

# Nostalgia

## School memories include an eye-witness account of a fire

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**H**orsham author John Snelling has given an eye witness account of a major fire in which a whole school burned down in 1940.

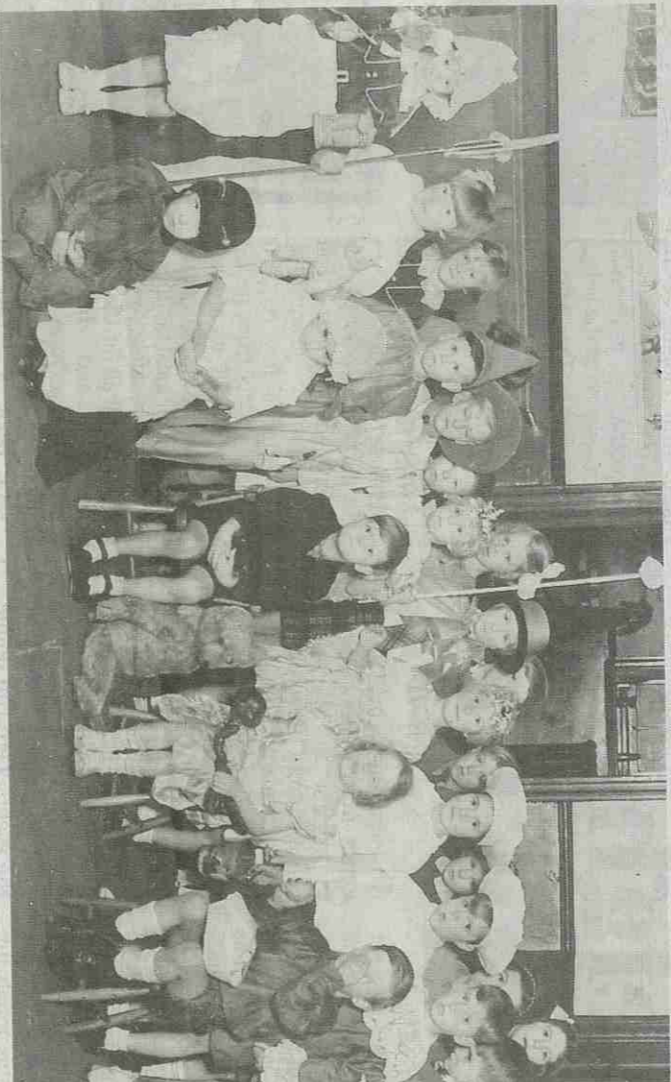
His father was a part-time policeman at the time and was allowed into the ruins the next day, taking John with him and filming it on a cine-camera.

John picks up the story: "Tucked away beside Horsham's Victory Road Recreation Ground, on land once called The Common, lies Tratalgar School, formerly called Victory Road School.

"I remember going there for the first time and bawling so lustily that they must have heard me in The Cartax. Throughout this skirmish, Miss Way, the head teacher, was never in danger of losing her badge of office, a blue straw hat. Well, it was my first day at school and the year must have been 1936.

Other teachers were Miss Messeler, standing a good 4ft 6in in her socks. Also there was a lanky Miss Hennessey, who would have made an acceptable Tiller Girl, if either of us in 1936 knew what that was.

"On the freezing night of January 10, 1940, the Victory Road schools all went up in flames, all three of them, infants, boys and girls, leaving unscathed



only three playgrounds, three sets of lavatories and a small estate of air-raid shelters, unloved by all except the family of invading glow-worms.

"I could see the school from my bedroom and my parents woke me to see and hear the spectacle taking place. And I wept to see it. I also learned that the noise of a conflagration is just as scary as the sight of one.

"The police communicate differently these days, as in 1936 a constable came to the door asking to use our phone!

"And was this devastation due to German bombing? No, the nearest German was over 100 miles away.

"The next morning, water from the hoses had left icy stalactites hanging from the single sycamore by the school gate. I wonder if that tree is still there?"

The infant class at Christmas in 1936 or 1937 - John Snelling can be seen seated on the floor on the left, dressed as a spider

The West Sussex County Times reported at the time that the weather was so cold, water froze the firefighters' uniforms as they tackled the blaze during six-hour vigils.

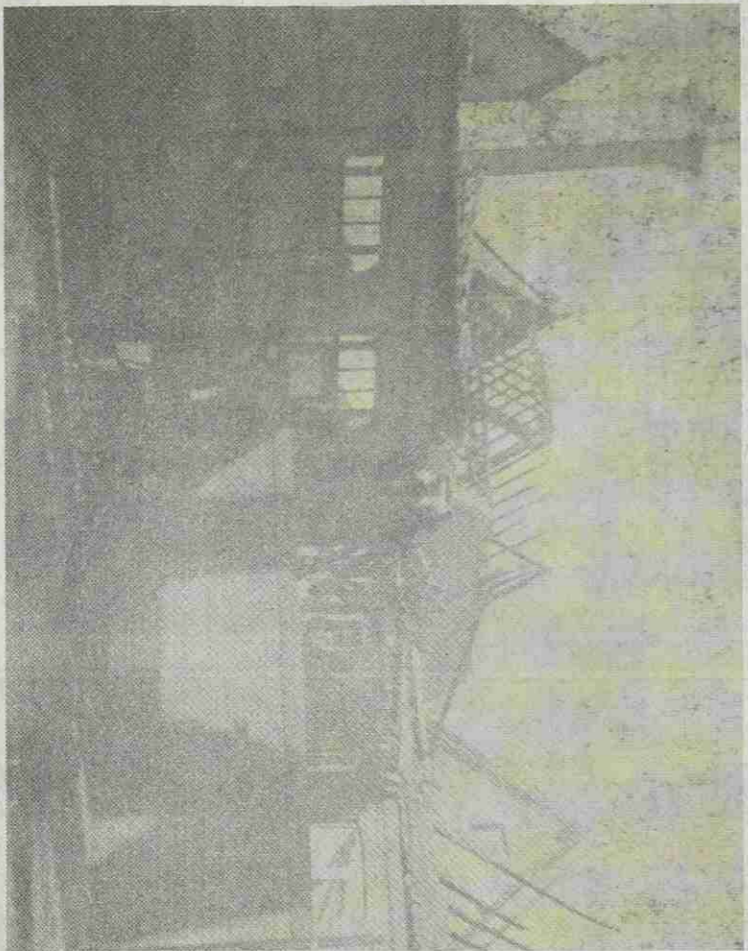
The fire broke out in the infants' school and the school burned down overnight. Members of the Old Boys' Association were at a dance in the Trinity Hall and rushed out to see if they could help. The fire, though, was unstoppable and all they could do was watch as their old school was destroyed.

The County Times said: "From the outside, the bare walls of the roofless building, with its blackened timbers and broken windows, bore mute witness to the extent of the damage. But it was not until one walked amid the smouldering, silent ruins of the classrooms that one could appreciate the full extent of the fire's destruction."

The efficient teachers, along with the town council and various businesses took just four days to find alternative accommodation for the schools.

Among John's mementoes is a picture of his infant class at Christmas in 1936 or 1937. He can be seen seated on the floor, dressed as a spider.

He said: "Norrah Peckett can be seen being frightened. Others either identified or likely to be there are June Frogley, Harold Over, Leslie Chatfield, Audrey Trot, Rosemary Madgwick, Donald Smallwood, Leslie Clack and Sheila Comper.



The ruins of Victory Road School after the fire in January 1940



A still taken from the cine-camera film of John Snelling as a boy in the ruins of Victory Road School