

A Wartime Scottow Tragedy

Concerning the Ashfield Family

2nd November 2018

The following story concerning the Ashfield family has been one of the most difficult to evidence and research; yet to me it is an important that it should be told. It involved a Scottow family, indeed the whole village became affected one way and another, in a most appalling tragedy. It was one of the consequences of having a major fighter airbase built in the midst of a civilian community during wartime Britain.

It was because of it being wartime that finding the facts concerning this incident has been so difficult. I am indebted to Ms Rosemary Dixon, the very helpful archivist from the Eastern Daily Press, who gave me the reason why this was so. Bad or negative news linked to the war was automatically censored, just the barest of facts being reported. In the Ashfield case just the name and age of the victim, his wife, their address and the fact that he was injured in Scottow on the 22nd February 1944; and as a result, died on the same day at the Norfolk of Norwich Hospital from his injuries.

The reason for his injuries and the circumstances that gave rise to them were simply omitted from any newspaper report, on the basis of the possible demoralising effect it may have had on the population.

I am further indebted, although I have never met them, to Anthea Ashfield and Ethel Howard for meticulously compiling the Ashfield family tree, starting at a point in Barningham Suffolk from the 16th century; and then posting their findings on the website. It was from their efforts we were able to find clues which enabled us to glean much needed information.

In spite of the difficulty in finding hard written evidence we did however, have one material witness, my own mother. It was her account that provided the basis for further research.

The following is an attempt to reconstruct from the various contributions made, the terribly event that happened to a family of civilians on that fateful day. There appears to be no easily traceably public record of this appalling tragedy, so this small effort is an attempt to give memory and pay tribute to those involved all those years ago.

Here is the story as it has been remembered and told by past and present residents of Scottow.

The Incident.

Late on the Tuesday morning of 22nd February 1944, Mrs Ginny Ashfield of 65 Norwich Road (Birds Yard) Scottow was waiting on the Horseshoes Corner for a bus to take her to North Walsham. The bus stop was directly opposite the Scottow Three Horseshoes Inn on the other side of the road.

Her fifty-seven year old husband Mr Alfred Jacob Ashfield, was cutting the hedge in the Tunstead Road close to the Scottow Horseshoes' farm entrance. They would have been in

easy seeing and possible talking distance of each other. Mr Ashfield probably worked for Mr Roger Tooke who both ran the farm and also was the landlord of the Three Horseshoes pub.

At some point Mr Ashfield accidentally struck an unexploded bomb with his bill-hook and was very seriously injured by the explosion. In spite of him being taken to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, he died shortly afterwards from his injuries on the same day.

Immediately after the event a very distraught Mrs Ashfield, having witnessed the terrible event involving her husband was taken into the Horseshoes public house and comforted there by the staff. The Ashfield's were married in 1913, Depwade Norfolk and had been married for thirty-one years.

Witnesses

Apart from my mother, Mrs Myrtle Jones, nee Parden, Mrs Joy Head, nee Buck, then aged six was home at number 58, Tunstead Road from school for lunch. She remembers how her mother, Mrs Nora Buck a trained cook once employed by Genera and Mrs Landon at the Scottow Vicarage. She had a reputation for being highly organised. Suddenly the massive explosion reminded her how late it was and that Joy should have been back at school. The explosion happened on Joy's route back to school so it could have been an act of providence!

Mrs Margret Belson nee Kirk was off from school and at home at number 39, The Fairstead and also remembers hearing the explosion.

The Bomb

It was later reported that the bomb, the Butterfly or SD2, was responsible for the death of Mr Ashfield, was one of a number of such bombs dropped on Monday 27th September 1943 by the German Luftwaffe.

The Butterfly bomb or *Sprengbombe Dickwandig 2 kg* or SD, was a German anti-personnel mine dropped in clusters by the Luftwaffe during the Second World War. The bomblet when primed gave the artificial appearance of a giant butterfly, hence its nickname.

What seemed like an ordinary day of people going about their lives and business, suddenly turned into a great and unforeseen tragedy; one that was to be mourned by all the people of Scottow. Mr Ashfield was buried at Scottow cemetery, a burial ground that stood directly under the flight path to RAF Coltishall! His name appears on the War Memorial Cross.

The Poem

Was it this terrible event visited on the Ashfield family - one that possibly inspired a poem written during that period?

Mick Jennings, author of the splendid book *Royal Airforce Coltishall Fighter Station*, a history of RAF Coltishall. On page seventy he alludes to a similar incident in a poem written at the time by Winifred Hurren.

Leading Aircraftwoman (LACW) Winifred Hurren was posted to RAF Coltishall in the summer of 1942. She spent the next eighteen months carrying out a variety of duties from chauffeuring the CO, driving coal and supply trucks around the station and ferrying ambulances to sick bays and hospitals. Here are the last six paragraphs of one of the many such poems she wrote as a coping mechanism for helping her through the dark years of the war.

*At eighty, an old man, cutting the hedge with a sickle
It touched something and he was blasted –was this his war?*

*They called it a butterfly bomb, but a butterfly is beautiful
This thing hung like a devil, waiting to kill.*

*We roared down the road to the crossing, a little crowd waited
nearby*

*“Come on man, help us with this stretcher “they looked the
other way.*

*Struggled with our human burden –the birds were singing once
more*

We were leaving this scene of carnage-nearly left his leg.

*Shut the doors, start her up, into gear, “Get to Norwich as
quickly as you can “*

Eyes alert, watch the road, forget the sight, five miles to go.

*A tap on the Communications window, slide it along, a voice is
heard*

No rush – take it easy, he’s dead. Killed by a butterfly.

Are the similarities expressed in her poem too much alike to be just mere coincidence? Perhaps she was using poetical licence to emphasise the pathos and deep tragedy she felt regarding this event and in others of a similar nature which she had also experienced.

Bombing

The village of Scottow suffered frequent bombing raids owing to its close proximity to the RAF Camp. The Horseshoes pub was reportedly damaged by enemy action on Tuesday the 7th July 1942, as was my own grandparent’s - the Parden Family - in their small cottage at number 53, the Fairstead.

In their case they were fortuitous in being helped by two passing airmen cycling back to the camp from North Walsham. They assisted in extinguishing the fire caused by an incendiary bomb which had fallen through the roof and ignited onto the bed setting it and the feather mattress alight. The bedroom was full of flames, smoke and feathers.

Both my Aunts Irene and Beryl remembers their mother, my grandmother, having only seconds earlier when hearing the sirens of the impending air-raid began ferrying the children downstairs to the safety of the Morrison shelter, a metal cage under the dining table downstairs, when the bomb struck. My Aunts recall their mother using her body to shield them past the flames. On reaching the ground floor and opening the front door she was relieved to see two airman armed with buckets full of water ready for action.

My Grandfather, in the meantime, had a very narrow escape, as only seconds before he was lying on the very spot where the bomb had fallen and was at the very moment of impact sitting on the side of the bed putting his trousers on.

Two further incendiary bombs fell that same evening, one in the dog's kennel at the back of their cottage (leaving the dog unharmed but in full barking voice) the other in the pantry of the Scottow Horseshoes opposite. Mr Donny Goodwins of North View appeared and collected both my aunts where they stayed for a few days with him, his wife and their daughter Betty.

Such a small and inadequate account of such a horrific event, still never the less, required the help and advice of a large number of people, most of whom are mentioned below. My apologies for any omissions made by me, plus any unintentional errors that may come to light due to my lack of competence and knowledge at the time.

Credits.

My thanks goes to:

Mrs Jayne Fenn and Mr Barry Appleton for their help in sorting out the house numbering system which was so important in making correct identifications.

Mrs Hannah Halls who supplied key information regarding the bomb.

Mr Trevor Hedge for naming all the residents of Birds Yard during that period.

My mother Mrs Myrtle Fisher for the description of events she witnessed on that fateful day in 1944.

My aunts, Mrs Irene Gray and Mrs Beryl Mitchell, for their background knowledge. Both of whom were born, bred and as children lived on the Horseshoes Corner during that period..

Mrs Sylvia Vaughan, nee Gray, post lady extraordinaire, who very kindly wrote out her whole postal round from the early forties on to her retirement. Thus enabling us to fit the story together.

The Eastern Daily Press and Ms Rosemary Dixon, archivist, for her time and advice regarding the method and attitude employed during war time reporting. She was also able to confirm some of the uncorroborated information we already held.

The unmet leading Aircraftwoman Winifred Hurren for her powerful and poignant poem.

Anthea Ashfield and Ethel Howard for so meticulously compiling the Ashfield family tree, giving us vital information which we so desperately sought.

Mr Michael Adams for his support and advice and to his wife Mrs Vera Adams who is often disturbed at the most inconvenient of times by my telephone calls, but always answers with friendliness good grace.

Bibliography:

Royal Airforce Coltishall Fighter Station by Mick Jennings. Published by Old Forge Publishing 2007. ISBN 978-1-906183-01-1