

## CHAPTER VI

### WORLD WAR II

By virtue of its size and location Kirkintilloch was never to become heavily involved in World War II unlike other areas in the West of the County. Even so the story of the school, and the town for that matter between 1939 and 1945 is probably a more accurate reflection of how most of Britain's civilian population experienced the war than would the story of a Glasgow or a London or a Coventry school.

Without a doubt extraordinary things happened to the School, to its pupils, and to its staff in those years but what is most striking of all when reading the accounts of the time is the accent on normality. Classes were tested; exams were set; inspectors, doctors, dentists visited; Holy Mass was attended; religious inspectors succeeded each other year by year. Probably much of this impression is misguided but one aspect is very clear – that the authority, the industry and efficiency of the Headmaster counted more than most towards the apparent calm. One is tempted to clichés about 'Captains' and 'stormtossed ships'.

1939 opened very much as any other winter term. Total roll was 769 with 296 in the 'Post Primary' department including a grand 21 pupils in IV, V, VI. Already though, a cautious and uncertain government was undertaking preparations for a future conflict and on January 19<sup>th</sup> local headmasters were asked to meet to arrange the taking of a census in the town. This would establish how many children could be evacuated there and who would accommodate them 'should an emergency arise'. Secondary teachers being much too involved in preparing for exams it was resolved that the Primary Teachers carry out this census which was duly done on afternoons of late January and early February. With that the affairs of Europe ceased to affect St. Ninian's, at least for the meantime, and the slow blessed rhythm of school was resumed.

A school is ever the vessel of the young but it does not remain young. It grows, it changes, and already by 1939 the folly of the open corridors was apparent and the headmaster was busily engaged in arranging their closure so as he, almost poetically puts it, 'to shelter the children from the wintry blast'. The statue of the Little Flower arrived and was blessed by Canon Taylor from Carfin. The death of Pius XI, and the election of his successor are marked as was a rather splendid traditional concert to mark the Golden Jubilee of Canon Jansen. However the idyll of the ensuing summer holidays was doubly shattered not only by a return to school but also by a telegram from County Office, Park Circus, on August 31<sup>st</sup> ordering preparation for the reception of evacuees to be put in train the following day – Friday, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939.

School was closed on that day but all staff and some pupils were present to assist in the dispersing of evacuees who were mainly from Radnor Park and Elgin Street Public School in Clydebank. (Sad to say 'some were refused, came back to the Hall and had to be sent elsewhere'). Next day, Saturday, school was ordered to be closed for a week. On Sunday came Mr. Chamberlain's doleful message and on Monday the Staff assembled to gird themselves for war. However they, sooner than the rest of the nation, were to encounter the disillusionment of the 'phoney war'. Their first blow for a war-torn Britain was to fill in last week's registers – which crucial task duly done they were sent home! Appearing again next morning they were dismissed peremptorily to the following Monday, September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Not all will remember that in 1939 through cinema and newspapers, but especially through radio, the civilian population were already being brought up to a high level of awareness of national and international affairs. 'Guernica' was not simply a painting by Picasso (still practically unknown and anyway incomprehensible). Popular writers like Neville Shute and even the venerable H.G. Wells were purveying the horrors of aerial warfare and illustrated magazines were already showing pictures and impressions of 'what it would be like'. Anyway the 'Hun' only twenty odd years before was using all sorts of dirty tricks; one could be sure he'd not have changed. Hence the rapid evacuation of children out of industrial areas – and hence, of course, the gas mask.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, the very first day of School of the War, Morning Assembly revealed that 97 pupils did not have masks. What astonishes us is that over 600 pupils DID have them with them that morning! Next day long-suffering teachers were asked to instruct the classes 'how to put them on and off'. What a lesson that must have been! As the likelihood of poison gasses wafting from the skies began to diminish, the authorities were already moving to tackle the more realistic possibility of explosive bombs and so blacking out, sand-bagging, and the provision of shelters were undertaken. The passages north and east of the quadrangle were enclosed to form shelters and on October 24<sup>th</sup> the Headmaster explained to every class what they should do in the event of an air raid. On November 10<sup>th</sup> he had a 'try out' of the shelters, which were occupied in 7-8 minutes. All were satisfied but one practical problem arose. How to have a spontaneous drill without using the siren which was sited on the school to serve the local area? The answer came from the Town Hall – a gong and a stick! From then on Shelter Drill became virtually a weekly occurrence.

So the winter passed with anticipation waning and mundane things like a visit to the King's Theatre, or complaints about behaviour of pupils beginning to resume their proper importance. Even the enrolment of evacuees, already small, trickled to a halt and may well have reversed itself.

A severe spell of winter weather in January and February 1940 cut down attendances, but the weather soon improved and the sun appeared to smile on Stukas and Panzers as Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Norway and then even France fell to German arms.

In May, though, the war arrived in Kirkintilloch with the arrival of a body of Chasseurs Alpins, French troops newly back from the debacle of Norway. The school seems to have gaped, squinted or just stared at them – and then offered them hospitality, charity and entertainment. Entertainment? – a football match of course! Then on the night of June 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> the first air raid over the town took place. The ARP people in Washington Inn did not contact the janitor as arranged but it hardly mattered for the long waiting was over – to be replaced by the awful fear and frustration of civilians exposed to bombing. Life could never be the same for anyone again – but the worst was yet to come.

Raids were infrequent through the rest of the year but one could 'never be sure'. Dr. Barry notes effects on staff and pupils. He himself was beset by illness, necessitating an operation May/June 1940, but the school was capably looked after by Mr. William Monaghan – officially Second Master since December 16<sup>th</sup> 1939. Indeed Dr. Barry's main battle of 1940 was with our own British Army, especially the Wiltshires who had cast an envious, requisitioning eye on the building as a billet. The Headmaster held out resolutely, invoking all power, official and divine he could find. Eventually a Major General arrived and although we know nothing of the conversation which followed no doubt the good Major General left to seek some

softer foe. It should also be noted here that the staff found out for the first time the reality of the fact that 'a teacher is never on holiday' since they had to take it in turns to be available for service right through the summer 'vacation' of 1940.

So passed one of the most unreal of all years. At the same time as School Sports were held five boys truanted in October 'to see where the bombs had fallen at Westergartshore'. A Whist Drive went on to the unearthly hour of 2 a.m. for the Spitfire Fund and the price of tea had to be raised to three ha'pence a cup. Someone came to see if the ground in front of the school was fit for growing vegetables and then, crowning indignity, the Staff had P.A.Y.E. income tax deducted, for the first time, from their December salaries (as opposed to paying such tax annually).

The Year of Our Lord 1941 brought no consolation to anyone. The poor staff, already hit financially, got no cash on pay day as their school cheque had been sent to Twechar. There was no meat for dinners, only potatoes, beans or soup. 350 beds were allocated to be stored against 'serious evacuation after "severe" bombing', and 'alerts' increased – even happening in day-light hours. London was beginning to suffer its long agony and proper fire-watching became a necessity, indeed a legal requirement, on all large buildings. In February the staff and some present and former pupils were put on a formal rota so the School and Westermains House were always tenanted through every night, seven nights per week. Structural alterations were made to allow easy access to roofs and lofts in both buildings.

Dr. Barry records that attendance in the morning of Friday March 14<sup>th</sup> was about one third in the Primary Department and less than half in the Secondary Department. He attributes this to the 'Blitz' the previous evening on Clydeside area between 9 p.m. and 6.15 a.m. Before lunch-time the implications for the school were brought home. The Headmaster was told to arrange school to provide food and accommodation for firstly 800, then 450, evacuees from the Clydeside area. Let him tell his version of what was probably St. Ninian's 'finest hour' in World War II.

*"14/3/41 – The 'Alert' sounded again at 8.40 a.m. and the 'All Clear' at 9.20 p.m.*

*All the teachers reported during the forenoon, except Miss Doyle.*

*Made a 'double' attendance at 1 p.m.*

*At 12.45 p.m. Headmaster received phone message per janitor to be ready to receive by 2 p.m. 800 evacuees for tea. This message was sent round staff when all volunteered to remain behind and assist. Later that number was modified to 450, who were to be fed communally and sleep here until billeting had been completed.*

*Asked for and received a dozen soldiers (A.S. Corps) at present in the town who cleared desks out of Rooms 1 to 15, into which were placed 320 camp beds ready for use. Rooms were not blacked out. Janitor pulled switches of rooms to be used.*

*Instructions were that all evacuees receive cup of tea and biscuit and those desiring a meal or meals after that were to fill in form giving all particulars as to their last address, occupation, age, identity card etc. before receiving meal or meals. At 8.40 p.m. the first lot arrived. They were sent to the Dining Hall where they received a substantial meal, purveyed by Dickson's and the filling of forms was dispensed with as being out of the question. Bus loads came in succession until the Assembly Hall was packed with men, women, children, babies and some with their dogs. Many had cases, others had nothing but their working clothes on; women in house slippers etc.*

*On behalf of the staff and people of the town, the Headmaster welcomed them all in their sad plight and asked for their co-operation in making their stay under the dreadful circumstances as pleasant as possible with the material at his disposal. He*

told them about the rooms, the beds, and the communal feeding, regretted he had not beds for all and had only 75 blankets, which, he suggested, might be given to the most deserving among the women. All seemed agreeable and resigned.

Four relays of people were fed – over four hundred in all. The ‘Alert’ sounded again at 9.15 p.m. and continued to 4.15 a.m. when ‘All Clear’ sounded. Anti-aircraft guns were in action all night and this upset the evacuees. They refused to remain in the rooms owing to darkness and flashes of flares falling in the distance, in addition to the noise of guns and rattling of doors and windows. Gradually they all trekked to the Assembly Hall to be near the Air Raid Shelters and in the light as the Assembly Hall and Dining Hall were blacked out’. Mr. Monaghan remained in charge during the night with some of the members of the staff.

15/3/41 – All evacuees were fed in the Dining Hall – breakfast, dinner and tea. Room 1 became a billeting centre from which people were sent in army lorries under Corporal Higham to houses in town. Miss Cameron, Rev. D. McMath and Fr. Hamill were assisting. Room 2 was used for storing iron rations – bully beef, sweetened milk and unsweetened milk for families. Room 3 was centre for the Assistance Board who paid out war relief claims. The library was centre for landward billeting.

16/3/41 – Same as yesterday – three meals supplied in relays, complete sittings each time and admission by ticket.

17/3/41 and 18/3/41 – Communal feeding both days, but numbers fell as persons were billeted. The Ministry of Information sent an official on behalf of Sir. S. Bilsland, Regional Commissioner, to kill a rumour that the military were in charge of Clydebank, that there was compulsory evacuation, etc.

On Tuesday night no unbilleted persons were in the school. One or two stragglers were accommodated for the night.

19/3/41 – Teaches were arranged as from the 17<sup>th</sup> March into two lists – A, all living at a distance – B, all living in the vicinity. The A lot came on duty from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and the B lot from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. then the fire watchers took over. Mr. Arbuckle (H.M.I.) from the Ministry of Health called on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1941. The County Convener Mr. Rutherford called on the same day and approved of what was being done.

On 16/3/41 the names, present address and former address of all Clydebank persons had to be written out and sent to Clydebank Police Office to enable lists to be made out.

20/3/41 – School opened for Assistance Board, Room 3.

Mr. Hyslop, H.M.I. called at 1.30 p.m. to hear of arrangements and report.

Meeting in Town Clerk’s Office on Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> March along with Rev. D. McMath, Dr. Carvan, Miss Fletcher, Mrs. Duncan, Miss Marshall a deputation to the Provost – (Mr. Duncan) for a County Benevolent Fund to buy prams for refugee mothers.

Meeting in Town Clerk’s office at 4 p.m. on 20<sup>th</sup> March of local Headmasters (Messrs. Phillips, Farquharson, Russell and self) to consider the question of communal feeding – one meal at mid-day, as from next week.

The Director of Education on Tuesday at Town Council Offices. Most of Clydebank schools demolished or useless.

21/3/41 – Teachers here as usual. Made re-arrangements of duties and sent others away.

17/3/41 – School closed for week owing to it being used as a Rest Centre.

*Arranged for two pupils to sit test in chemistry on Monday, 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1941 at time (9.30 a.m. – 11.30 a.m.) stated in Senior Leaving Certificate Time-Table in Room 22.*

*21/3/41 – Assembly Hall and Classrooms are being washed out in readiness for re-opening on Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> March.*

*24<sup>th</sup> March – School re-opened to-day after being closed since 14<sup>th</sup> March. All rooms used had been thoroughly cleansed and washed, extra women had been employed for this purpose.*

*Practical tests in Physics, Chemistry and Music were given the candidates in these subjects for the Senior Leaving Certificate.*

*To-day, enrolled 93 evacuees from Clydebank and Glasgow Catholic schools.”*

So by April 1941 the roll had leapt to close on 1,000 although some extra staff arrived from Clydebank. It was to remain at this level for the rest of the war (it did so, down to 1945). Little is known of evacuees' reaction to new situation. Headmaster comments on their being 'backward by a much as half a year.

1941 wasn't completely disastrous. At sea the Bismarck was sunk after pursuit by 'Renown', the hapless 'Hood' and a newer capital ship 'King George V'. News of the Bismarck's defeat was received with more than ordinary patriotic enthusiasm by the school. The reasons are to be found some months earlier. A letter from Apostolatus Maris was received suggesting that the school 'adopt' a warship. The staff agreed and 'King George V' was chosen. On October 7<sup>th</sup> a parcel of books was sent off and work began on making 'comforts' for the seamen or on collecting money to buy wool for such. Mr. Coleman produced a water-colour painting of the ship and the school plunged wholeheartedly into what was probably not a unique relationship but one which was deeply satisfying and stood the test of time. Letters and compliments were exchanged as were gifts. King George V sent another 'gong', a 5.25" shell casing, used against Bismarck which remains on display to this day. Then came an 'honour trophy', not a shield as suggested, but a miniature replica of a gun turret made of brass and ebony – still on display in school. Finally in November 1943 the Chaplain of King George V, Reverend J. Waters, a mainstay of the relationship, arrived in person to say his thanks and talk of his ship's part in the war to date. In all hundreds of pounds were collected and spent by the school, on the sailors of the King George V.