



St. Clement Danes

ROYAL
AIR FORCE
St Clement
Danes Church

Special Eagle and Anchor 80th Anniversary Newsletter

10th May 1941 - 10th May 2021

PHOENIX FROM THE FIRE

Originally, Hitler had begun bombing England in preparation for the German invasion. The plan - Operation Sealion - was scheduled for 11 September 1940. To Hitler's surprise, the RAF held its own during the Battle of Britain against the Luftwaffe and the planned invasion was postponed.

On the 17 September, the invasion was postponed indefinitely, but Hitler continued with air raids to terrorise and demoralise the population.

In the first four months of the Blitz, more than 13,000 were killed and tens of thousands wounded in London. But the carnage was far from over. In retaliation for RAF bombings of Bremen, Hamburg, and Berlin earlier in the year, Hitler ordered his Luftwaffe to execute a retaliatory strike on London.

A DEVASTATING ONSLAUGHT

The worst air raid on London during the Blitz took place on 10-11 May 1941. Destruction was spread out all over the city, with German bombers targeting all bridges west of Tower Bridge, factories on the south side of the Thames, the warehouses at Stepney, and the railway line that ran north from Elephant and Castle.

On Saturday the 10th of May, Londoners were going about their business as best they could, queuing with ration books at bakers and grocery stores, making their way through the bomb-damaged streets, desolation and destruction all around them.

Rector at St Clement Danes Church, William Pennington-Bickford and his wife Louie, were preparing for the Sunday services. It was William's intention, that no matter how bad the situation became, his beautiful church would remain open for his parishioners and the church would serve its community with little interruption.

As William and Louie returned to the vicarage in Clements Inn Passage, little did they know of the devastating onslaught being prepared on the other side of the Channel. That night, there was to be an ebb tide, so the Thames would be at its lowest level for months. Later that evening, this would prove fateful.



505 bombers flew to London on the night of 10 May. The German pilots had 15 minutes to locate and bomb their targets once they reached London, but still the bombing lasted nearly seven hours, starting at 11pm on 10 May and continuing until the all-clear sounded at 5.50am the next morning. British anti-aircraft batteries and RAF night-fighters managed to shoot down 33 planes, but despite their best efforts, that night was one of the most destructive raids of the war.

St Clement Danes church received a direct hit. An incendiary bomb pierced the lead covered roof, and exploded within the roof space, setting the church ablaze.

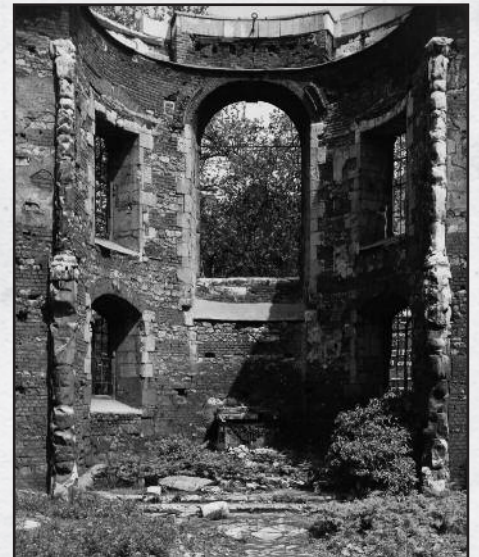
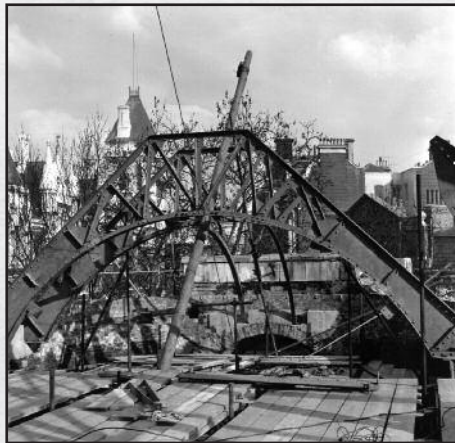
Within minutes it was an inferno with the bell tower and Gothic steeple acting as a funnel, sending flames hundreds of feet in the air.

Unable to get their hoses into the low-level river, the fire crews had no chance to save the beautiful building and St Clement Danes was left to burn.



Louie and William Pennington-Bickford

A SIGHT OF TOTAL DESTRUCTION



Once the “All Clear” siren sounded just before dawn, William and Louie surveyed the remains of their beloved church. The sight that greeted them was one of total destruction. The beautiful roof, wooden galleries, and panelling, even the stained-glass windows fell victim, all consumed by the fire. Only the outer walls and bell tower remained standing.

The sight broke William, and within a month he died of a broken heart. Louie, unable to live without her husband took her own life a short while after.

Fortunately, the bells had previously been brought down to ground level, so although six were damaged by the intense heat and falling debris and had to be recast, most survived.



BOARDED UP AND ABANDONED

For 15 years after the war, St Clement Danes remained an unloved reminder of the terrible events of that night. Boarded up and abandoned, its ultimate fate unknown.

The whole of Westminster was affected that night. The District Line Railway near Ebury Street, Hallam Street, the House of Commons, New Bond Street, the Queen’s Hall, the Turner Buildings and Westminster Abbey, all suffered damage.

The destruction: "was noticeable in the morning air...an invisible veil of plaster-dust hung its odour over the air of every street, bombed or not bombed, for Westminster was impregnated with it."

(William Sansom: Westminster in War, 1947).

THE LAST MAJOR RAID OF THE BLITZ

The night of 10-11 May 1941 marked the last major raid of the Blitz. It inflicted the highest number of casualties of any single night raid of the London Blitz: 1,436 Londoners killed and over 2,000 others seriously injured.

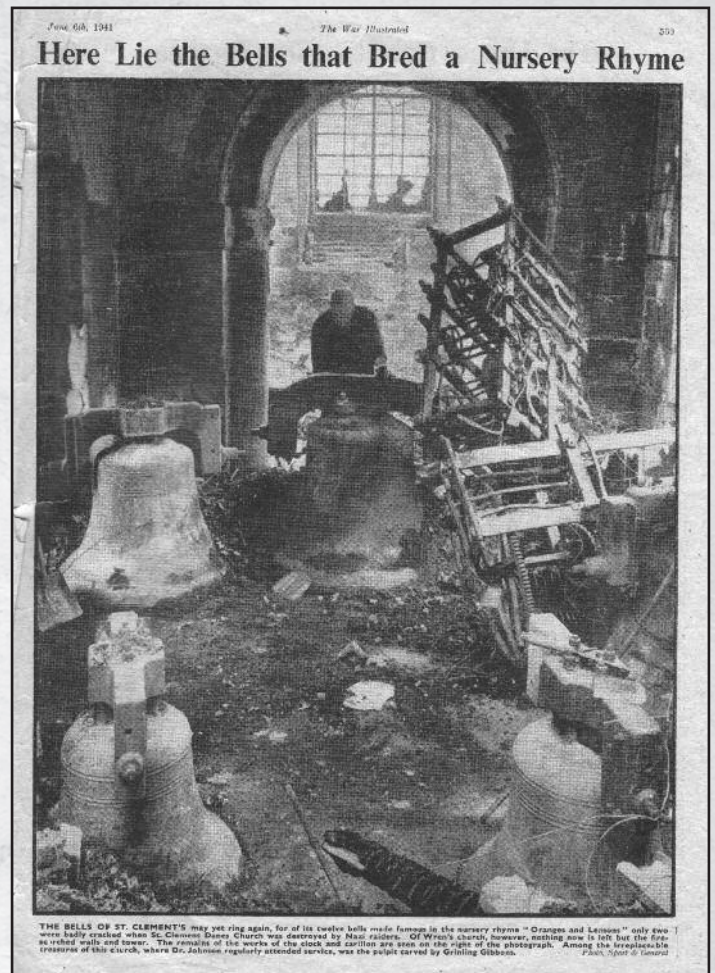
After the war, the RAF were looking for a central London church to adopt, so negotiations were had with The Diocese of London, and eventually a deal was struck. It was agreed that if the RAF rebuilt St Clement Danes Church to Sir Christopher Wren's designs, the RAF could have its central church.

A worldwide fundraising campaign was launched in mid 1950s to raise £125,000 to enable the rebuilding. Within months, the generosity of the grateful British public, and those from the allied Commonwealth nations, enabled work to commence.

The church was completed in September 1958 and on the 19th October, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II attended the reconsecration service at the elegantly rebuilt church.

2021 marks the 80th anniversary of the destruction of the church. Under the care of the RAF, St Clement Danes Church still stands proudly on its island on the Strand, the magnificent bells playing "Oranges & Lemons" on the hour.

What of the future for St Clement Danes? Later this year, the RAF will launch another worldwide fundraising appeal to dismantle and rebuild the James Gibbs Gothic Steeple and to open and expand the crypt. This will ensure the church can continue to welcome and serve the RAF and local community for generations to come.



Radio Times October 1958



REBUILDING THE STEEPLE



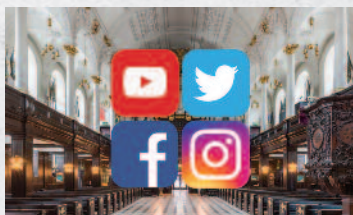
End note

That's all for this anniversary issue

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You can follow the progress of this campaign on the church website later this year, and if you wish to stay in touch, please sign up for our free newsletter via the website at; <https://stclementdanesraf.org/> or by calling our team on 020 7242 8282.



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