

## Beyond The Blitz: Remembering the events of 1940

### St Osburg's: Destruction and Resurrection

*The following article is taken from a booklet produced by Dom Sebastian Simpson O.S.B called "A Centenary Memorial of Saint Osburg's Coventry 1845-1945". A Full description is available on the Coventry Deanery Website.*



The enemy planes had carefully selected their targets and loads of incendiaries were raining down. Hundreds of burning bombs lay about the streets and in gardens. Down in the cellar we recited the Rosary.

Before many minutes the doorbell rang. The night watchman from the gasworks came to advise us to find a safer place. He pointed to the gas container. It was ablaze. Anything might now happen with this menacing fire so close at hand. Fortunately there was no wind and the flames soared into the heavens. The sight filled one with terror, for now church,

house, schools stood out more clearly than ever. To have gone out into the streets would in any case have meant instant death for the raid was now gaining in weight and speed. Squadron after squadron of planes swept in and swooped down releasing their deadly loads.

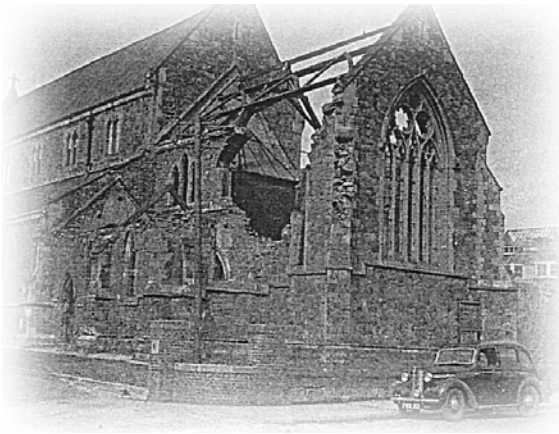
Then came whistling bombs which, because of their penetrating and bloodcurdling screech, were the most disturbing of all. Each of these created the impression that it was plunging into the cellar and one instinctively "ducked" to avoid disaster. The ordeal went on like an endless chain, planes, bombs, explosions, the crashing of buildings, till one almost wished death would come and quickly. Some time about nine o'clock it was decided to leave the house for one had the uncanny feeling that something sinister was stealthily closing in on us. A premonition? We abandoned the cellar and went into the church. A few minutes after, the house was wrecked and its ceilings, floors and broken furniture filled the cellar.

The church, though blacked out, was not in darkness for there poured through the unscreened clerestory windows the glow from fires near by and especially that of the gas container. From the side door could be seen the flames leaping high into the heavens like a volcano. Then came the problem, where could we go? As soon as bombs dropped and exploded, one at a time rushed across the avenue until all were safe below ground again.

Then the thundering planes were over us again and we waited as so often before for the bomb that would destroy us. Suddenly there came an explosion, which lifted the school, and we were deafened by the crashing of some building. A few minutes later we knew that this was the church. It was about ten o'clock. We had not recovered from this appalling shock when the schools were hit. The noise of the falling walls was terrifying for it seemed we were going to be buried under them.

The upheaval subsided and there was a lull. Within a few minutes the bombing started again. The next few minutes were perhaps the most terrifying of all that night. A load of incendiaries fell on to the main building of the school and before long several fires had started. Then a heavy bomb exploded in the lobby almost over our heads. Walls subsided and crashed down on the cellar. Water pipes were burst and before many minutes we were ankle deep in water. It was obvious we must find some other place of retreat, but where? In vain we tried to raise the escape hatch into the school corridor for this was weighed down with debris. Our only way of escape was the steps that led into the cellar. Across these, flames were already leaping for the schools had now become an inferno.

The tower of the church still stood and it was decided to make for this. Somehow all reached the church with nothing worse than a few bruises and scratches. A ghastly spectacle



confronted us. Save for the Baptistry, the whole interior of the church was an appalling melee. The roof on the Gospel side had gone completely; windows had been blown out; all of the new oak seating was shattered and piled up in heaps; the organ was smashed to atoms; the sanctuary nothing of the altar could be seen for tons of masonry. Stones and timbers were still falling so we retreated into the Baptistry. Through the gap in the roof the blue sky of a few hours ago was no longer seen but only the glare of fires and thick black clouds of smoke. Suffocating hot air and smoke from the blazing school filled the church, more and more bombs were being hurled into the

fire, and this, one felt sure, would soon spread to the church. The crackling of burning wood and the roar of the terrific fire within a few yards of us sounded like demoniacal voices chiding us with the hopelessness of our position.

Towards six o'clock the last of the bombs in this locality fell. There was a long silence; no more bombs; no siren to sound the "all clear"



No one who saw the havoc which bombs had wrought ever dreamt that the church would be used again. For nearly three years the ruins were exposed to all weather conditions. The work of repairing was therefore difficult. Operations started in October 1943, but before this, men of the parish had cleared tons of debris from the church. When the builders finished their task in March 1944, men and women voluntarily undertook the cleaning of the church. When they had completed this self-appointed task, the interior of St. Osburg's looked as though it had never been wrecked. The formal Reopening took place on Easter Sunday, 1944.