



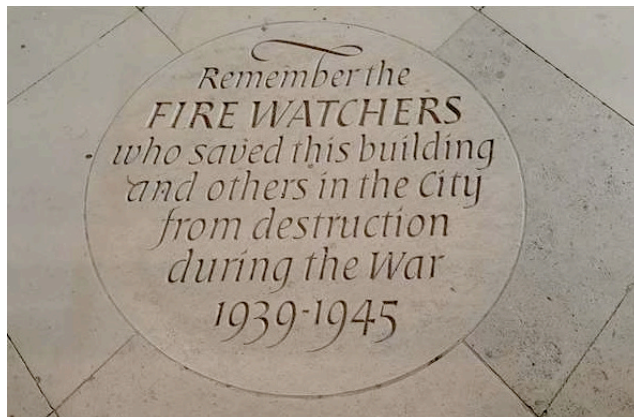
The Canterbury Fire Watchers, 1939 - 42

EPISODE TWO:

The Canterbury Fire Watchers

At the west end of Canterbury Cathedral, just inside the huge main doors, is a round stone plaque placed in the floor that reads, "Remember the FIRE WATCHERS who saved this building and others in the City from destruction during the War 1939-1945."

It commemorates a group of men who, during the air raids of the Blitz, stood watch on the roof of Canterbury Cathedral, prepared to shovel incendiary bombs over the edge in order to prevent the cathedral from burning. Organized by Dean Hewlett Johnson (who was known as "The Red Dean" for his socialist sympathies), their heroism was profound: through the nights when the Luftwaffe dropped not only incendiary but high explosive bombs, specifically targeting the cathedral, they put their lives at risk to save it. In the end, the library was destroyed, but remarkably the cathedral itself survived.



The story is one of both the depths of perversity to which human beings can sink, and of what they can achieve through perseverance to a high calling. On the dark side, the attacks were part of what came to be known as the "Baedeker Raids," when the German air force maliciously targeted culturally significant monuments (based on what they found in the Baedeker guide books), hoping to break the spirit of the British people.

Canterbury Cathedral was one of them: the city had no military significance, but was subjected to numerous bombing raids in an attempt to destroy the symbolic center not only of the Church of England, but the global Anglican Communion. The cathedral is a building that wears its historical wounds quite openly, from the shrine of Thomas Becket destroyed by Henry VIII (now marked with a perpetually burning candle), to medieval stained glass windows poked out by the Puritans, to the ravages of modern day pollution. Yet never had its very existence been so threatened.

Yet the building is more than an architectural wonder, and the loyalty and commitment it inspires run deep. Just inside its main entrance, a small sign reads, "In this place, daily prayer has been offered for over 1400 years." That daily rhythm, still very much alive, has sanctified the space with a timeless sense of the holy. And perhaps it was an awareness of the value of the sacred, earned through all those centuries of prayer, that most inspired the fire watchers.

As Robert Willis, current dean of the cathedral, tells the story, on one of the worst nights of bombing (June 1 – 2, 1942), many of the city's residents sought safety in shelters, and heard the bombs falling with such ferocity that they were sure that the next morning they would emerge to find the cathedral destroyed. The destruction in the city that night was intense, but the fire watchers remained at their posts on the roof, shoveling off countless chandelier incendiaries. When dawn finally came, "Bell Harry" (the enormous bell that hangs in the imposing central tower) rang out as usual the call to daily prayer, and everyone knew the cathedral had been saved. The Chapter gathered at the appointed hour to recite the morning office.

One final comment: aside from the heroic side to this story, it also offers a dramatic portrayal of the importance of daily, common prayer in our Anglican tradition. The regularity of offering praise to God, hearing the reading of scripture, and pouring out our prayers of petition and thanksgiving, is a rhythm that carries both individuals and the community through the best, and the worst, of times. No wonder that it is so much a part of the daily routine at St. Michael's—now even online each weekday at 8 am!



The destruction of the city of Canterbury, 1942, with the unscathed cathedral in the background.

For an oral history account of the bombing (including how Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple and his wife fought the fires in their pajamas, and how a hen named Hetty contributed to the war effort), go to:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/62/a3453662.shtml>