

Fire at RAF Biggin Hill Chapel, 2/3 December 1946

The cause of the fire which destroyed the original RAF Chapel of Remembrance at Biggin Hill has been regarded as a mystery for many years. It has been variously attributed to a faulty electric kettle, more general electrical problems and even to the result of gang warfare between gangs in Bromley and Biggin Hill.

The truth has been sitting undiscovered in the National Archives at Kew since 1998 when a file, AIR 2/13900, containing the report of the Court of Inquiry into the fire was declassified.

The Court of Inquiry was assembled on 4 December 1946 by order of Air Commodore Sir Harry Broadhurst, AOC No.61 (Eastern Reserve) Group for the purpose of "investigating and reporting on an outbreak of fire involving the Memorial Chapel at Royal Air Force Station, BIGGIN HILL".

The facts disclosed were as follows:

At 19:30 on Monday, 2 December 1946, there was a Gramophone Recital in the Georges Room, part of the Chapel screened by curtains. It was organised by F/O New, who was temporarily in command of the personnel selection course. He was assisted by AC2 Haslam. The only other RAF person present was Rev Cecil King, the Station Church of England Chaplain. There were also approximately 30 civilians from Biggin Hill village present.

Just after 21:00, it became apparent that there was some smoke behind No. 1 Stove between an asbestos panel behind the stove and the inner wall to which it was attached. All three RAF personnel went outside, and a fire extinguisher was used on the wall of the building behind the stove. They believed that the source of the smoke had been extinguished and returned inside where the Recital continued until approximately 22:10.

After tidying up, the Rev King and F/O New looked at the stoves to ensure they were out and then inspected the outside of the building which had been smouldering earlier. There was no evidence of further smouldering and the stove pipe was fairly warm but not hot. They left at 22:35 and decided not to report the problem, believing it could wait until the following morning.

The Court of Inquiry found that the original fire had been subdued but not extinguished. It subsequently developed to such an extent that by 02:48 on 3 December 1946, the entire building was ablaze.

It was the opinion of the Court of Inquiry that the fire was caused as a direct result of No. 1 Stove being installed in such a manner that the stove pipe was in dangerous proximity to the paper boarding forming the lining of the Chapel wall. It recommended disciplinary action against AA Borer, Clerk of Works, employed by the Air Ministry Works Directorate, which installed the stoves without due regard to fire precautions, and the NCO i/c Guardroom and the Duty Telephone Operator for not taking action in accordance with Station Fire Orders.

The file was reviewed by Wing Commander GJ Spence, the Station Commander of RAF Biggin Hill. He concurred with the above findings, although he said that the actions of the NCO i/c Guardroom and the Duty Telephone Operator had no adverse effect in the action taken to deal with the fire.

The file was further reviewed by Air Commodore Broadhurst. He agreed with the findings of the Court of Inquiry and recommended that disciplinary action should be taken against the Clerk of Works. He added: "Although the Court of Inquiry exposes slight inefficiencies in the organisation of R.A.F. Biggin Hill, it is not considered that these are of any great importance, and can be excused by the great shortage of manpower, and inexperienced personnel in the Service today."