



In Focus

Bombing of the Houses of Parliament: 75th Anniversary

On 10 May 1941, incendiary and high-explosive bombs were dropped on the Palace of Westminster, destroying the House of Commons Chamber and damaging the House of Lords Chamber, Westminster Hall and the Clock Tower.¹ The air raid was part of the Luftwaffe's (German Air Force) campaign of sustained aerial bombing attacks on Britain, known as the Blitz.² The attack launched by the Luftwaffe on 10 May 1941 was its biggest air raid on London during the Second World War. It resulted in 1,436 civilian deaths, and caused damage to a number of other buildings including Westminster Abbey and the British Museum.³ As a result of the damage to the Commons Chamber, between late June 1941 and October 1950, the House of Commons sat in the House of Lords Chamber, and the House of Lords sat in the Robing Room.⁴ The architect, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, was appointed to design the overall architectural scheme and interior of the new Chamber, and it was officially opened by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth on 26 October 1950.

London and the Blitz

The 'Blitz', derived from the German term Blitzkrieg ('lightning war'), was a period of strategic aerial bombing attacks on Britain.⁵ These were carried out by the Luftwaffe between September 1940 and May 1941. The Blitz began on 7 September 1940, when German bombers attacked London, killing 430 people and injuring 1,600. London was then bombed for 57 consecutive nights. The biggest air raid on London took place on 10–11 May 1941, when the Luftwaffe dropped 711 tons of high explosives and 2,393 incendiaries. It resulted in 1,436 civilian deaths, and caused damage to a number of buildings including Westminster Abbey, the British Museum and the Houses of Parliament.⁶

Houses of Parliament and the Blitz

Between 1940 and 1941 both Houses of Parliament convened at Church House in Westminster because of concerns that the Chambers would be bombed while the Houses were sitting.⁷ The Palace of Westminster was damaged by air raids on 14 different occasions during the Second World War. However, the air raid which started on 10 May 1941 caused the greatest damage.

Houses of Parliament Bombing: May 1941

On Saturday 10 May 1941, incendiary and high-explosive bombs were dropped on the Palace, setting both the Commons Chamber and the roof of Westminster Hall on fire.⁸ The fire service decided that it would not be possible to save both, and was directed by Walter Elliot, a former Cabinet Minister, to save Westminster Hall rather than the Chamber.⁹ The Commons Chamber was entirely destroyed by the fire which spread to the Members' Lobby and caused the ceiling to collapse.¹⁰ A reporter at the time described the level of damage to the House of Commons Chamber:

The Chamber [...] was completely destroyed in Saturday night's raid. Not since the fire of 1834, which destroyed the old Palace, has there been such a scene of ruin on this historic site. Only a

shell of this part of the building remains; and the broken walls stand sentinel over an interior mass of debris in which steel girders, charred timbers, and masses of masonry have engulfed the green benches, the galleries, the Speaker's chair, and the table of the House.¹¹

The library of the House and most of the other rooms used by ministers and Members “escaped damage”.¹² The House of Lords Chamber was struck by a bomb which passed through its floor without exploding.¹³ The thrones occupied by the King and Queen at state opening and most of the red leather benches “remained intact”.¹⁴ In the Law Lords' corridor a “mass of fallen masonry showed that worse damage had been done on the east side of the building”. A small bomb also struck the Clock Tower and broke the glass on its south face.¹⁵ The clock and bells were undamaged and the chimes continued to be broadcast.

It was reported at the time, that Captain Elliot, the resident superintendent of the House of Lords, was killed at his post while assisting with fire-fighting operations, and that two members of the Police War Reserve and one custodian were also killed.¹⁶

Rebuilding the House of Commons Chamber

Immediately after the attack, the House of Commons and the House of Lords held their sittings in Church House.¹⁷ However, from late June 1941 until October 1950, the Commons met in the Lords Chamber, while the Lords sat in the Robing Room.

A select committee, established to consider plans for rebuilding the House of Commons Chamber, recommended that it be rebuilt with the “essential features” of the destroyed Chamber.¹⁸ The architect, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, was appointed to design the overall architectural scheme and interior of the new Chamber. The foundation stone was laid by the Speaker Clifton Brown on 26 May 1948 and it was officially opened by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth on 26 October 1950.

¹ Parliament website, '[Bomb Damage](#)', accessed 29 April 2016; and *Times*, 'London's Latest Ordeal', 13 May 1941.

² Imperial War Museums, '[The Blitz Around Britain](#)', accessed 3 May 2016.

³ *ibid*; and *Times*, '33 of London's Raiders Shot Down', 12 May 1941, p 4.

⁴ Parliament website, '[Bomb Damage](#)', accessed 29 April 2016.

⁵ Imperial War Museums, '[The Blitz Around Britain](#)', accessed 3 May 2016.

⁶ *ibid*; and *Times*, '33 of London's Raiders Shot Down', 12 May 1941, p 4.

⁷ Parliament website, '[Bomb Damage](#)', accessed 29 April 2016.

⁸ Parliament website, '[Westminster Hall: The Second World War and After](#)', accessed 29 April 2016.

⁹ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 'Walter Elliot', accessed 29 April 2016.

¹⁰ Parliament website, '[Bomb Damage](#)', accessed 29 April 2016.

¹¹ *Times*, 'London's Latest Ordeal', 13 May 1941.

¹² *ibid*.

¹³ Parliament website, '[Bomb Damage](#)', accessed 29 April 2016.

¹⁴ *Times*, 'London's Latest Ordeal', 13 May 1941.

¹⁵ Parliament website, '[Bomb Damage](#)', accessed 29 April 2016.

¹⁶ *Times*, '33 of London's Raiders Shot Down', 12 May 1941, p 4.

¹⁷ Parliament website, '[Bomb Damage](#)', accessed 29 April 2016.

¹⁸ [HC Hansard, 28 October 1943, col 403](#); and Select Committee on House of Commons (Rebuilding), *Report from the Select Committee on the House of Commons (Rebuilding), and the Proceedings of the Committee (Rebuilding)*, 25 October 1944, p 5.

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