's room, and recovered, tattered and torn, in Nunnery Lane. It bears its scars to this day.

The children and secular staff were sent home, the oldest sisters were invited to Holme Hall, Holme-on-Spalding Moor, where the nuns took the greatest care of them. Local convents offered accommodation to others, and the 'IBVM community in Egton Bridge, unaware of what had happened, were surprised to find uninvited members on their doorstep.

A member of the community (evidently the cook) wrote:

"The night York was bombed I got out of bed to see the enemy planes go over, high in the sky. Next day we had no post and no trains ran and we heard York City had been bombed. In the evening some of our sisters came and they were all dirty, bedraggled and white faced, real refugees. They broke the sad news to us of our convent being hit and that some of ours had been killed. I had a few problems, among them how to make five mutton chops do the whole community. I solved it with a stew".

In York the stricken community was surrounded by willing helpers. The butcher sent in the meat rations ready cooked, friends washed the nuns' clothes and further baskets of dirty laundry were taken to the nuns in Clifford, who returned it all, clean and orderly, two days later. Every hand in York seemed ready to help a neighbour.