

100 years ago:

ZEPPELIN RAIDS

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The severe bomb damage of World War II is well-remembered in the Inn, for good and obvious reasons. The Inn was also bombed in World War I, but had several narrow escapes and suffered little damage.

The first air raid on England of WWI, leaving aside a trial run shortly before, took place on 24 December 1914, when a German airship dropped a single bomb on Dover: it landed in a garden. The first of the raids on London did not take place until 31 May 1915 (the Kaiser disliked the idea and had delayed as long as he could). They continued thereafter almost until the end of the war: the last was on 5 August 1918.

Gray's Inn's first raid was in the late evening of 8 September: an incendiary bomb fell in the Walks and an explosive bomb in Jockey's Fields, which broke all the windows in Raymond Buildings. Although the effects on the Inn itself were slight, this raid – the first on central London, extending from Queen's Square to Liverpool Street – was to be the most damaging of the war in terms of financial loss caused, though not in casualties.

The Inn had its narrowest escape on the evening of 18 October 1915. The bombing this time extended from the Lyceum Theatre in the Strand, across Aldwych, Lincoln's Inn and Chancery Lane to Gray's Inn, and then onto the City, finishing at the Royal Mint. Lincoln's Inn lost the glass in its chapel. A high explosive bomb fell on Gray's Inn, landing

just to the west of 4 Gray's Inn Square and blowing out part of its back wall, as well as all the windows on that side of Gray's Inn Square.

Six incendiaries were also dropped: two fell in the middle of South Square and burnt themselves out frighteningly but harmlessly, and another two landed on roofs in South Square but failed to ignite. The fifth clipped the outside of 12 South Square but caused no structural damage. The sixth, however, nearly destroyed the Hall. It fell in a small cloakroom which stood close to where the south bay window now is and set it on fire. The War Book comments: 'A few seconds sufficed to make this room a furnace. The open door showed nothing but one white sheet of rolling flame.' Most fortunately the Inn and the tenants had formed a voluntary fire brigade which under the leadership of Charles Sansom, the then Housekeeper, was able to extinguish the fire before it could spread through the thin partition wall to the Hall itself.

Finally, on 18 December 1917, an aerial torpedo of 110lbs was dropped on 6 Gray's Inn Square. Although the torpedo penetrated all storeys to the cellar it did not explode, and was later retrieved, to be displayed in a glass case in the 1929 Holker Library, along with the burnt-out incendiary that almost set fire to the Hall. Both were apparently destroyed along with the library itself in 1941. ■



Acknowledgement: I am grateful to Ian Castle for bringing to my attention the photos of 4 Gray's Inn Square (above) and of the Holker Library display (top left), and have consulted his informative website on Zeppelin raids for dates and background information: <http://www.iancastlezeppelin.co.uk/>