

Meg Hargrove



This is the first of an occasional series about the five civilian names on the All Saints Church WW2 memorial. Ladies first of course, so I thought I'd start with Mabel Hargrove, known as Meg, who was killed in the Café de Paris bombing in March 1941.

This was the tragic incident in which Ken "Snakehips" Johnson also died. Ken attended Borlase School from 1929 to 1931 and became a professional bandleader after university. He and his swing jazz band, the West Indian Dance Orchestra, were playing on stage at about 9.45pm that evening when two 50kg high explosive bombs crashed down the ventilation shaft through the floors above. The first bomb exploded at ground floor level in the gallery above the band. All band members including Ken were killed outright

with the exception of the guitarist who amazingly survived. The second bomb landed in the centre of the dance floor and failed to explode, but fragmented on impact. It was



almost certainly the second which fatally injured Meg and she was taken to Charing Cross Hospital where she died later that evening, aged 33. Total casualties amounted to 100 people, with 34 of those killed. The air raids that night were reckoned the worst

since early January but not on the scale of those during the London Blitz of the previous year.

It's not clear why Meg was at the club that Saturday evening or who she was with. A report by a civil defence officer at the scene said that a notable feature was the number of young girls in evening dress who were injured, most of them accompanied by young officers on leave. There was certainly a determination amongst many club-goers to try to carry on regardless of the nightly bombing in central London. The club advertised itself as the safest place to dance and dine in London, and one female guest later remembered: "Although the Blitz was happening outside, you felt quite safe because you were underground, away from where the bombs were landing". On the other hand, the superstitious kept away from the Café de Paris because the restaurant-cum-dance floor was said to resemble the style of the Titanic's ballroom, even down to the colours of the furnishings and glassware.



The actor Ballard Berkeley, who later played the dotty major in Fawlty Towers, was a reserve constable in the area during the war. The horrors he saw that night remained with him and others for the rest of their lives. He regretfully commented on the looting and theft from the bodies which occurred as they were removed, but he also reflected on the bravery and the good things that happened generally during the war.

Meg had joined the Auxiliary Fire Service after it was formed in 1938 and at the time of the bombing, she was resident at an AFS hostel in Sloane Square. Her father was Lieutenant Colonel Brian Bartley CBE who had a distinguished military career in both the Boer War and WW1, but during WW2 her parents were resident in South Africa. Meg was well connected socially and in June 1930 she had married solicitor Frank Hargrove in a society wedding in Hawkhurst in Kent.

It was her father-in-law who arranged for her name to be included on our war memorial. He had retired from his London law practice to a Victorian villa on Little Marlow Road named Kiama. The substantial house was next door to the Quarry Laundry in the stretch of road between Newtown Road and the BP garage, and was later demolished along with the laundry to make way for the Findlay Mews Housing Estate.

In addition to Marlow, where she is one of only two women recorded on our memorial, Meg is also commemorated on the Firefighter's Memorial near St Paul's Cathedral. The Café de Paris closed its doors in December 2020 after 96 glitzy years, surviving total war but finally dealt a death blow by the Covid epidemic.



Geoff Wood