

THE CAMBRIDGE ROAD BOMB
Sawbridgeworth, 10 October 1940 by John Liddell



John Liddell in October 2019 at Great St Mary's.

A large German bomb hit the middle of Cambridge Road about midnight. A profound silence lasted for about two seconds. The noise then started. Items falling including slates and tiles, glass breaking, some of it where my mother had stuck net curtain to the windows. People shouting.

My brother was just six and I aged eight were in a double bed at the back of the house, 120 Cambridge Road. Grahame was the nearest to the bomb. His first words were that he could see the moon. There was a large hole in the wall beside his head, over a foot wide. About the same time our Father called out from the front bedroom. 'Boys stay where you are as there may not be any floor'. This sent Grahame into a fit of giggles. My pyjama top was sticky and we were both white from the ceiling dust.



Graham and John Liddell swimming in the Stort in 1939/40.

My grandmother ran the 'Bull' public house almost opposite and her son Norman Wykes came over to our house immediately after the bomb landed. With my father they carried Grahame and myself across the road to the 'Bull'. I remember the front door was on the lawn and dressing gowns were draped over rose bushes. My grandmother was still in bed when we arrived and Grahame was put beside her. Although my pyjama top was covered with blood no wounds were discovered.

Within a few minutes Ada, my grandmother, called out to my father that something had to be done for Grahame's left hand. Once he had seen the hand, father got a car and took Grahame to Rye Street hospital in Bishop's Stortford. I believe other wounded were taken to Haymeads after first aid people had seen them. At this stage no help arrived at the 'Bull'. My father took Grahame to Rye Street because he had only just left this hospital where they had removed his tonsils.

What followed was reported by a relative who was on duty that night and was the site warden and lived on the premises. The surgeon was Mr. Coleman and the senior nurse was the Children's ward sister, Sister Norbury, who had just been looking after Grahame. His hand was such a mess that the surgeon stated he was going to remove it. Sister Norbury told Mr. Coleman that he was not to amputate and stood between the surgeon and Grahame. She went on to say that most of the hand could be saved with dedicated nursing.

The hand was saved but he lost the top of his thumb, a finger and most of another one. He was very ill, in hospital for over two months, a major part of the problem concerned his throat. Ceiling dust caused problems. There were no antibiotics, no penicillin at this time.

The next day I was cleaned up and, after being seen by a doctor, was taken to the Rye Street hospital. An operation took place to remove metal fragments from my shoulder and behind my ear. The anaesthetic was a liquid which was poured over a gauze, held in place with a metal frame on my nose. My memory is of being drowned. After two days I was sent home, I still have my discharge certificate. I did see our bedroom again; it was difficult to believe the damage to a wooden chest of drawers riddled with shrapnel, which must have come across our bed. Also to see the feathers from the eiderdown stuck in the plasterwork like darts.

Home by then was my uncle's farm near Hatfield Heath. The day following the bombing farm vehicles took all they could from Cambridge Road, as it was no longer fit to live in. My father continued to run the garage next door While we were very grateful to have a place to live it was a move back in time: no electric light, no heating and no gas. Oil lamps and a paraffin cooker were the order of the day. That winter was very cold. Fortunately, the farmhouse was large, as the inhabitants became six and then seven when Grahame joined us. There was an air raid shelter in the garden where we spent night after night, often counting the bomb explosions as everyone believed that there were four, or six and even eight to a stick. Would it happen again? My father and uncle Jim normally stood outside smoking. Often it was very light from the fires in the London Docks and the decoy lights in Hatfield Forrest.

This was a time of horses and, while there may have been a tractor, everything seemed to revolve around shire horses. I continued to go to school at Waterside in Bishop's Stortford, which involved walking to Hatfield Heath to catch a bus. Day after day my mother went to see Grahame in the hospital, standing outside when the ward was closed due to infections. It must have been a very difficult time for her, no home to look after and no idea what would happen in the future. Even troops who parked on the roadside decided to have a fire to keep themselves warm, in what had been the lounge of her house, 120 Cambridge Road, Sawbridgeworth.

I am not sure when the rebuild started but this happened when government funds were released. Labour and materials were available as no new work was happening. Older workers who had not been called up were glad of work. Not only was it a rebuild but an extension was included because my father had just received authorisation for a strong room to be added to the house as a bomb shelter. This room became our bedroom when we moved back.

120 Cambridge Road was then on its own as the council houses next door had all been demolished; we had lost our neighbours. Across the road, apart from the 'Bull' there were fields. The first house on the other side of Cambridge Road, nearer to the centre of Sawbridgeworth was some distance away. These fields went on for a long way and included a footpath which led to what we knew as the racecourse and a spinney. This was an area to walk in and play.

The details of those killed, three children and two adults, are recorded in Great St Mary's Church, as well as on the War Memorial. Although I have tried to obtain details that relate to the bombing, I have been unsuccessful. I have seen no photographs and have found no county records; it seems no inquests were held at this time. I hope others will be more successful than I have been. What I have been able to do for a number of years is to ensure that those killed are not forgotten; I have reminded the local press of what happened and the Church has allowed me to read their names on the nearest Sunday to the 10th of October. Feedback from this has been interesting. While I am alive I will ensure that what happened is not forgotten.

We were all impacted by this bomb, a random bomb; one of millions that were dropped worldwide but it did drop on Sawbridgeworth. One way or another we all carried the scars from what happened.

As a footnote, and an indication of how life has changed, it is worth recording my brother's National Service. Grahame was commissioned in the Royal Artillery. After training he was sent to Korea and was awarded the British Korean medal and the United Nations medal for service in Korea.

John Liddell, July 2019, E & OE.