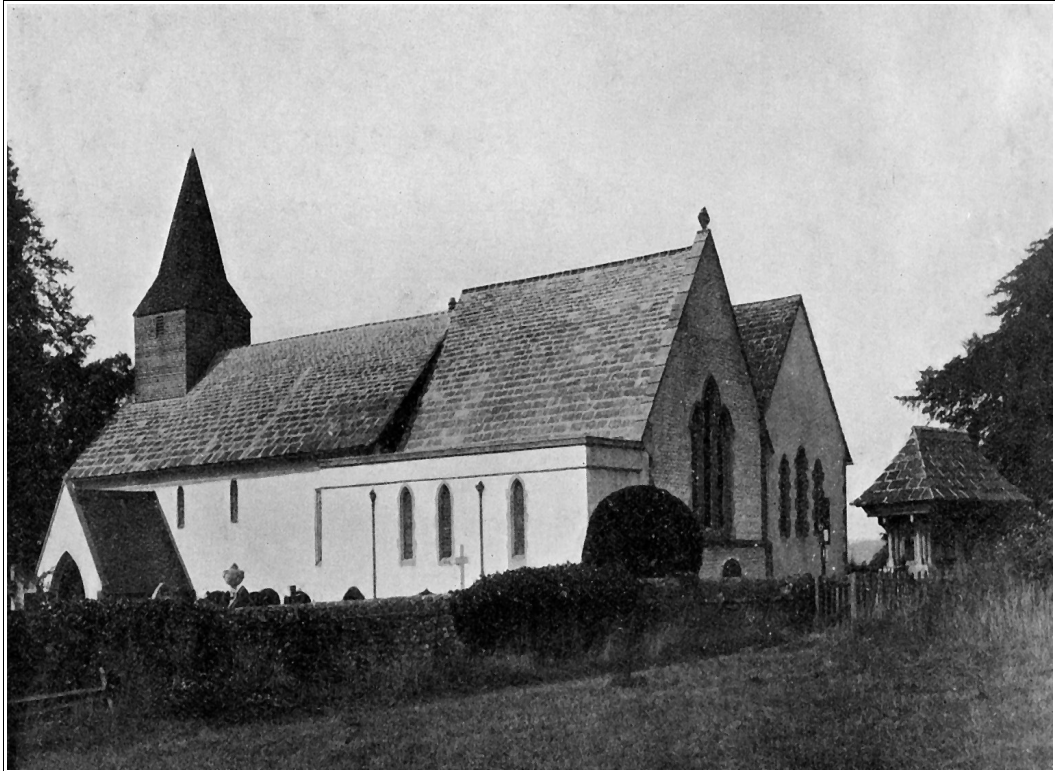


# *The Destruction of Abinger Church*

## *3 Aug 1944*



St James' Church 1938

The following is, in shortened form, the report read at a meeting of the Church Council on the 19<sup>th</sup> August, 1944, and adopted by them. Released by the Censor on the 7<sup>th</sup> September, it is now being sent to every home in the Parish, as it is felt that everyone would wish to see it.

Our beautiful and well-beloved church, in which the people of this parish have worshipped for over 850 years, was destroyed in a moment some weeks ago by a flying bomb of the enemy. The bomb fell just when the Rector was leaving his house to take the Holy Communion Service at 8 a.m. And, mercifully, no one had arrived at the Church. It seems to have exploded in the air after hitting the belfry or its spire, or maybe the tall cypress tree which grew close to the south-west corner of the Nave. The lower part of that tree still stands, but its upper part was torn off and found inside the ruined Nave near the Chancel. The remains of the bomb lie where they fell in the paddock outside the west wall of the churchyard.

The west wall of the Nave, including the belfry and spire and the great tie-beam on which they were supported, and all the roof of the Nave,

both inside and outside, were completely demolished, and so was the south door and porch, a great part of the north wall including the three little Norman windows of that side, and the south wall up to a point beyond the porch. In the remains of the south wall are left the easternmost of the three Norman windows of that side and the three-light 15<sup>th</sup> century window (damaged) near where the pulpit stood. The two eastern-most tie-beams of the Nave alone remain (but much damaged) to represent the roof. The north and south walls were the most ancient parts of the Church.

The timbers of the other roofs have not suffered in the same way, but the blast has stripped them all, and the lych-gate, of their Horsham-stone slabs, or tiles, except for parts of the north face of the North Aisle. The glass of all the

windows of the Church is in fragments on the floors or on the ground outside.

When the disaster occurred the Rector informed the Diocesan Secretary, who came at once. The Archdeacon of Dorking (Canon Newill) and the Bishop of Guildford came and gave the Rector the authority for removed salvaged contents, and for conducting the Church Services in other places. Our M.P., Mr. G. C. Touche, also came. Mr. Bargman, who is the Diocesan architect for War damage to Churches, attended, and so did Mr. Gordon Troupe, as architect to the Ministry of Works in connection with air-raid damage to Buildings of Historic interest. Both architects formed the opinion that the whole building is so badly damaged that it must be reported to the War Damage Commission as a "total loss", though, besides parts of the Nave-walls already mentioned, the walls of the Chancel, North Aisle, North porch, Vestry and old Vestry are still standing. The pillars and arches between the Chancel and the 13<sup>th</sup> century North Aisle, and the crypt is unhurt except for its windows and door. The fixtures and loose contents of the Church have suffered surprisingly little. The Altar-rails, Chancel screens and stalls, and the pews of the North Aisle, are almost intact. The pulpit, detached from the wall, has been placed in the North Aisle, little hurt and its carved panels not at all. The cupboards, the sliding partition, and the harmonium in the Vestry are considerably damaged, and so are the pews in the Nave and the organ. There have been moved temporarily into the Vestry, the font and its cover (both badly broken), the Altar, the fallen bells, and ten Memorial tablets taken from the walls of the Church, all unhurt. The 1914-18 War Memorial, among the tablets still in place, is badly damaged, while the twin marble memorials to members of the Worsfold and Rowzier families have been found in pieces on the floor. The Crucifixion bronze on the wall of the vestry, and the marble recumbent figure of A. I. Mackenzie in the wall of the North Aisle are undamaged. It is very remarkable that, while the corner cupboard in the Vestry lay on the floor with some of the books it contained, two bottles of Communion wine that were in it and the rest of the books were blown through the Vestry door and the North Aisle and deposited unhurt near the Altar.

In the course of the first day or two the Rector, with the help of his family and household, the Verger and two or three choir boys, and using a trailer, removed into the safety of the Rectory all movables and perishable things not put into the Vestry (except the Vestry chairs which the Rector put in the school) and among them the Altar, and its Cross, Candlesticks and Vases, the Sanctuary chairs, stools, and prayer-desk, the Litany desk and Lectern, all kneeling-boards, and the large table from the Vestry, the contents of the safe and iron box in the Vestry wall; also, from the Vestry, the chest of drawers with its contents of Altar linen, etc., all the Altar frontals and surplices, the oak chest with all the documents in it, the map-box with the Churchyard map, etc., the coloured Parish wall-map, and the Tithe map; also all books, carpets, mats, and hassocks that could be found. (The Nave carpet and many hassocks remain under the debris in the Nave.)

To clear up some of the debris, Major A. J. Baldwin, the Officer in charge of the Pioneer force camped here, allowed the Rector the free use of forty Italian Pioneers (formerly prisoners-of-war) for a week, and they did splendid work, collecting into dumps great quantities of fallen timber, stone roof-slabs, and broken gravestones, under the supervision of a British officer and the Rector. The Nave still remains deep in debris, in which the pews are buried, and, as the walls are still crumbling, Major Baldwin has surrounded the Church with barbed wire to prevent sight-seers risking injury to themselves. The Diocese has allowed Mr. Bargman a first grant of £100 towards further necessary work.

In the Churchyard the tall lime-trees on either side of the stone steps on the public footpath are stripped bare, fallen or uprooted. The Churchyard wall has been blown down for some distance on each side of the steps and for a few yards south of the lychgate. The handsome Skardon monument near the south porch is broken into pieces, and most of the upright gravestones and Crosses on the south, as far as the east-west path near the chestnut-trees, are snapped off, and so are those on the west, but on the north side of the Church only a few opposite the Vestry have suffered. Lutyen's War Memorial Cross has been cut off from its base, and lies on the ground in five pieces.

J.A.G.

NOTE.

Estimates are not yet available but contributions are being received to a fund which has been opened to supplement (as will be necessary) the Government's liability for the rebuilding, and for providing a place for carrying

on the services meanwhile. They should be sent either to Major Lugard, D.S.O., O.B.E., at Little Parkhurst, Abinger Common, as Hon. Treasurer, or to the Westminster Bank, Dorking.

L. G. Meade, Rector of Abinger