

Secrets linger over wartime destruction

Seventy years ago, Great Yarmouth's ancient parish church fell victim to German air attack. But could it and should it have been saved from fiery destruction? **Steve Snelling** has unearthed evidence of controversy and cover-up at the height of the blitz on Norfolk.

The speed of destruction was truly shocking. Within minutes, the blaze had raged beyond control. Flames leapt from gothic windows and the steeple, wreathed in flames, collapsed amid the inferno, consuming more than 800 years of history.

Morning revealed the ghastly extent of the night's fiery holocaust. The whole interior was completely gutted, the roof had gone and the smouldering, rubble-strewn nave and aisles were laid bare to the heavens in their terrible desolation.

Of all the architectural treasures lost to aerial bombardment, the destruction of St Nicholas' Church in Great Yarmouth, in the early hours of June 25, 1942, must surely rank as one of Norfolk's greatest wartime tragedies.

Two nights later, in a second assault on the region's ecclesiastical heritage, Norwich Cathedral came within a whisker of similar annihilation only to be saved by a combination of shrewd defences and courageous efforts to contain the incendiary-stoked fires from spreading uncontrollably.

The charred and exposed roof timbers in the badly damaged North Transept on the morning after showed just how perilously close the Cathedral had come to disaster.

But the salvation of the city's most iconic building in the midst of the war's heaviest fire-bomb blitz on East Anglia also begged awkward questions about the fate of St Nicholas' Church. Frightful though the fires had been that night in Yarmouth, could England's largest parish church have been spared the worst of its destruction? Moreover, was it a calamity that could have been prevented?

Such thoughts first occurred to me while I was researching the Baedeker raids on Norwich. Until then, I had not realised the narrow margin by which the Cathedral had been saved. The valiant story of the schoolboys who reinforced the firewatchers at a critical moment to combat the fires was a minor epic. But their brave efforts would have counted for little had it not been for the foresight of the senior fireguard and surveyor to the fabric of the Norman masterpiece.

Arthur Whittingham, more than any other single person, had ensured

the building's survival by reinforcing the medieval defences against fire. He oversaw the building of walls between the triforium arches and the belfry and spire windows were sealed to prevent the tower acting as a flue.

At the same time, sandbags, pails, water and stirrup pumps appeared at strategic points. Better access was created. Casements opened on to roofs, ladders straddled exterior walls and links were established on the organ loft and through the roof of the nave to ensure every level could be reached. As I wrote in my book, "Nothing was to be left to chance."

Discovering this, I wondered what steps had been taken to protect St Nicholas', given that its demise in the summer of 1942 was the result not of high explosive but of the same kind of incendiaries that rained down on the Cathedral two nights later.

The paper trail led me to the National Archives and key documents relating to the bombing of Great Yarmouth 70 years ago. There, amid the usual Home Office files, were the reports compiled on the raid and the destruction of the church.

As ever, I found myself mining a rich seam of blitz bureaucracy. There were papers covering all aspects of the wider bombardment. In among them were predictable accounts, examining the construction of the church, the precautions taken in the event of air attack and the nature of the fire-fighting operation.

But what I hadn't bargained on was the contentiousness of the curtailed inquiry that followed, still less the ensuing controversy which raised questions that seem to me to remain unresolved seven decades later.

To better understand what happened on the night of June 24/25, 1942, however, it is necessary to set the loss of St Nicholas' Church in its proper context.

The attack on Great Yarmouth was part of a wider Luftwaffe operation involving some 45 bombers. The main target appears to have been in the Nuneaton area, where around 15 aircraft were reported to have dropped approximately seven tonnes of high explosive and 3.5 tonnes of incendiaries.

The likelihood is that some of the

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raiders, possibly as few as four, passed over the Norfolk port while returning from the Midlands and proceeded to disgorge eight high explosive and approximately 1,500 incendiaries over the heart of the borough between 1.30am and 2.05am.

Damage from the indiscriminate assault was extensive in a town that had already suffered considerably at the hands of the Luftwaffe during 1940 and, particularly, 1941. The list of casualties was mercifully few - just three people killed and 21 injured including a special constable - but the catalogue of properties damaged was a long one. Among the most notable casualties were: Lacon's Brewery workshop and barrel store, which were gutted, Palmer's furniture store, Brett's North Quay furniture store, housing the contents of 22 homes, which was burnt out and Greyfriars Cloisters, recently restored after being hit in a previous raid, which was seriously damaged again.

As well as the businesses affected, 35 houses were completely wrecked, or so badly damaged as to require demolition, and a further 200 homes superficially damaged. One stick of bombs had fallen in the already much-raided historic Rows, prompting officials to consider the complete evacuation of the congested terraces between Queen's Street and Friars Lane.

But the greatest psychological blow had fallen on one of the town's most ancient and most symbolic buildings: the Church of St Nicholas, which had been founded



by Bishop Herbert Losinga in 1101 and greatly expanded in the centuries that followed.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, a programme of restoration, spanning 80 years and costing the then considerable sum of £80,000, was carried out and had only been concluded some 14 years before



the outbreak of war.

The church, with its heavy oak roof, timber-framed spire and its peal of 12 bells carried on timber beams, was always known to be vulnerable to incendiary attack on account of its numberless nooks and crannies. Of particular concern were the gutters, with their timber 'snow racks'. It was feared that these might serve to 'collect' incendiaries which would, in turn, ignite the 'racks' and spread fire around the entire building.

But, despite the warnings, no action was taken. Nor, it seems, were any other structural modifications made to the church on a par with those undertaken at Norwich Cathedral. Its only defence consisted of eight fireguards, all of them senior members of the town's Boys' Brigade.

The consequences were appalling. At about 1.33am on June 25, 1942, a single German bomber was seen flying over the north-west corner of the church. According to the Rev L J Baggott, vicar of St Nicholas, the aircraft flew "right across the building... dropping many IBs". Having completed its run, it then swung round and flew back, passing over the church again and releasing another shower of incendiaries before disappearing into the night.

All told, Mr Baggott estimated around 150 fire-bombs were scattered across the roof and in the surrounding churchyard.

A Home Office investigation, carried out by F Keighley-Peach two weeks after the

raid, found that the entire roof was ablaze within a few minutes of the incendiaries falling on the building. "Many of them landed on the timber snow racks in the gutters between the roofs of the nave and aisles and in the many angles where the lead sheeting was easily burnt through to the timberwork," reported Keighley-Peach.

"The spire was also set ablaze and soon collapsed, falling through the roof of the Tower and crashing to the floor of the church and carrying the bells and supports with it."

Incredibly, the shell of the building, including the tower, withstood the shock of the blaze and the spire's crashing fall, although some of the Norman pillars and arches were badly damaged. Another remarkable survivor was the church's beautiful carved stone high altar.

According to Mr Baggott, the scale and speed of the fires had quickly overwhelmed the fireguards and they were powerless "to do anything".

What was surprising, however, was the 25-minute gap between the beginning of the attack and the time that the National Fire Service crews were called to the church. By the time they arrived, a few minutes later, "the fire was completely out of control".

Even then, there were further delays. The church doors on the south side of the building closest to the water hydrants were found to be locked, forcing the fire crews to run their hoses round the

Main picture: Brave salute: a Boys' Brigade bugler amid the ruins of the church. Three members of the Boys' Brigade team of fireguards were awarded diplomas for gallantry for saving the bulk of church and company property in the vestries on the night the Luftwaffe struck.

Right, above: St Nicholas' rises from the ashes in the late 1950s.

Right, below: Under fire: close-up view of the damage to the Norman pillars.

Left, the church – now Great Yarmouth Minster – as it is today.



building. In all probability, this hitch made little difference. By then, the senior fire officer considered that it was already too late and "little could have been done to save the building".

It wasn't Keighley-Peach's job to apportion blame, merely to state the facts, but another official's handwritten note raised the obvious question: "Why was the NFS not called until 25 minutes after the attack?... It is no wonder that the NFS found the fire out of control."

The same appended memo also drew attention to the fact that the 'snowboards' in the gutters were ignited. It gave the impression that the "roofs resisted and deflected most of the IBs". He felt it important to find out if any of the incendiaries had actually penetrated the roof, or whether the wooden 'snowboards' were chiefly responsible for the fire's rapid spread.

The call for further inquiries was supported by the Ministry of Home Security, but by August little headway had been made. Keighley-Peach had evidently left the area and another official was tasked with obtaining answers, though it was hoped he could do so without making a journey by car to Great Yarmouth on account "of the petrol rationing".

The matter rumbled on without resolution until November when a confidential memo was despatched to the Cambridge-based regional office

demanding urgent action.

At last, a reply was forthcoming. However, it was not one that the Home Office could have anticipated. According to the one-page report, intended to supplement Keighley-Peach's original findings, the fate of Great Yarmouth's parish church had become mired in controversy with the Home Office questions subsumed by a rancorous local investigation and an apparent cover-up.

In fact, it appeared that the church's destruction had opened a can of worms in which Keighley-Peach's hapless successor was anxious to avoid becoming embroiled.

He reported: "In the course of enquiries I discovered that there had been some considerable local trouble over the circumstances of the fire... Apparently rumours and letters to the press suggested laxity on the part of the NFS."

An official enquiry, involving police, Civil Defence, and the NFS, had been held "but no findings were made public".

Keen to avoid stirring up trouble among services and agencies whose 'goodwill' was vital for securing important information relating to bomb census and other unspecified enquiries, he was advised not to press the matter further.

"The main cause of local rumour and dissatisfaction," he later discovered, "had been the belief that the NFS had not come to the scene of the fire quickly enough, and consequently the well-loved Parish Church had been gutted."

Whether or not such criticism was justified he did not feel able to "pass any opinion" and desired to remain "aloof" from any internecine wrangling.

Left without answers, an official at the Home Office had one more question: "What action do you wish taken...?" And with that, the file appears to have been closed and the matter quietly forgotten. It was an unhappy and unsatisfactory conclusion to the story.

St Nicholas' rose from the ruins to be painstakingly restored in the 1950s, and reconsecrated in 1961 by the Bishop of Norwich. In December last year, St Nicholas' became a Minster Church, a new chapter in the long and ancient history of this, the largest parish church in England. But the mystery of whether St Nicholas' could or should have been spared its disastrous wartime fate remains tantalisingly unresolved.

Steve Snelling is the author of Norwich: A Shattered City: The Story of Hitler's Blitz on Norwich and its People, 1942, which is published by Halsgrove, priced £19.99.