

Arthur Harris and Leo Ryan

For my final article in this occasional series about the five civilian names on our war memorial in All Saints Church, my subject is two men who both died in bombing attacks in the same month, though many miles apart.

Leo Ryan was the only wartime fatality in Marlow caused as a direct result of enemy action. His story has been well covered in recent times by Michael Eagleton in his Marlow Free Press articles, and I wrote about him in my newsletter article in autumn 2021 about bombing incidents in our area. There is also an article about him on the excellent Chalfont Crew website, see:

<http://www.chalfontcrew.plus.com/page29.html>

Mr Ryan died on 30th September 1940 and lies buried with his son in our cemetery. He is always smiling in photographs and I think he must have been a happy man, as shown in this photo.



Leo Ryan Marlow Working Mans Cricket Club 1940

Four days earlier, Arthur George Harris was in his office at the Vickers-Armstrong Supermarine Works at Woolston in Southampton, where he was the Head Storekeeper. For months his company had been working flat out making the Spitfire, but constant air raid warnings caused production to falter as workers streamed out to the shelters. So, in late August the decision was made that aircraft workers should continue working even when the town's sirens sounded the warning. They had to wait until the last minute.



The Stores Building 1936

The Woolston Works were vulnerable, very vulnerable. Their location on the banks of the Itchen, alongside the naval shipbuilder Thornycrofts, and across from the docks and gas works, made them a prime target for the Luftwaffe. Everyone knew it. The air raid shelters, on Peartree Green, were too far away and took time to reach. Then, early in the afternoon of Tuesday 24th September 1940, a force of German bombers attacked Southampton and Supermarine's Itchen Works. By the end of the afternoon 42 men and women were killed with 174 wounded across the town, among them 29 from Supermarine.

Two days later, at 4PM on Thursday 26th, the Luftwaffe returned, and this time the attack involved over sixty bombers with fighter escorts. Arthur, aged just 32, was almost certainly killed by a bomb that fell on the new Stores building in the south-eastern corner of the works. After the rubble had been cleared, the top two floors of the stores no longer existed. That day's attacks ended the lives of another 55 men, women and children, including 20 from Supermarine.

An hour and a half later, Arthur's body was taken to the nearby Itchen Secondary School where a temporary mortuary had been set up. There he was formally identified by his father George who collected the body the next day, and on 1st October Arthur was laid to rest in a family grave at St Mary Extra Cemetery in Woolston.

Arthur had no direct connection with Marlow and I believe that it must have been his mother, Clara, who arranged for his name to be recorded on our memorial. Clara Rebecca Gill was born in 1879 at Queen's Road in Wheeler End and married George Harris at Wycombe in 1904. He was a carpenter and I guess that the family moved round a lot in search of work. George died in Reading less than a year after his son, whilst Clara was living at that time at 30 Oxford Road in Marlow.

Our five civilian casualties of World War II then, all living such different lives, meeting their ends in such varied places around the world. Four killed by bombs, one by a torpedo sinking his ship. All were in the service of their country, either in their day jobs or in their voluntary service out of work, and I hope that they would all be proud to be remembered forever on our war memorial.

Geoff Wood April 2024