

HILLSIDE SCHOOL

*Hillside Avenue, Borehamwood, WD6 1HN
1939-2014*

The Curious Story of the Sandbags in the Roofspace:

*Reproduced for the
Elstree & Borehamwood Museum Exhibition,
to mark the 75th anniversary of the
opening of the School in September, 1939.*

Until 1978, wartime sandbags  *were lying in the Hall roofspace!*



So did they fall, or were they pushed?

*A copy of this and other Exhibition documents can be found on-line, at:
www.robertnewson.co.uk/hillside*

Welcome back to Hillside School!



*This document was prepared in October, 2014 by
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from material presented, given or lent to him
by ex-colleagues and former pupils,
for the 75th Anniversary of the opening of the School
(in September, 1939).*

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“The Curious story of the Sandbags in the Roof-space”

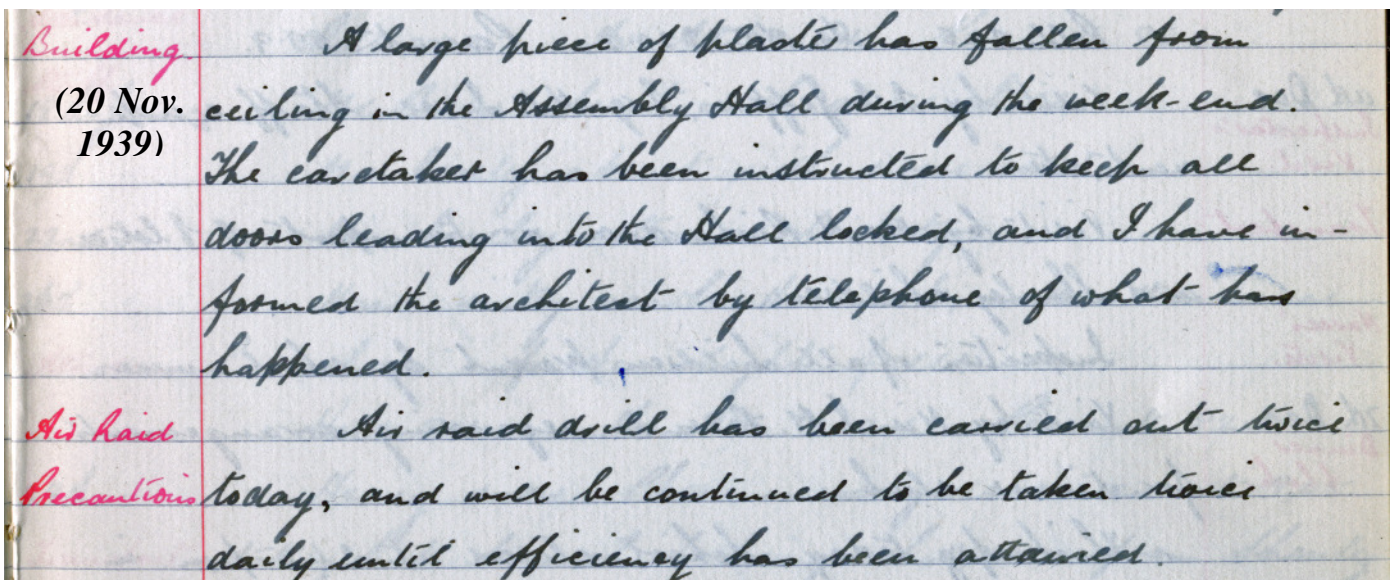
Keith Newson has been researching the first Hillside School Log Book and some of his own headmaster’s Reports to Governors.

I can still remember the day when I first became aware that there were sandbags in the roof-space above the School Hall, no doubt left over from the war. If I remember correctly, above the school stage, and somewhere behind the proscenium arch, there was a set of ladder rungs fixed to the wall in such a way that this could not easily be reached from ground (or first) floor level. The rungs led up to a small door giving access to the roof-space, under the eaves. I had not then climbed up there: when I arrived in January 1970, I assumed that it was not part of my responsibility, as Head, to check the state of the roof, or what had been left in the roof-space! (But I was deluding myself).

Then one day, after school, in 1978, two 5th (or were they 6th?) formers knocked on my door, to tell me that a wartime sandbag had fallen through a hole in the Hall ceiling. I remember going to see the bag as it lay on the parquet floor of the Hall. The boys had been rehearsing with their instruments and their loud amplifiers, for a ‘gig’ that they wanted to play there, and they told me that the bag that had lain above the ceiling must have slipped from the vibration of their music, and broken the hole in the lath-and-plaster ceiling. I told them that the gig would have to be cancelled – or certainly postponed until the ceiling was repaired. They packed up their gear; I believe I then climbed up with Fred Nash (then caretaker) to see for myself the boarded walkway along the length of the loft above the Hall, the laths of the plaster ceiling between the rafters - and yes, several sandbags. We concluded that they were indeed left over from the war, when the school’s ‘firewatchers’ would have been on call to put out fires, if any incendiary bombs scored a direct hit on the roof of the school. My first priorities were to get all sandbags taken down, and the ceiling repaired. I then included this extraordinary accident in my next Report to the Governors, and assured them that such an incident could not occur again.

It did seem possible then that those heavy sandbags had remained up in that loft for 39 years - though almost incredible that one of them could have been shaken off the boarded area onto the ceiling laths by the vibration of those amplifiers, and so had broken through the original ceiling. But surely none of those young musicians would have deliberately climbed up to look round, and then deliberately pushed one of the sandbags off the boarded area whilst his mates were rehearsing below?

I did not then think it relevant to look in the original School Log Book, for evidence of why, how and when the bags might have got there: that seemed obvious. But perhaps I should have studied this entry, handwritten by the Head, Mr Gernat, in November, 1939?



Mr Gernat’s very first log-book entry had been written on 4th September, saying “The

school was due to open today, but remained closed in accordance with instructions received following the Declaration of War on 3rd September.” After listing the newly appointed staff, the Head added that “*The caretaker, Mr Withers, commenced duty on the 14th July 1939*”, and added too that a Miss D Withers commenced her duty as a cleaner on 4th September (she must have been the caretaker’s daughter, or possibly his sister). It is clear from other log-book entries in September and October, that the caretaker and other non-teaching, and possibly teaching, staff had been building “shelters” with sandbags, and putting up blackout curtains, and taking precautions against air raids. From October, the children were gradually moving in (from Furzehill and Shenley Schools), and the Boreham Wood area remained quiet. Most of the children were being taught at the new school building by November, and learning what to do if and when the sirens sounded. And it was then that a large part of the new ceiling just fell down, on to the floor of the Assembly Hall! Mr Gernat did not record how or why that happened, nor what the architect did to prevent it happening again. Could this incident have been caused by those preparations for “air raid precautions”? We know from these early pages of the Log, that the staff (teachers, caretakers and cleaners) were practising routines for future air raids, and that some of them volunteered to be on a rota of “firewatchers”, looking out for bombs (especially unexploded ones), and also incendiaries (or ‘firebombs’) - not to mention listening for the rattles, that the ARP wardens would sound in the event of any gas bombs! (In those days, we had all been issued with gas-masks, which we carried in cardboard boxes hanging from our shoulders.) Were those on the “fire-watch” rotas checking the fire-fighting equipment (water and sand) in the roof-spaces, at the time when part of the ceiling fell down?

Mr Withers only lasted as caretaker for 18 months! On 29th & 31st March, 1941, Mr Gernat wrote this:

29th Mar. 1941	Mr. Withers, caretaker, ceases work here today, having been given notice to leave by the Managers owing to unsatisfactory work. Miss Withers has also handed in her notice to date as from today.
	Mr. Hazard, assistant caretaker, has been appointed caretaker.
31st Mar.	Mrs. E. A. Pales commenced duty in place of Miss Withers as kitchen help and part time cleaner.

In this March 1941 entry, Mr Gernat said Withers was dismissed for “*unsatisfactory work*”. Withers had by then seen the school through the worst of the “Blitzkrieg” in the London area. It is also clear that the period when air-raid alerts were most frequent (night and day) was from August 1940 to the early summer of 1941. But there is no record (in the Log Book) that the school or the grounds ever suffered any direct hit, at that or any other period.

Mr Gernat had offered no further comment or explanation in the November 1939 log-book entry, as to what caused some ceiling plaster to fall down so soon after the original building work finished; and it is true that he did *not* relate *that* incident to Mr Withers’s “*unsatisfactory work*”; so presumably his work was unsatisfactory later, in 1940-41. But could it somehow be Mr Withers’ fault, that there was going to be *another* hole in the ceiling, 15 months after he had been dismissed by the Managers? This time someone *would* be hurt. The plot seems to thicken at this point, in 1942!

On page 33 of the Log Book, in the 16th June 1942 entry, Mr Gernat wrote this:

16th June
1942

During a tour of inspection of area above first floor, while on Fire-Watch duty this evening, Mrs. E. A. Pales missed her footing and fell through ceiling to floor of stage, sustaining serious injuries. After receiving preliminary treatment by party from the First Aid Post, she was taken by ambulance to Wellhouse Hospital, Barnet.

We know from the 29th March 1941 entry that Mr Hazard was now school caretaker: appointed when Mr Withers was sacked. From the 31st March entry, also in 1941, we know the date when Mrs Pales was appointed as “*kitchen help and part-time cleaner*” (to replace Miss Withers). This Mrs Pales must soon have volunteered to be on the rota to do “Fire Watch duty”, in the evenings. Volunteers were still on duty in the roof-space in 1942.

This log-book entry (June 1942) also suggests that some of the “firewatchers” were able to access *all* the dark roof-spaces, including those above the classrooms, as well as those above the hall and stage. Earlier, the log book had recorded frequent air-raid alerts in the night (and a few during the day), but these were mainly in the autumn of 1940 and early in 1941, *not* in 1942. Surely Mr Gernat would have recorded any air-raid that evening, and certainly he *should* have done so, if there had been any kind of ‘hit’ on the school.

Poor Mrs Pales is the only recorded war casualty on the school premises during WW2! The headmaster records that “*she fell through the ceiling to the floor of the stage, sustaining serious injuries*”, when she was making a “*tour of inspection [in the] area above first floor while on fire watch duty this evening.*” Was it Mr Hazard (an ominous name for a caretaker!) who heard her scream as she fell, and who then called a “*party from the First Aid Post*”? I can see no reference to her subsequent recovery, nor find any date when she returned to her cleaning duties. Perhaps she didn’t?

Mr Gernat gives no clear explanation as to how this serious accident occurred – Mrs Pales did not just put her *foot* through the ceiling, she *fell* through the ceiling, bodily! Did she trip over a sandbag up in the roof-space, in the dark? Could there be any connection with the unsafe state of the ceiling as recorded by Gernat back in November, 1939, when he wrote “*a large piece of plaster has fallen from the ceiling the assembly hall during the weekend*” - and gave no explanation? Were there ever any awkward questions asked? One supposes that, in war-time, no-one was going to be prosecuted for negligence, and that Mrs Pales would not have been likely to claim compensation! But we don’t really know.

What we *do* know - and can confirm from one of *my* Reports to the Governors, in 1978, (more than 30 years later) - is that there were *then, still*, war-time sandbags left in the roof-space over the Hall. I was surprised, indeed concerned, to realise this, and I had now seen the one sandbag that fell and the others still in the loft. It didn’t occur to me to get out Mr Gernat’s old log-book! But I obviously had to organise an immediate repair of the ceiling, and formally report the accident in my next Report to the Governors - adding that I had ordered the caretaker, now Mr Nash, to remove any remaining sandbags at once. The ceiling was repaired, and I think the ‘gig’ eventually went ahead. I believe I also wrote a ‘script’ about the incident for a school assembly (but sadly I cannot now find it). This is how the ‘accident’ has been recorded, from 1978 up until early 2014. But I had sometimes wondered, looking back, just what it was that caused that sandbag to fall: did it just slip down, with the vibration from the pop music - or was it somehow pushed?

However, *now*, in May 2014, thanks to the following Facebook dialogue with Lesley De

Meza (who was teaching English at Hillside in the 1970s), we are at last getting a little nearer to the real (if still not the whole) truth! Here is a transcript of a recent on-line discussion between Lesley and three of our former pupils, or students, two of whom were personally involved in the 1978 incident:

Joe Rumsey: Lesley, I hope Keith is well, I did like him. The only time I was in his office was to beg, and we did beg to play the gig we had been rehearsing for in the school hall when Paul Taylor put his foot through the ceiling. I had no idea he was in the loft when suddenly dust was falling from the ceiling as his foot came through. Sorry, I'm laughing to myself as I'm writing. I knew this wouldn't go down well. We had to make up some plausible explanation as to why there was a hole in the ceiling. We came up with the idea that the sand bags in the loft, left over from the war were vibrated by the loud noise from the amps and one of them displaced itself and fell through the ceiling. Ridiculous I know, but it was the best we could come up with. The following day the gig was cancelled because of the hole in the ceiling. We really wanted to play the gig so I tried to convince Keith that it was a freak accident. I'm sure he saw right through me but also saw what it meant to me to do the show. He let us play. For that I will be always grateful

Phil Pearce: I too was there on that fateful day, I remember going on the offensive with Keith, saying how could he leave sandbags in the ceiling since the war? He was not amused and was saying he wasn't born yesterday. Happy days!

This Facebook dialogue had begun with an announcement by Lesley De Meza of the death of Jane Mancus, Deputy Headmistress at that period. Mark Poole was not involved in this gig at that time (in 1978), but he soon joined in the discussion as follows (coming rather generously, I thought, to my defence):

Mark Poole: I might be wrong and forgive me if I am....Mr Newson was of a new and more liberal kind of headmaster, similar to Mr Willis at Holmshill.....and had a dislike of the cane and such ...Julian Marcus and Jane Mancus were on hand to deliver the relevant levels of corporal punishment deemed necessary in that day and age. If I remember rightly the offence had to be extremely serious to warrant a caning: as far as I'm aware the cane was only used once in my 5 years at Hillside.

What I do remember in Mr. Newson was a headmaster passionate about English literature. He only taught Eng Lit to A level students in a teaching role but those lessons gave us an insight into the richness of the English language. Mr Newson coached us on DH Lawrence's "The Rainbow" which was part of our A level syllabus; in a subtle way he expressed the need to embrace the metaphysical aspects of the prose, and feel the emotion behind the words; his key words at the time were 'empathy' and 'pathos'.

Lesley De Meza: He was and is an English scholar. He wrote "The Art of English," which I certainly used as a classroom text book...& you're absolutely right about the cane, he loathed it.

Mark Poole: His passion for the English language shone through; you could hear a pin drop during one of Mr. Newson's tutorials.

I am grateful, and touched, by these and many other messages that I've recently received. (But none yet from Paul Taylor, confessing that he tripped over a sandbag and put his foot through the ceiling!). But perhaps the 1978 Head could have the last word on this story? I can only dimly remember interviewing the boys who were rehearsing for that gig, and it is only now, in 2014, that I learn whose foot it was that came through the Hall ceiling that day! And perhaps I was only 'born yesterday'? History is composed of a mix of unreliable memories, biased records, and partial truths. But I do believe I wanted to give those 5th and 6th formers the chance to perfect their skills and use their talents in a variety of ways (as well as in their English exams). Was that really so "new" and "liberal" at that time, in the late 1970s?