

Express and Echo, 23 January 1945

Shobrooke Park Mansion Gutted

TWO BOYS LOSE THEIR LIVES

Shobrooke Park, a century old mansion near Crediton, one of the best known seats in Devon, was gutted by fire which occurred during the early hours of this morning, and all that remains of the large fifty-roomed house is the gaunt shell of masonry.

With the building used during the war by an evacuated boys' preparatory school, went practically the whole of the contents, which included school equipment, clothing, the school records and valuable pictures which belonged to Sir John Shelley, Bart., owner of the mansion and estate.

BODIES FOUND

At the school, one of the most famous in the country, and at which the Duke of Gloucester and the late Duke of Kent received their early education, were about seventy boys and staff, and it is known that two of the scholars lost their lives. In addition a nurse named Bell was still missing at mid-day.

The charred remains of a body were recovered during the late morning. At noon a second body was found, and it is thought that both victims, trapped in one of the smoke filled rooms soon after the outbreak were overcome before they could make their escape.

SEARCH GOES ON

Meantime, firemen and police are continuing the search for the nurse who is feared to be lost.

The fire was discovered at about 4 o'clock, and soon after, according to the headmaster, the mansion was a blazing inferno. The suddenness of the outbreak and the rapid spread of the flames destroyed the telephone system. Communication by this means was cut off and consequently delayed the flashing of the alarm, which was first given by a scholar who, scantily clad, raced along country roads to Crediton over a mile distant.

SHEET LADDERS

Back at the mansion, the boys and staff were faced with many perils. As the flames raged with ever-increasing fury, the immediate task was that of getting the scholars from the blazing building to the safety of the surrounding grounds. Improvised ladders, made from sheets, were hurriedly suspended from burning and smoke-filled rooms on the upper storeys. Many boys made the hazardous descent, hand over hand, in complete safety, but a few, presumed to have leapt from parapets and windows, received injuries. So did a number of teachers and members of the domestic staff.

As far as is known, five adults and four children were brought in Crediton and Exeter St John ambulances to the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, some suffering from burns.

INJURED

The detained are Martin Syngé, 53, fractured leg; Dorothy Hunt, about 40, injured spine; Eugene Baker, 53; Rachel Wright, 22 and Doris Nott, 20 – suffering from burns- David Corbett 8 shock and cuts; Charles Cox, 9, cuts, Peter Charlesworth, 9, burns. Another boy, aged 10, suffered from cuts on the face.

When they received the alarm, the fire-fighters reacted promptly, and the Crediton N.F.S. were attacking the fire with the minimum of delay. Ample supply was available from a lake near the mansion, but hard though the firemen worked, the task of saving the buildings and contents was an impossible one.

Besides the Crediton firemen, other contingents were sent later from Exeter, Topsham and Tiverton. The combined efforts of the firemen could do no more than control the flames and prevent them from spreading to buildings in close proximity. Moreover the members of the N.F.S. with the police, who were also early on duty, did much noble work in rescuing boys as tongues of flame leapt dangerously close.

One party of eighteen boys was rescued by firemen from a pillared porch over the main entrance.

CREDITON SCHOOLS HELP

Early offers from the Queen Elizabeth Grammar School and the Crediton High School happily went a long way to solve the problem of accommodating and giving food and shelter to the luckless victims of the Shobrooke fire. Scholars and members of the staff were taken to Crediton by a service of motor cars which journeyed to and fro at frequent intervals.

The headmaster of the school was seen at the Lodge by an "Express and Echo" reporter. A blanket draped around his shoulders he said, "My wife went round the house at 2 o'clock to make sure everything was in order: by 4.30 it was a blazing inferno."

Sir John Shelley was among those early on the scene and expressed the opinion that the fire might have originated in the nursery block, on the ground floor. Near this was a muniment room, and although the school records were all lost, Sir John thought that some of his own private papers might have been saved.

SHELLEY FAMILY HOME

Fire operations were directed by Fire Force Commander F. Winteringham, accompanied by other principal officers, and others early on the spot were the Chief Constable of Devon (Major L.H.Morris) Supt. B.M. Beynon, Insp. W.J.Hutchings, Sergt. Phillips and several constables, and the Rev. C.C.Kelway (Rector of Shobrooke).

Shobrooke Park was for many years the home of the Shelley family, for long associated with the public life of the county. The mansion stood in an undulating park studded with fine oak, beech and other trees, with a large ornamental lake in its centre.

Recently the County Council adopted a scheme to set up a farm institute at the Park to be used for training ex-Servicemen, and afterwards taken over by the Council.