

Night Blaze at Aylesbury Grammar School

WIDESPREAD DAMAGE AS FLAMES SWEPT BUILDING

Within a few hours of Aylesbury Grammar School's Speech day ceremony last Thursday, disaster befell the school. A fire, probably caused by an electrical fault, started in the main hall of the school, caused extensive damage and proved to be one of the worst local fires in recent years. The front main block was burnt out and the roof was seriously damaged, but little serious structural damage was caused to the building, and it is hoped to have the complete school in shape again by the end of the Easter holidays next year.



The insurance assessors have not yet announced the financial extent of the damage, and a list is being supplied to them of the articles destroyed including portraits of the school founders which cannot be replaced, memorial tablets, honours boards and trophies.

A woman who is unknown to the authorities telephoned the Fire Brigade at 10.39pm. She had been asked to do so by Mr Burnham or 129 Walton Road, Aylesbury, who lives opposite the school and is employed by International Alloys Ltd. She said that although there were no flames visible, there was smoke coming from the roof in the centre of the building, and she could hear a crackling noise which indicated the fire had taken hold. Another man living opposite the school said he had passed at 10.20pm but had noticed nothing.

Four or five members of the Old Aylesburians' Badminton Club were playing in the school gymnasium when told by a man that the roof was on fire. They reported the fact to the headmaster, and the caretaker who lives nearby.

In two minutes

The Fire Brigade arrived at the school at 10.41pm, only two minutes after receiving the call and found the main hall on fire. There was a lot of smoke and working conditions were had

One or two firemen were affected by the smoke and heat, but after a 'breather' outside they were able to return to the work of fighting the fire that had spread considerably along the roof void, over the ceiling. The fire was held in most places by close boarding in the roof but where the boarding was burned through flames showed in the night sky.

The Chief Fire Officer for Bucks, Mr E. G. Hobbs said the following day; 'The over side of the lathe and plaster ceiling was also burning. The substantial construction, and the fact that the roof void extended the full length of the school without any breaks, caused the fire to spread very rapidly in both directions'.

Firemen had to get into the roof through two openings in the ceiling and they were being constantly bombarded by tiles falling, without warning, through the roof. There was a high wind and as it was blowing towards the Hazell, Watson and Viney printing works oil store, Hazell's Fire Brigade was alerted and stood by until the school fire was finally extinguished at 12.20am. Fire appliances and men attended from Aylesbury, Wendover and Whitchurch, and the emergency proved the high efficiency of the Fire and Police radio system.



Fuses blew

In a statement to a Fire Brigade official, the caretaker of the school said that on the previous Monday all the lights were on in the main school building and biology laboratory. The fuses blew at about 4.00pm and the lights went out. Under the direction of the physics master, a new 15 amp fuse wire was put in.

The following afternoon, Tuesday, at almost the same time, the fuses went again, and the physics master himself replaced the 15 amp fuse with two wires. The lights went on but when the fluorescent lights in the biology laboratory were turned on the fuse blew again.

The caretaker immediately telephoned the Electricity board and an electrician arrived on Wednesday morning and fitted a 25 amp fuse. The Chief Fire Office reported later; 'He advised the caretaker that if there was further trouble he thought an additional circuit to the main building would be necessary.'

School work has not been as seriously hampered as it might have been. The block at the rear of the school was not damaged and the Fifth and Sixth forms studying for their General Certificate of Education examinations were able to return to normal work on Wednesday.

Start on Monday

The other forms will start work on Monday, six forms at Queen's Park School and six forms in the classroom huts at Beaconsfield Road. This has been made possible by the cooperation of the contractors building the new Grange County Secondary School, Turnfurlong.

Because of the contractors' increased efforts, Mr Percy Jones, headmaster of the new school, will remove all his pupils from the Queen's Park buildings on Monday instead of having to wait until January as was originally expected.

Fortunately the headmaster's study was not affected by the fire, and no records and documents were destroyed. Only one laboratory suffered damage but in the main hall the wooden blocks forming the floor were forced up into little 'molehills'.

An official of the County Education Department pointed out this week that the three sections into which the Grammar School has been split are all within a half-mile radius, and little inconvenience will be caused to the masters and mistresses in moving from one class to another. The same official paid tribute to the Sixth formers who did a good job on Monday moving desks and sorting books 'to bring a little order out of chaos'.

One big feature of the week has been the many offers of help from people in the Aylesbury District, many of them offering halls and rooms in their houses for classrooms and storage. The Old Aylesburians' Association met this week to discuss plans for their annual reunion which was to have been in the School Hall on December 19th. The reunion will still be held at the school but in the gymnasium which escaped damage.

A Tribute

A letter to the Bucks Herald signed by Alderman Mrs O. H. Paterson, chairman of the School Governors and Mr L. W. Tidmarsh, the headmaster also includes a tribute to those who offered to help;

'We trust that this letter may convey our very real thanks to all those who have offered us their help', says the letter, 'and that they, and all those others who have been so kind by word or letter, will understand that it is impossible at present to reply to them individually'.



(above) Extensive damage to the main hall

