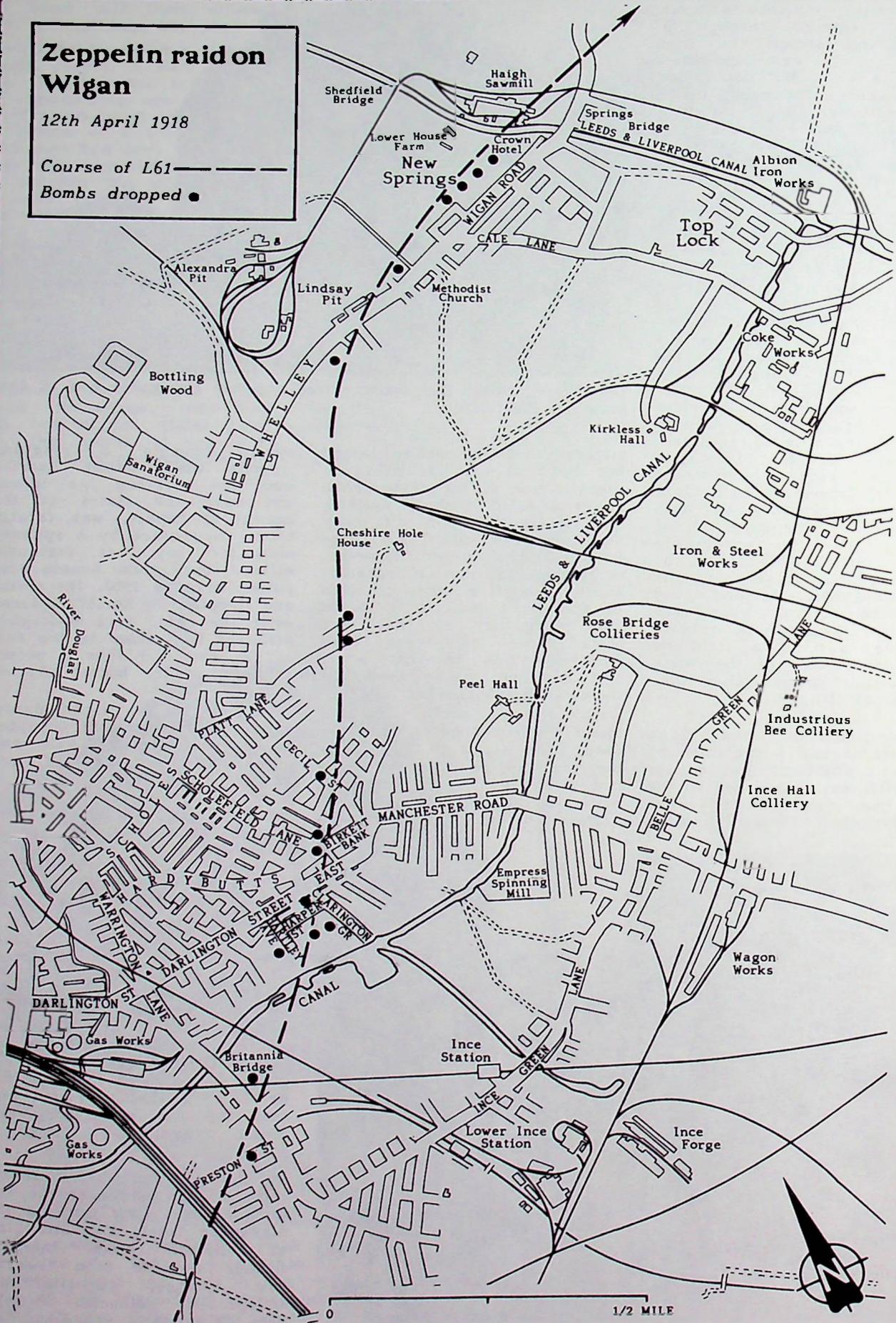


Zeppelin raid on Wigan

12th April 1918

Course of L61 ————

Bombs dropped ●



doomed buildings with more or less shock and their injuries were, if anything, but slight."

"The lack of response of two elderly people, a man and his wife, led to close scrutiny of the surrounding area with the aid of storm lamps and there at the bottom of a deep pit from which clay had been extensively excavated, lay two bodies from the bedroom they are supposed to have occupied immediately before the explosion and from which they had obviously been hurled along with articles in usual bedroom use such as clothing."

"Medical men were at once appraised and an examination of the two showed that life was extinct and that much personal mutilation had followed the explosion. As to the three houses themselves, they had been broken up; slates hung from the apices of the previously linked up property; the



The Wigan raid. Bomb damage near the "Big Lamp". This photograph, taken from Birkett Bank, shows part of Scholefield Lane. The building on the left is a former public house, the Raven, which closed in 1906



The "Big Lamp" at the Birkett Bank end of Hardybutts was one of three large gas lamps which illuminated the winding course of Hardybutts. Each was set in the roadway on a stone base to protect it from the wheels of passing traffic. This lamp, photographed in the 1920s, stood at the Wellington Street/Cambridge Street intersection. (The building is the Wigan Arms on the corner of Wellington Street.) The third lamp was at the junction with Warrington Lane

front and back walls had been altogether thrown asunder and a clear space was almost all that remained of the three dwellings. In the hole in which the bodies were found, large quantities of bricks and mortar had been pitched and rested up the sides to the top of the cavity."

In the ruins of one of the three houses the police found a fox terrier bitch which at first could not be induced to come out. It was found that she had with her a litter of pups, illustrating the strength of maternal fidelity.

At the junction of Hardybutts, Birkett Bank and Scholefield Lane stood the "Big Lamp", a cast-iron street gaslight of unusual size, which was used as a local meeting place. This received a near or direct hit from the next bomb and lethal fragments of the lamp severely pitted surrounding buildings. One splinter of the lamp, or of the bomb, entered through a fanlight and stopped the clock at the end of the lobby in the Birkett Bank Hotel. Another bomb at Birkett Bank exploded on the cobbled street and flung the heavy stone setts against nearby brickwork, causing deep pitting, while yet another bomb in nearby Cecil Street added to the toll of smashed window and door frames, damaged roofs and accumulated debris resulting from the explosions.

There were several narrow escapes but an occupant of one cottage had to be taken to hospital unconscious and seriously injured about the face. In the front bedroom of another,

an elderly man was hurt when a projectile, probably a bomb splinter, entered through a window and struck the iron bedrail. It was deflected through a wall, but not before it had grazed the man's forehead, although his wife was untouched. Another man, who was sitting in the front room of a neighbouring house, was blown with part of the dividing wall into the back room. His only injuries were a scratch or two, which he afterwards said were of less consequence to him than the loss of his pipe.

After a slight pause, a further bomb marked the continued progress of L61 when it exploded opposite the gable end of a detached house at the bottom of Platt Lane, blowing a crater in the unpaved roadway. The explosion killed Mrs Margaret Ashurst, a mother of five and the wife of a miner. One of the children, later Mrs Elizabeth Brindle, remembers the "tremendous bang" right outside her window. On this occasion the structure of the building stood up remarkably well, probably because the missile penetrated deeper into the ground before exploding so that more of the blast was deflected upwards. A further explosive cratered a field on the opposite side of the house but without any additional damage resulting.

Of this incident, the Wigan Examiner says, "In one dwelling a woman and her four months old child occupied a bed in the lower front room and from what has happened there it would



The Wigan raid. The bomb crater opposite the gable end of the house in Platt Lane

suggest that the woman raised her head in bed, no doubt in astonishment of the noise, when a fragment of bomb or splinter shot across the room, cut away her face and killed her immediately. The infant, however, escaped with just a scratch. There were five other children in the place and it is stated that altogether at that time there were no fewer than fourteen souls in that house and only one was released from its earthly tabernacle."

Still flying north, Ehrlich found Whelley Brow on the main road from Wigan to Aspull. At the rear of No.187, one of a row of twelve houses (Morson's Row) facing the Lindsay Pit gates, another of his bombs

burst, causing a singular tragedy when Walter Harris, who was carrying his infant son down the stairs at the moment of impact, was fatally hit in the stomach by a splinter and the boy was instantly killed. (Until these houses were pulled down in 1960, the stairs and fireplace at No.187, replaced after the raid, were noticeably different from those in the rest of the row and thus a potent reminder of the horror enacted there.)

According to the Wigan Examiner, "The house was occupied by a man and his wife and child. The male parent was carrying the child down to what was considered a place of safety, a fragment of something appears to have struck him in the abdomen and there was also a wound in the man's hand as though he had been trying to save the little one from danger."

The local GP, Doctor Girdwood, was accompanied on his round, giving first aid to the injured, by his assistant, Mr P W Wellings. Many years later Mr Wellings recalled attending at 187 Whelley Brow where, having given such aid as he could for Mr Harris's stomach wound and sent for the ambulance, the doctor remarked, "He's a goner".

Mr Wellings remembered debris lying in the road near the Von Blucher Hotel (now renamed the Alexandra Hotel) and attending at another bomb incident further up the road towards New Springs, opposite the Independent Methodist Church. Here he found a young man of about twenty years of age whose injury had been caused by a bomb splinter which had



The Wigan raid. Photograph taken from Hardybutts, looking up Birkett Bank Terrace. The gable end of the Raven is on the left, Birkett Bank on the right

Continuing northwards, Ehrlich soon spotted a glare from the six blast furnaces of the Wigan Coal & Iron Company (known locally as "Top Place") at Kirkless on the eastern outskirts of Wigan, where no warning of an impending air raid was given. Ehrlich could perhaps be forgiven for mistakenly entering in his log that he had bombed Sheffield, rather than Wigan.

Approaching from the south over the Warrington road, L61 released its first bomb of the attack which struck Preston Street (since eliminated by redevelopment), just short of the Britannia canal bridge and railway bridge. One of the houses in Preston Street was damaged. A second missile, released fractionally later, caused damage to a signal box set on the embankment just to the east of the bridge.

Continuing on his northerly course, Ehrlich released a salvo of bombs as he crossed the Leeds & Liverpool Canal and these straddled Darlington Street East. The first failed to explode when it fell at the bottom of Hartley Avenue, but the next three had more serious results. One exploded in the angle between Harper Street and Clarington Grove, making a crater eight feet wide and six feet deep in open ground which had a brook running through it. (The brook has since been culverted and the land turned into a playing



The Wigan raid. The destruction in Harper Street. The buildings in the background are on Darlington Street East

field.) Another fell on the same ground but only a few yards from Clarington Grove and is well remembered by Mr Jack McCann, who as an eight-year-old boy lived at No.23, the house opposite the crater. He didn't hear the bomb explode as the window frame of his bedroom was blown in and struck his head, knocking him unconscious. His uncle rushed to his aid and carried him from the debris. His uncle's words, "Thank God he's alive," were still clear in Mr McCann's mind seventy-three years after the event.

The fourth missile hit a terraced house in Harper Street, the

home of Mr Tomlinson, a gas meter inspector, and his wife. Both died instantly when they were blown, with their bed, completely out of the building. Their house and the two adjacent ones were wrecked but subsequently rebuilt. One of the neighbours, Mrs Mary Helen More, who survived, was a devout Roman Catholic and it was noted that upon her ruined wall a picture of Christ with a crown of thorns hung intact and exposed to the public view. Another surviving neighbour was a noted herbalist, Mr Unsworth. Mr Marshall Sutcliffe, who had a prosperous tripe business, was particularly active in the release of the trapped victims. Mr John Baldwin, writing in 1978, claimed that his wife was living in property on Darlington Street, backing on to Harper Street, which was damaged by the blast. He went on to say that his wife was again "bombed out", albeit from different premises, in the Second World War and he wondered if she might have gained something of a record with these two events.

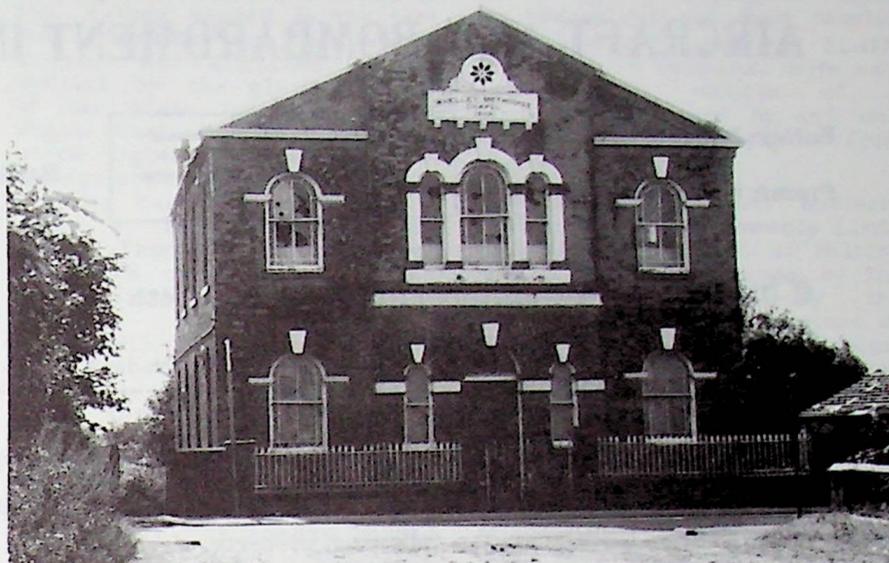
The Wigan Examiner of 16th April 1918 was subject to the usual wartime censorship constraints over publication of place names, but reported the Harper Street area incidents, saying, "The first place to cause serious attention was where three dwelling houses, not many years standing, facing an open space, had been absolutely razed to the ground. In the darkness the work of search was carried on with difficulty but there was no room left for doubt that at least some of the occupants had suffered the worst. Those who could move had escaped the



Houses on Harper Street, Wigan, in 1991. Those on the left were rebuilt after the L61 raid

entered his clog and come out at the other side, severely cutting his foot. After treating him, Dr Girdwood told the injured man, "The army won't be getting you for some time".

Mr Wellings remarked that the blast furnaces at Top Place were operated on a batch system, so that at intervals the tops were opened for the feeding in of fresh charges of raw materials. When opened, the furnaces emitted huge flames for two or three minutes, lighting up the whole neighbourhood; there then followed a longer period of comparative darkness. Mr Wellings thought that it must have been the feeding of the furnaces that attracted Ehrlich from afar, and that the shutting up of these caused the airship to pass them by on a course to the west and thus misplace his bombs on the unfortunate citizens of east Wigan.



Whelley Methodist Church, still standing but derelict in 1991

Turning gradually eastwards over New Springs, L61 released four large 250-kilogram bombs which fell along the line of a brook which still wends its way behind the Crown Hotel on the Wigan side of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal bridge at New Springs, hard by the bridge approach ramp. One of the craters which was gouged into the banking of the brook is still clearly visible. When made, it was on the edge of some allotments and the bomb, and another close by, destroyed about a dozen greenhouses and their contents. The other two missiles broke down a roadside wall and cratered a rhubarb patch. Blast injured four people

and caused some superficial damage to property. The bombardment of Wigan, which began at 11.33pm, ended here at 11.45pm. In all, five people were killed and nine injured during its course.

The Wigan Examiner reported that the inquest on the five victims was opened on the afternoon of Monday 15th April. "The coroner said that on the night of the 12th this country was visited by enemy aircraft and that a series of bombs were dropped in different parts. These bombs exploded and the explosions were responsible for the deaths of five persons, a man of 49 years of

age, his wife 58 years of age (Mr and Mrs Tomlinson), as well as another man 31 years of age (Mr Walter Harris) and his son not yet five months old and a married woman 34 years of age (Mrs Margaret Ashurst). It is our duty to enquire into the causes and circumstances of the deaths of these persons."

"This afternoon I do not think we can usefully do more than first of all express the hope that those who have been injured are making satisfactory progress towards recovery; therefore after taking evidence of identification I propose to adjourn the inquest for a week. Many of the witnesses are suffering at this time from



The rear of the Crown Hotel, New Springs, photographed from the towpath of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal in 1991. The line of the brook, where four of L61's bombs fell, is now overgrown with weeds. The arrow indicates the position of the crater still visible in the north bank.