

## Westgate at war, 1914–18 and 1939–45

The Westgate remained a museum throughout the 20th century, with a short but crucial interval during World War II. During World Wars I and II (1914-18 and 1939-45), the building reverted to its original purpose of defending the City. In World War I, it was manned by lookouts watching from the battlements for enemy airships and bombers. Its role was far more important in World War II, when it served as an Air Raid Precautions centre, a fortress, a billboard for the display of wartime messages, and a sturdy symbol of national resistance.

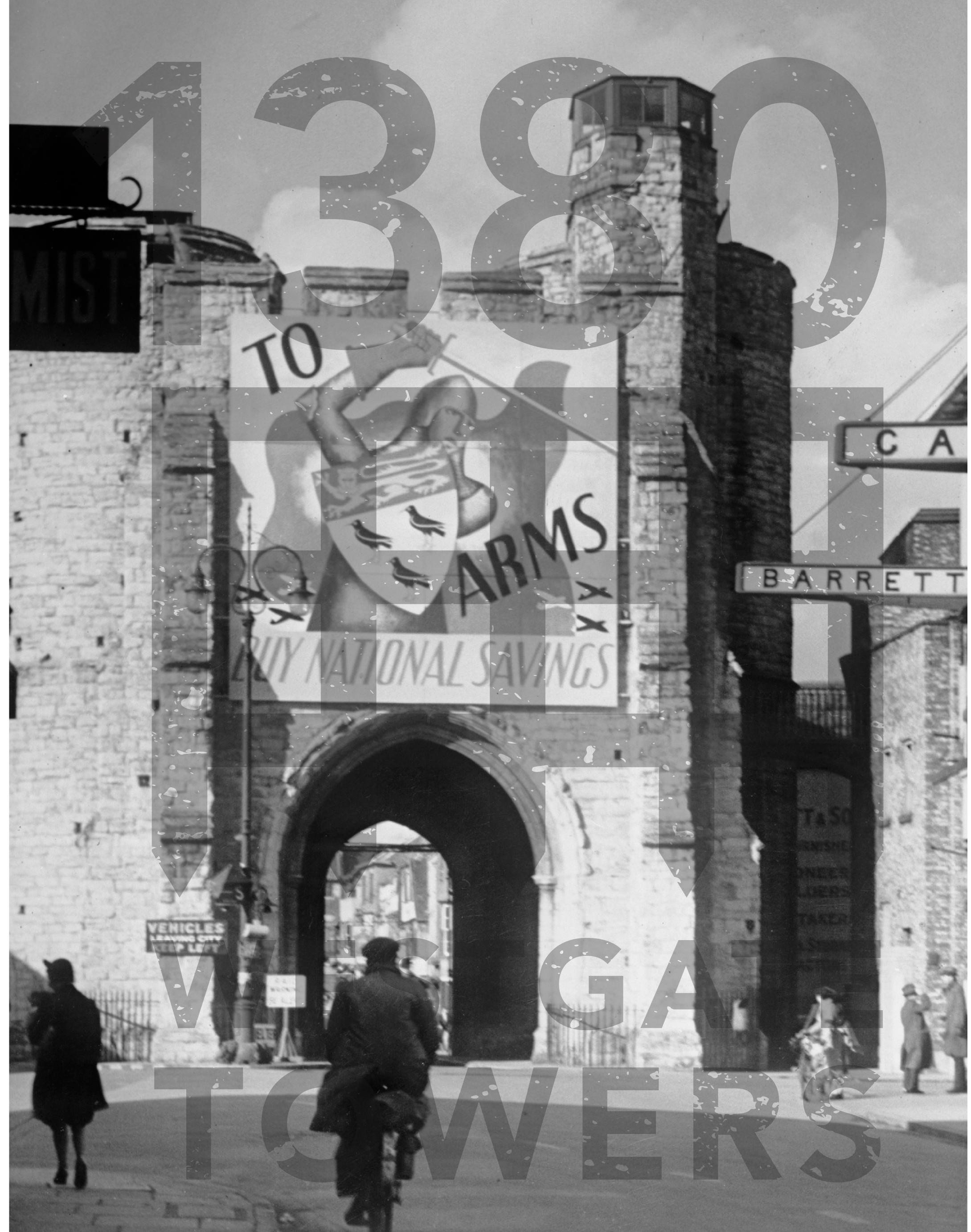
#### World War I

Canterbury was of strategic importance in World War I as a railway junction, a home to a large army barracks, and a transit station for men and material going to and returning from the Western Front. Despite its proximity to the French coast, the City was never attacked from the air. Nevertheless, it did play a small role in the country's air defences - day and night, spotters on the roof watched for Zeppelin airships and, later in the war, Gotha bombers trundling towards their targets in Chatham and London. Sightings were relayed by telephone to the anti-aircraft batteries, searchlights and eight Home Defence squadrons which had managed to down ten airships and 22 aircraft by the end of hostilities in November 1918.

#### World War II

Committee, in recognition of Canterbury raising nearly £250,000 towards the war effort BC5

The Westgate's role in World War II was altogether different. Its crucial strategic position had not changed, but the power and range of bomber aircraft had. So too had the geography of war. While in World War I the front had remained far from England's White Cliffs, two decades later those same cliffs were themselves the front line. As a result, in 1940 Westgate was prepared to fulfil once more the task for which it had been built: resist foreign invasion!



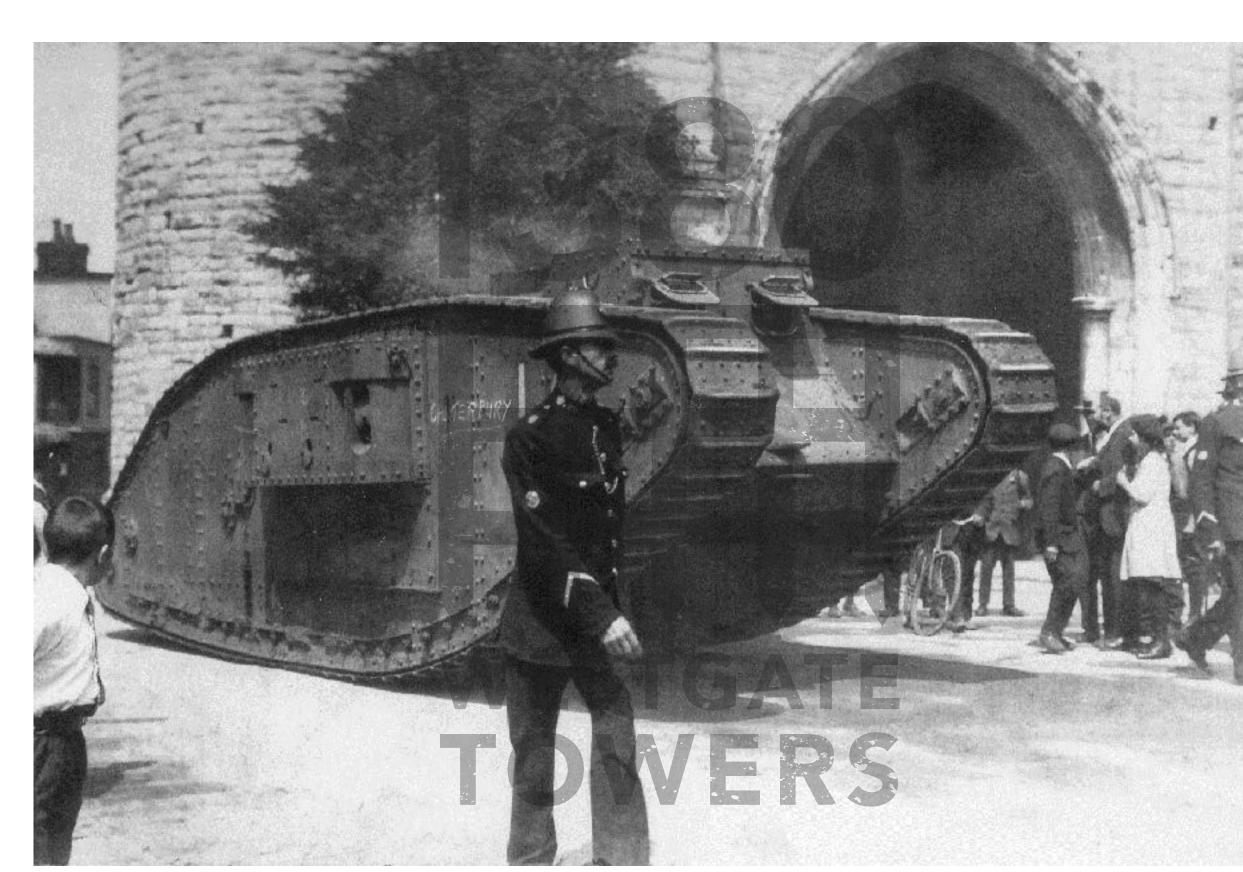




flagpole at the top of the Westgate and an absence of banners following the end of the war UNKNOWN



Nestgate on his way to be made a Freeman of the City of Canterbury at the former Guildhall on October 25th 1945



A picture of the Home Guard marching through the Westgate in 1941. Appeared in a book named Images of Canterbury by Andrew Rootes UNKNOWN



Guildhall. The South turret of the Westgate Towers is visible in the background. Appeared in a book named *Images of Canterbury* by



half their roofs, and timber and debris is all that is left of several other buildings. A salvage truck is visible in the centre IWM/Q(HS)299

Cathedral in May 1945. Jack Skelton (1906-66) also in the picture was the former owner of the ashtray now on display in the WW2 cabinet downstairs



# Air Raid Precautions (ARP)

Maps show that as early as 1936 the German air force, the Luftwaffe, was preparing maps of key targets in the Canterbury area. Interestingly, these were not hit in a systematic way for another six years.

Long before this, the UK government had taken steps to protect the civilian population from aerial attack. An ARP Department was set up in March 1935, followed by a volunteer Air Raid Warden service (managed by local councils) in 1937. By 1940, ARP wardens were charged with reporting bombing incidents in their district, enforcing the blackout (making sure no light that might assist enemy bombers was visible from the air), operating air-raid sirens, and directing civilians to air-raid shelters when the alarm sounded.

ARP also required the council to coordinate the efforts of the Wardens with those of the local Fire Service, messengers, the police, fire watchers, first aid teams, rescue services, and others. Women were involved through the Women's Voluntary Service. By the third year of the war, the range and complexity of ARP services was reflected in a name change to the Civil Defence Service (CDS).

## Air Raid Precautions (ARP) in Canterbury

When in 1937 the government demanded that each council establish a hub to oversee ARP activity, the Westgate was the obvious site in Canterbury. It stood close to the heart of the City yet was some distance from the obvious targets of the Cathedral, the barracks and the two railway stations; it was tall enough to be used by fire-watchers and planespotters; its height and position made it the ideal site for an air-raid warning siren. The building's massive stone walls were sufficiently strong to withstand everything but a direct hit on the roof, and the Guard Chamber had plenty of space for desks, maps, telephones, etc. Finally, the Towers' position next to the Police Station facilitated close and immediate communication with the regular authorities.

Once the decision had been taken in early 1939 to convert Westgate's Guard Chamber 'for use by the Police as an emergency [ARP] control room', the museum's exhibits were packed away, telephones and some sort of 'improved ventilation' were installed, and a siren was bolted onto the roof. ARP volunteers tested it - silently, apparently - once a week. Towards the end of 1940, it was fitted with a heating system to stop it freezing up. By the autumn of the same year, an octagonal 'observer post' had been built beside it (where the flagpole is now) as shelter for civilian and, later, military observers. (See photograph top right.) An area of the Pound Lane Police Station was adapted to provide 'decontamination facilities' in case of a gas attack.

### Everyone involved

For many years, the tannery at the bottom of Stour Street was one of Canterbury's main employers, and the founders of the business, the Williamson family, were some of its leading citizens. Their top-quality leather was used for the benches in the House of Lords, and for the seats of prestigious cars, such as Rolls Royce, Bentley and Ferrari. During World War II, Stephen Williamson (1898-1986) was Canterbury's chief warden, responsible for co-ordinating the duties of wardens throughout the City. (See documents on the right.) On all Air Raid Precautions (ARP) / Civil Defence work he worked closely with his wife, Catherine (1896-1977), who between 1939 and 1940 had served as the City's first female mayor. The clerical inhabitants of the Cathedral Precincts played their part, too. Dean Hewlett Johnson (1874-1966, known as the Red Dean for his left-wing views), organised a rota of fire watchers on the roof of the Cathedral, while his neighbour, Archdeacon Alec Sergent (1895-1989), was an enthusiastic Warden. Even Frances Temple, the wife of the Archbishop, was known to have attacked an incendiary bomb fire with a stirrup pump while her husband, in tin hat, pyjamas and

dressing gown, stood at the ready. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides acted as runners, carrying messages from wardens and other ARP / Civil Defence personnel to the base in the Westgate. Even quite young children perched on rooftops as fire watchers. Teams of three youths operated simple cart, water tank and stirrup pump fire services.

### Fortress Canterbury

By the summer of 1940, after the fall of France, invasion across the Channel appeared imminent. With extraordinary speed, Canterbury was converted from a sleepy cathedral city into a 'Nodal Point' or 'anti-tank island' at the heart of the area's defences. In 1941, it was re-classified as a 'fortress'.

Roads leading into the City were guarded by roadblocks, pillboxes and fortified houses. Further roadblocks, barbed wire entanglements, sandbags, and a concrete gun emplacement turned the Westgate, the Police Station and nearby Tower House into a single citadel, garrisoned by a platoon of soldiers. Fortunately, the efficacy of the hastily constructed stronghold was never tested; nevertheless, those who had built the Westgate in 1380 must have smiled quietly to themselves to see their 550-year-old bastion once again serving the purpose for which it had been built.

The authorities were not slow in exploiting the historic significance of the Westgate. Its inward-facing walls were draped with loyal flags, banners and placards, while the building itself was hailed as an enduring stone symbol of 'never surrender'. (See top right photograph.)

On the night of 1-2 June 1942, the City's spirit was tested to the limit during a raid that swiftly became known as the 'Canterbury Blitz'. Hundreds of incendiary and high-explosive bombs rained down on the City. Whole streets were engulfed in fires, consuming shops, homes, churches and schools. But amid the slaughter, flame and din, like St. Paul's during the London Blitz, the Cathedral and the Westgate remained resolute and unflinching.

Today, the thrum of traffic and the chatter of tourists are the only sounds within the rooms, stairways and passages of this fine old building. But as you make your way round, you may care to pause for a moment and reflect on how different it must have been when the Westgate was last called into battle: the throb of aircraft engines and the wail of the siren overhead, the scream of falling bombs, the crash of explosions, the roar of fires, the shouts and cries of the trapped and wounded, clanging bells, shrill ARP whistles, the clatter of the feet of school-aged runners hurrying up the steps to the control centre with news of the devastation taking place outside...

### Fire Bucket

This wooden panel and metal hook were probably added in 1940 when the building was being used by the local ARP wardens, who were based here throughout the Second World War. It is thought to have held the fire bucket on display in the WW2 cabinet in the Guard Chamber. The platform above this room was used by the ARP wardens as a lookout post to watch for enemy aircraft OPL15

### Baedeker Raids and the 'Canterbury Blitz', 1942

On 28 March 1942, a shocking RAF bombing raid destroyed the historic centre of the cathedral city of Lübeck. The Luftwaffe responded with attacks on five English cities that encapsulated the country's cultural heritage: York, Exeter, Bath, Norwich, and Canterbury. The attacks have become known as the 'Baedeker Raids' because the targets were apparently chosen from the pages of a 1937 Baedeker Guidebook.

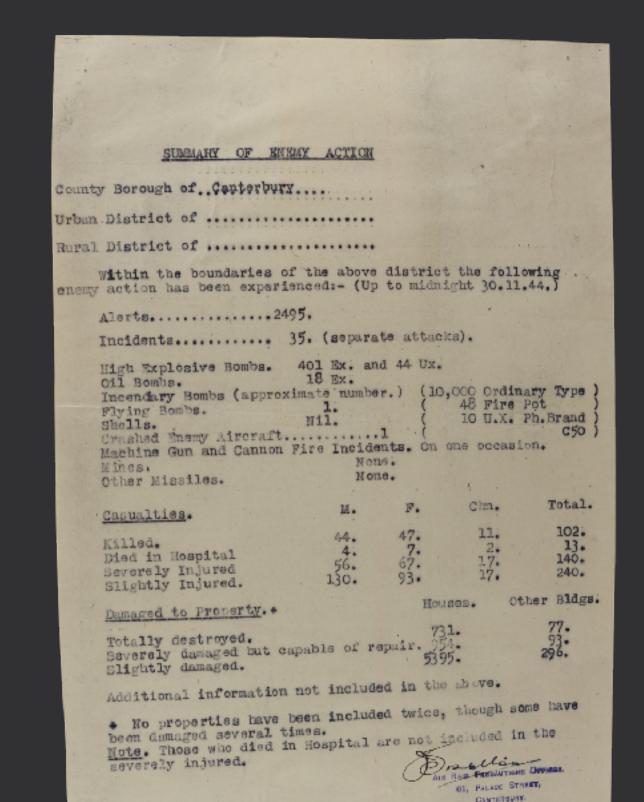
Canterbury experienced two Baedeker Raids, by night on 1 June 1942 and in daylight on 31 October 1942. The first raid was by far the heavier, though the death and injury tolls were similar: the June attack left 43 killed and 40 seriously injured, while in October 33 were killed and 54 seriously injured. The City was bombed on eight other occasions: four times in 1940 (25 killed), once in 1941 (1 killed), and twice in 1942 (6 killed), and once in 1944. (An official report of all wartime casualties and damage is among the documents below.)

### 1-2 June 1942

During the 75-minute raid of 1 June, 1942, 130 high explosive and 3,600 firebombs fell on the City. The principal targets were not the railway stations, the barracks or fortifications. Instead, the aim was to rip out the cultural heart of the City, as the RAF had done to Lübeck. That meant hitting civilians, ancient buildings and their treasures.

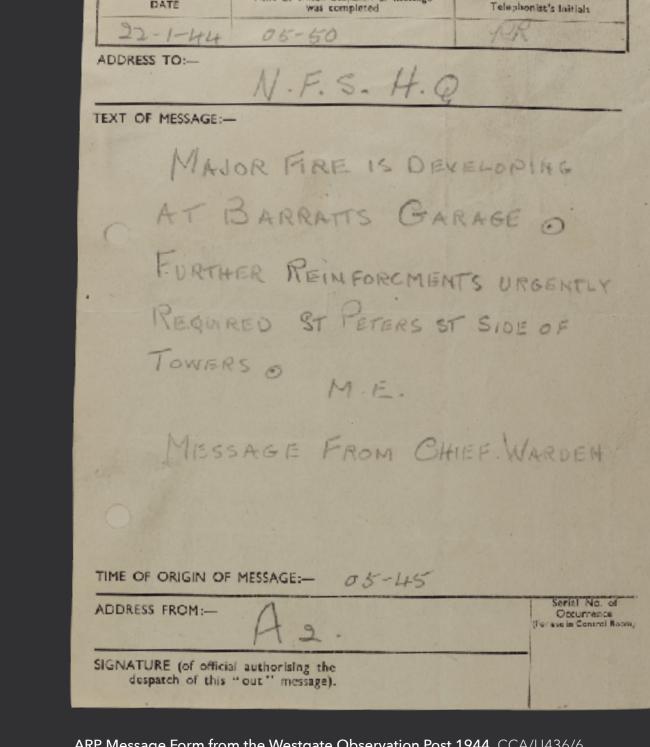
Obviously, the main aim was the destroy the Cathedral. This failed thanks to the dedicated labour of the firewatchers stationed on its roof: led by Tom Hoare (a veteran of World War I), Alfred Burden, Joe Wanstall and Tom Shaw doused or threw to the ground dozens of firebombs that fell, in Hoare's words, 'like hailstones.' Fortunately for them, high explosive bombs - including one weighing a massive four tons - narrowly missed the building. Ancient windows were smashed, however, and the Deanery and the Victorian library were both hit. The Cathedral crypt served as an air-raid shelter during the attack.

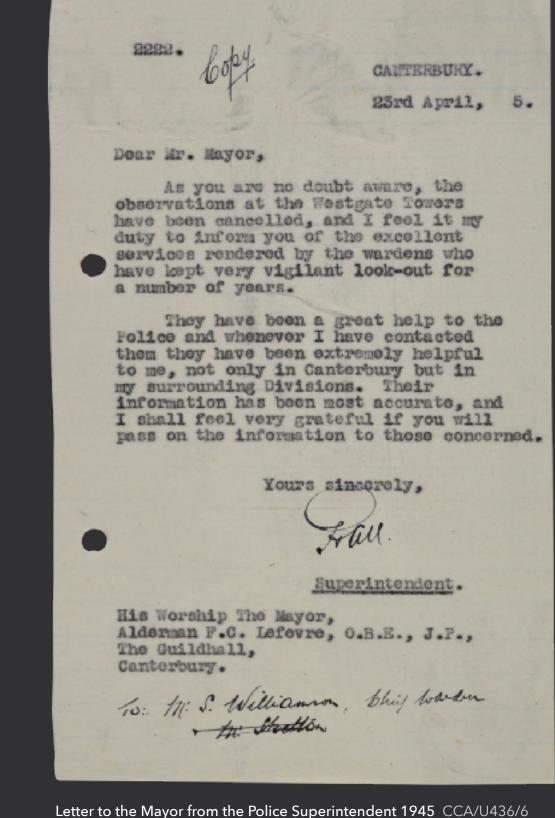
Elsewhere, dozens of fires engulfed the St. George's area to the south of the Precincts. Fire crews arrived from all over the country to help extinguish the blaze, and whole streets - including the medieval Butchery Lane - were sacrificed to prevent the fire spreading. Even so, much of the medieval district was reduced to rubble. Among the losses were the house where the City's most famous son, the playwright Christopher Marlowe, was born in 1564, and most of St. George's church where he was baptised. Today the tower is all that remains of this fine old building established in Norman times. Around 400 shops, offices and homes were destroyed, and a further 1,500 badly damaged. Viewing the scene shortly afterwards, former mayor Catherine Williamson wrote, 'The eastern half of the High Street was in a condition only comparable to that of Ypres during the previous war. It presented an almost unbroken vista of desolation... [with] the



Summary of Enemy Action 1944/45 CCA/U436/6

buildings battered into shapeless rubble-heaps...'





ARP Message Form from the Westgate Observation Post 1944 CCA/U436/6

### Photographs and documents

The picture of the Westgate Observation Post personnel seated in front of the Cathedral and the documents above are taken from a scrapbook compiled by Stephen Williamson, Canterbury's chief warden throughout the war. Included is a letter from the Police Superintendent to the Mayor thanking the observation team for their sterling service throughout the war; the letter was forwarded to Mr. Williamson. The other two documents are a summary of casualties and damage suffered by Canterbury by the end of November 1944, and a message from Mr. Williamson to the National Fire Service reporting a fire started in Barretts Garage opposite the Westgate during the City's final air raid in January 1944.