



# The Gretna Bombing

*When War Came to Gretna  
7th April 1942*



**Sarah Harper**



**THE DEVIL'S  
PORRIDGE  
MUSEUM**

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## The Gretna Bombing – 7<sup>th</sup> April 1941

The township of Gretna was built during the First World War to house many of the workers who produced cordite at the ‘greatest munitions factory on Earth’ which straddled the Scottish-English border. You might be forgiven if you had thought that Gretna and its twin township of Eastriggs would be constructed on a functional basis with little attention to detail. This was the case in the early days when a huge timber town was built on a grid system for the labourers and tradesmen, but, so intent was the Government on retaining the vital workforce, that it brought in the best town planners and architects to provide pleasant accommodation. Raymond Unwin, a disciple of Ebenezer Howard and his revolutionary Garden City movement, used his experience of creating Letchworth Garden City to construct two well-planned permanent small towns which provided all the amenities which the thousands of munitions employees could possibly desire.



### Unwin and Crickmer’s team of architects

In partnership with top architect Courtney Crickmer, they created a settlement of well-designed cottages with an impressive array of public buildings, including three churches, a huge dance hall, an institute, cinema and a variety of shops. Not only that, but the shortage and expense of timber meant that

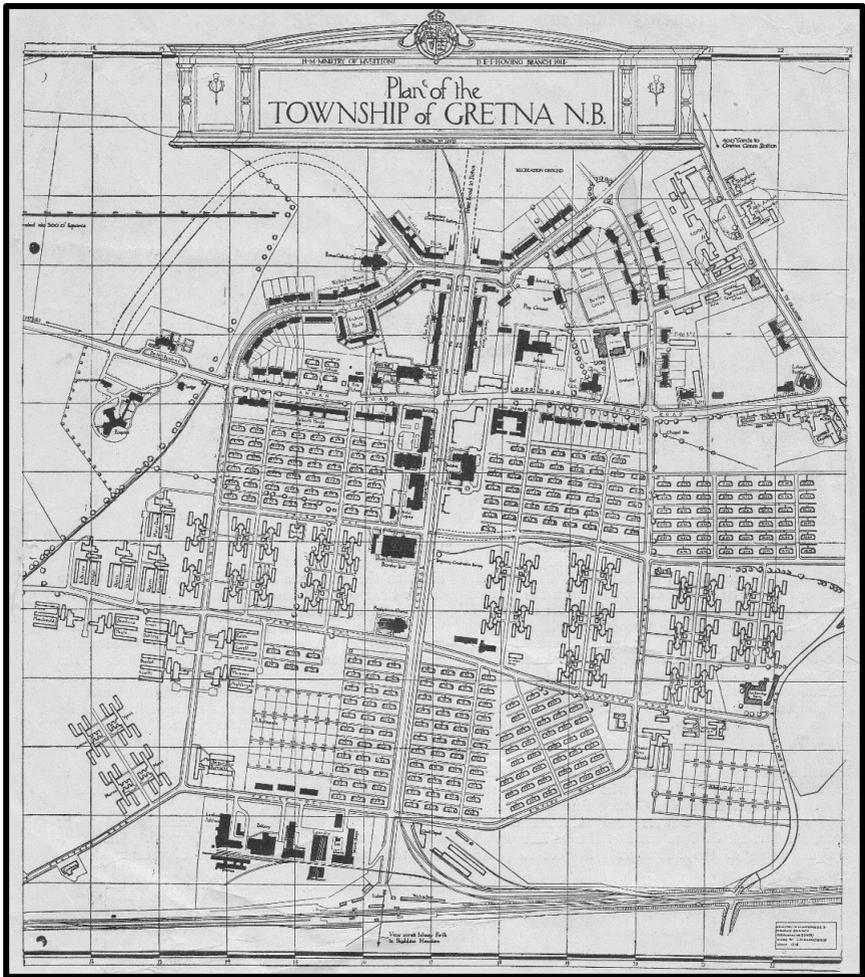
the buildings were constructed in traditional red brick, a material more traditionally used in England. Eastriggs and Gretna were built with wide tree lined streets, sweeping crescents and cul-de-sacs flanked by modern buildings which boasted indoor sanitation and even electricity, a modern innovation for the time.

Gretna was still a curious amalgam of modern cottages and functional timber housing when World War Two broke out. With such a low population density, Gretna was an unlikely target for a German aerial attack, but, on the 7<sup>th</sup> April 1941, seven bombs dropped on the township, killing 28 people. It was a calm, clear night which allowed the moon to glisten off the water in the Solway Firth and to reflect brightly from the flat felt roofs of the hundreds of timber huts in the township, becoming a beacon and, therefore, a target for a German bomber.



Earlier that night, German Bombers had conducted a bombing raid around Glasgow dropping over 400 bombs, primarily on the shipyards around Largs, Govan, Greenock, Inchbeam and Riccarton. Following this attack, on the return to Germany, a lone German Dornier Bomber crew released a payload of 50-kilogram bombs onto the Gretna township. Seven bombs were dropped diagonally across the town, destroying buildings and changing lives forever in

their wake. The bombs left huge craters, scattered debris across the town and ruptured underground water mains.



**Original map of the Gretna Township from 1918. The black buildings are brick built. There were rows upon rows of wooden accommodation.**

Six-year-old Ruby Hardisty had friends at the Gretna Cinema when the siren from Mossband sounded to alert the village to an attack. She said, *'My husband, he was only a small boy then, was at the pictures at the time and got a fright. Mr Towers, the owner, put all the lights on in the cinema and he said*

*if anyone wanted to leave they could, but the show was to go on. They all took off and ran all the way home in the pitch dark. It was pitch black as there were no street lights.'*



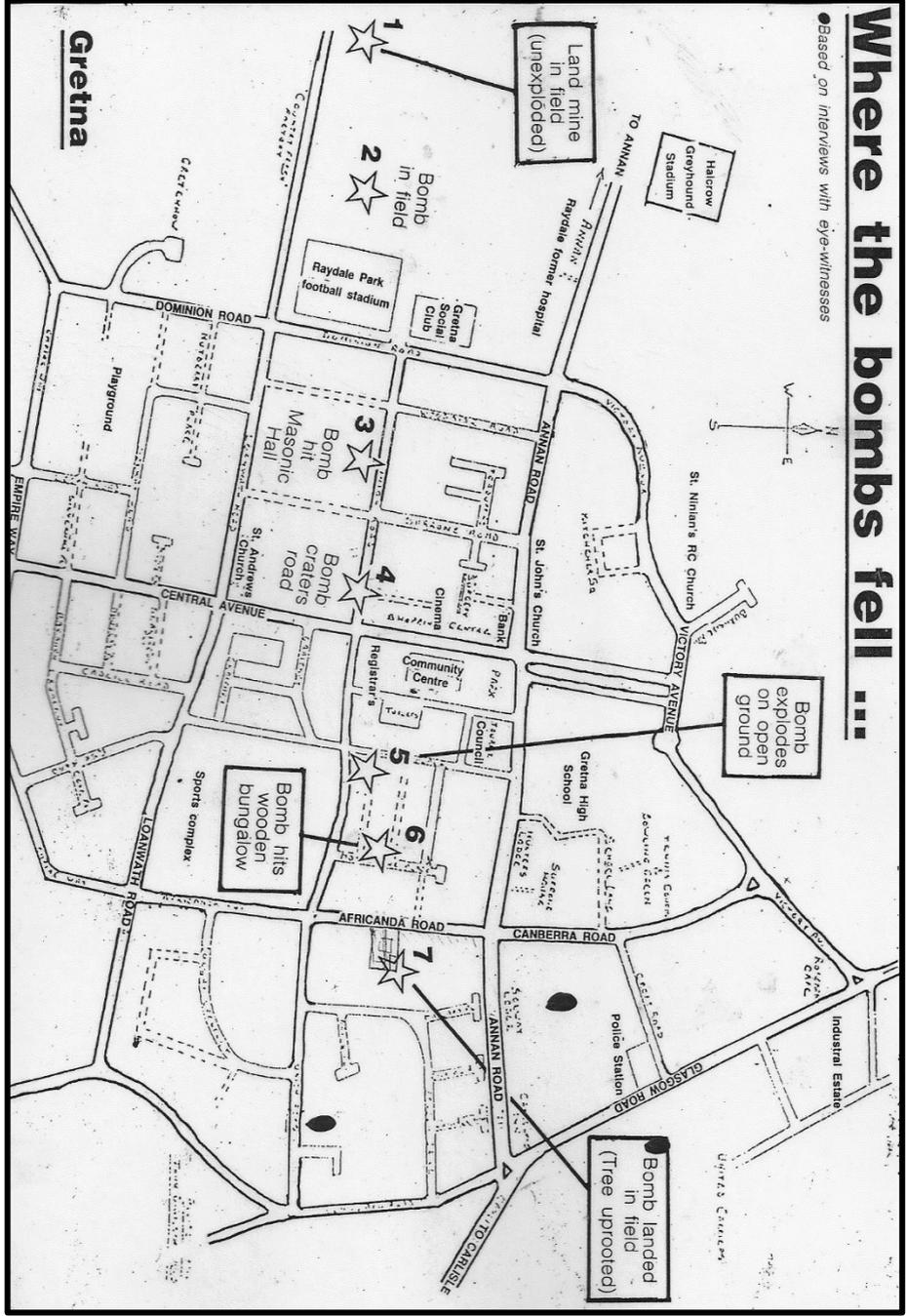
### **Aerial view of Gretna, showing the main Annan Path of the bombs**

The first bomb landed in a field north of Loanwath Road but did not detonate and it was later dealt with by the bomb disposal unit. The second also landed in a field and exploded causing little damage.

The third bomb directly hit the Gretna Masonic Lodge, bringing death and destruction which will be detailed later. On the junction between Union Road and Central Avenue, the fourth bomb landed with the shockwave shattering windows and dislodging roof tiles from the surrounding buildings. The fifth bomb landed in a garden between wooden huts, but the resultant explosion knocked out both adjacent Q East 7 and 8 wooden huts. Fifteen-year-old Doris Findlay said, *'A picture frame saved me. It came down on my head and saved the debris from falling on me.'*

# Where the bombs fell ...

● Based on interviews with eye-witnesses



**Gretna**

Tragically, 14-year-old Helen Graham was killed when the sixth bomb hit the hut she lived in with her grandmother and twin brother, who both miraculously survived the raid. Helen had been at the cinema when the air raid siren had sounded. She had quickly run home to check on her grandmother when the bomb sadly ended her life.

The final bomb landed in a field on the east side of Africanda Road but did little damage. The raid, however, sadly killed 28 people and shook this close-knit community. It could have been significantly worse if the bombs had been more accurately dropped on Gretna.

### **Masonic Lodge Tragedy**

By far the most devastating incident was at the Masonic Lodge, where twenty-seven members of the order lost their lives. The presence of Masons in Gretna accompanied the advent of the First World War and the massive influx of workers for HM Factory Gretna. It was natural that, amongst the 30,000 strong workforce, there would be Brethren who wished to follow the Craft in their adopted towns of Eastriggs, in the Parish of Dornock, and Gretna. In January 1916, very early in the life of the factory, a letter was written to the Grand Lodge of Scotland requesting the Grant of a Charter.

The inaugural meeting was held in the Board Room of the Central Offices Gretna (at that time situated on Glasgow Road, Gretna) on Monday 11th September 1916. This meeting encompassed forty-nine Brethren from both Scottish and English Constitutions. The Chairman proposed, *'This meeting of Master Masons residing in or about and employed in the construction and operation of His Majesty's Factory Gretna, resolve and crave for the erection of a daughter Lodge of the Grand Lodge of Scotland and prays Grand Lodge to Constitute us a regular Lodge and to grant us a Charter accordingly, so that we may be enabled to practise the Rites of our Order in this place, either in the Parish of Gretna or the Parish of Dornock.'*

A second meeting, one week later, set out members' fees and established the name *Lodge Gretna*, the Temple to be held at the Institute in the Gretna Township. A Charter was granted to the Gretna Lodge (1158) on 3rd November 1916. There were 81 founding member Masons made up of 46 Scottish, 16 English and 19 overseas members from Mexico, the USA, Singapore and

Australia. Until 1926, Masonic meetings were held in the Gretna Institute until the members purchased the Girl's Laundry on Union Road, Gretna, for £350. This would sadly become the location of a direct hit from a stray German bomb during World War Two.



**The badge was designed to highlight the connection between the Scottish and English Constitutions which had been brought together**

On the fateful night of the bombing in April 1941, a reciprocal lodge meal was being held in Gretna, with attendance from visiting members of the Dumfries, Carlisle, Lockerbie, Langholm and Longtown Freemasons. The meeting was to have taken place the following night, however, to accommodate visitors, it was put forward to this fateful evening. In attendance were several members of the business community, civic officials, retired members of the armed forces and even the local minister, the Reverend John Stafford. The bomb pierced the roof and exploded inside, just as the meeting had finished, instantly killing many of those still in the old laundry building. Those who were already outside were fortunate only to be showered with debris.

GRETNA ROYAL ARCH CHAPTER,

No. 419.



10 Canberra Road,  
Gretna, 26th March, 1941.

Dear Companion,

By command of the Most Excellent First Principal, Companion Francis W. Phillips, and the Most Excellent Second and Third Principals, you are requested to attend an Regular Convocation of Gretna Royal Arch Chapter, No. 419, which will be held in the Freemasons' Hall, Gretna, on MONDAY, the 7th April, 1941, at 7.30 p.m. prompt.

Yours faithfully and fraternally,

A. BUCHANAN JOHNSTON,  
*Scribe E.*

Next Meeting will be held on Tuesday, 22nd April,  
at 7.30 p.m.

**Invitation to attend Masonic meeting on the night of the  
bombing on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1941.**



## The remains of the Gretna Masonic Lodge

### Local Memories

The events of that night would stay long in the memory of those who lived through the tragedy. Gretna resident, Ruby Hardisty, was only 6-years-old at the time of the bombing and recalled hearing about the tragedy at the Masonic Lodge. She vividly recalled, *'I remember grown-ups talking in hushed tones about these sad events. After the direct hit on the Masonic Hall, the ARP wardens went in and were very sad to find men who looked all right and were sitting at a table untouched by the explosion, but sadly they were dead. Another body was found in the chimney'*.

Ruby also remembered evacuating her timber hut with her family and congregating at the Solway Lodge Hotel where people remained until it was deemed safe to return home.

Ruby wrote about her memories, *'I was in bed, and was awoken by my parents and sleepily gathered up and dressed hurriedly. I remember going out of the door and someone saying, 'Mind the crater!' I didn't know what a crater was, until right outside our door there was this great massive hole, where the path had been. I remember it was tricky getting past this hole and all the grown-ups were gathering at the path end.'*

*'We lived in Q East 8, a wooden hut next to the back road, which is now Union Road. I remember hearing murmured voices and just held onto my mam's hand. We all set off to walk, when someone said that we were to make for the Solway Lodge so that is what we all did, myself and my sister and parents along with all the neighbours. I don't know how long this took, but I must have started to wake up properly when we were all on the top of the old railway banking near Sarkfoot Farm.'*

*'I remember vividly that it was a brilliant moonlit night and thinking that the Solway looked like a great silver snake. It was a beautiful sight for a six-year-old. After someone decided it would be safe to go back, off we went.'*

*'The following day, the big hole was a site to behold. Boys were going down and bringing up bits of shrapnel and handing it out. As children, we had good fun with the bomb craters, until a lorry came and filled it in.'*

*'Back to 1941, officials said that we were very lucky because, if the bomb outside our house had fallen just a bit over the garden and onto the hard road, we would all have been killed, but it happened to land on the soft path, only damaging the house. After the bombing, people were seen carrying blankets and supplies to the Solway Lodge. A few days after the attack two unexploded bombs were found and a bomb disposal unit came and blew them up on the seafront.'*

*'A girl evacuee from London, who was staying with my future husband's parents heard the explosions and ran about screaming, 'They've come back!' He said she was in a terrible state, as she thought she had come all this way to escape the bombs.'*

The Cumberland Newspaper reported the bombing on the 12<sup>th</sup> April without revealing Gretna as the bombing location. The newspaper quoted eye-witness accounts from those like Mrs Lucchesi who said, *'I heard a terrific explosion, and saw the Masonic Hall crumble to pieces. I rushed over in my night attire, but I could do nothing. The masonry was too heavy for me to lift. It was terrible.'*

Walter Maxwell was a young boy at the time of the bombing; he was hidden below concrete stairs at home with his family in the red brick Barracks in Gretna. He heard the seven loud thumps of the bombs dropping and

remembered the school opening and operating as normal the next day. Looking back, Walter said, *'It gave us a shake-up, gave everyone a shake-up especially for a wee bit like Gretna.'* Walter's older brother was in the fire brigade at the time and said he saw the German plane so low that he could have touched it.

The seriously injured were quickly taken to Carlisle Infirmary, but those with minor injuries were treated at the small local hospital at Raydale, where the current Masonic Lodge stands. Sister Helen Blackwood, who had been on shift in Eastriggs township, rushed through to Gretna the next morning to help. She recalled, *'I arrived around 5.40 in the morning and we dressed a number of people with cuts and bruises caused by shrapnel.'*

A temporary mortuary was set up in the old Gretna Laundry on Empire Way; it was shocking that several bodies were not found intact due to the blast, but every effort was made to ensure all remains were removed before daylight to avoid any upsetting scenes.



**Ruby Hardisty with her sister Connie and Alec and evacuee.**

Residents in Gretna had access to air raid shelters, but this did not prevent so many deaths. The Anderson Shelter was commissioned by the Home Office in 1938 to protect civilians from potential German air-raids prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. The curved and side panels (including a door) were designed to withstand strong impact and absorb energy without collapsing. As the shelters had to be dug into the ground for stability, many people covered them in soil and planted vegetables and flowers to disguise the structure.

### **Local Civil Defence Response**

With tensions rising in Europe prior to World War Two, the British public and Government began to prepare in a variety of ways for war and potential invasion. The Government introduced blackout restrictions on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939, whereby Britons were expected to turn off unnecessary lighting, cover their windows with heavy black out curtains or black paint to block light. Street lights and car headlamps were also prohibited or were modified to limit light output.

As well as these new measures, Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, announced on the radio, *'In order to leave nothing to chance, and to supplement from sources as yet untapped the means of defence already arranged, we are going to ask you to help us in a manner which I know will be welcome to thousands of you.'*

Eden took the lead on home defence and called upon large numbers of British men aged between 17 and 65 to join the Local Defence Volunteers (LDV). Within 24 hours of the radio broadcast, 250,000 men had joined. The LDV were nicknamed 'Look, Duck and Vanish Brigade' rather unfairly, before Winston Churchill officially renamed the group the Home Guard in July 1940. Willing participants could register at their local police station. There were three Home Guard zones in Dumfries and Galloway made up of Dumfriesshire, Kirkcudbrightshire and Wigtownshire.

The role of the Home Guard was to monitor the coast, public buildings, road and railways for signs of enemy invaders or espionage. They trained in the evenings in weapons handling, unarmed combat and basic sabotage. The Home Guard acted as sentries during the day and night at road blocks and bridges and became extra 'ears and eyes' for the full-time military. They

checked that people were carrying their Identity Cards and had the power to arrest those who were without.



**The Anderson shelter at The Devil's Porridge Museum was originally used in Gretna during the Second World War.**

Similarly, thousands of men and women volunteered to be Air Raid Precautions (ARP) Wardens during the Second World War. An ARP Warden patrolled the streets and told people to put their lights out to maintain the Blackout. In the event of an air raid, local ARP wardens alerted civilians by sounding sirens and whistles, to encourage people to rush to the nearest shelter. Once the danger had passed, wardens would sound a continuous siren for two minutes, signifying the end of the raid.

The Gretna ARP wardens and emergency services had prepared for such an eventuality as this bombing. Little did they know when they took part in practice exercises, that they would be called upon for a real bombing. In early 1940, there was a rehearsal throughout the whole of Dumfriesshire. Air Raid Precaution wardens, for example, attended an 'incident' in Scott Street, Charles Street and on the High Street in Annan.



### **Gretna Air Raid Precaution (ARP) Wardens**

The Annandale Observer newspaper also reported on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1940 that, *'Gretna was 'raided' on Sunday afternoon. Bombs fell on the principal streets and there were six casualties, while five incendiary bombs fell on the Church.'* The volunteers rolled out three 75 feet hoses to put out the 'fire'. In another incident, *'explosive bombs damaged Victory Avenue and inflicted casualties.'* The paper also commented, *'Fortunately, it was just an imaginary incident.'*

In Gretna, the Air Raid Precaution (ARP) headquarters were on Central Avenue, currently the Royal Bank of Scotland building. On the night of the bombing, Charlie McCulloch, one of Gretna's ARP wardens on duty, remembered, *'It was the first red alert I can remember receiving. We followed the laid down procedure and contacted the senior wardens, who were to co-ordinate the ARP's response from the HQ.'*

Similarly, Angus Currie, a member of Gretna's Home Guard, witnessed the German bomber circle over the Solway before returning to town to drop a string of bombs. He recounted, *'We saw the bombs drop and at one point there was the sound of explosions and a red orange glow. I threw on my uniform and*

*I can remember my mother telling me to be careful as I set off to run down into the township.'*

As well as all local Civil Defence groups being mobilised, soldiers from the nearby Longtown munitions depot arrived to help frantically free the injured and dying from the rubble. Angus Currie described the scene: *'People were milling about everywhere. There was no panic- just a general feeling of shock and disbelief. There was no fire, but I can remember a choking smell of brick dust around the hall.'*

### **Why bomb Gretna?**

As a small rural town, Gretna was an unlikely target for a German bombing raid. As Sister Blackwood summed it up, *'People were prepared mentally for such things in the cities...the bombing came like a bolt from the blue in Gretna.'*

The reason behind the attack is unknown. However, there are several plausible theories. An initial theory was the German bomber was simply releasing the bombs to lose weight and conserve fuel for travelling back to Germany, something they would regularly do. However, when the alarm was raised by the local Air Raid Precaution wardens, before the bombs were dropped, the Masons had begun to leave the Lodge by car with their headlamps on. With the rest of the town adhering to the rules of the Blackout, with lights out between 5:45pm to 5.58am on that night, the headlamps would have been a beacon of light. It has been suggested the German aircrew may have mistaken these headlamps for a convoy of military vehicles and thus making the vacating Masons a prime target. Similarly, some thought even the doors of the Masonic Lodge opening would have allowed light to flood out, which could have also attracted the bombers.

It was also conjectured that, with the rows and rows of timber huts highlighted by the moonlight, the bombers may have thought Gretna was an army barracks and thus a legitimate enemy target. Furthermore, since the Germans would know that HM Factory Gretna was a First World War munitions factory, they may have thought it was still producing or storing ammunition. They may have aimed for the factory site but instead directly hit the Gretna township.

## **Victims of the bombing**

Newspapers at the time were careful about reporting the bombing due to wartime censorship, but the names of the deceased were published in the following weeks. A cairn memorial stands outside All Saints Episcopalian Church in Gretna to commemorate those who sadly lost their lives during the Gretna bombing.

**Thomas C Beattie**, 60, Lithographer, Gretna

**John Bell**, 59, Provision Agent, Carlisle

**Robert Bell**, 46, Railway Clerk, Annan

**John James Nicol Broatch**, 32, Blacksmith, Annan

**Stanley Burns**, 38, Draughtsman, Annan

**Stanley Carlyle**, 38, Boiler Maker, Annan

**William Cochrane**, 25, Railway Surfaceman, Gretna Green

**James Connolly**, 52, Railway Engine Driver, Dumfries

**Hugh Crawford**, 59, Railway Cashier, Dumfries

**Helen Graham**, 14, Domestic Servant, Gretna

**Reuben Gourley**, 37, Electrical Engineer, Carlisle

**Stephen Harold Gwyer**, 42, Royal Navy Recruiter, Dumfries

**Peter Charles Henderson**, 62, Boot Shop Manager, Annan

**Frederick Horseburgh**, 30, Grocer, Gretna

**William Irving**, 78, Master Builder, Gretna

**John Kilgour**, 57, Tailor and Draper, Longtown

**James Little Noble**, 48, Forester, Rigg

**Francis Phillips**, 55, Corporation Clerk, Carlisle

**Jeremiah Reed**, 37, Scrap Merchant, Annan

**John Robertson**, 47, Butcher's Shop Manager, Annan

**William Ross**, 41, Royal Marines Recruiter, Dumfries

**Arthur Phillip Thomas Shelley**, 43, Sanitary Inspector, Carlisle

**Benjamin Smith**, 44, Farmer, Old Graitney, Gretna

**Herbert Smith**, 38, Hotel Manager, Carlisle

**John Owen Stafford**, 71, Minister of Religion, Gretna Green

**William Telfer Steel**, 39, Butcher, Carlisle

**William Wettenhall West**, 32, Egg and Poultry Dealer, Rigg

**Thomas Young**, 34, Coal Agent, Springfield



**Memorial Cairn in Gretna**

# The Gretna Bombing

*When War Came to Gretna*



The night of the 7th April 1942 was calm and clear, the moonlight glistened off the Solway Firth and reflected brightly from the flat felt roofs of the hundreds of timber huts in the Gretna Township. Unfortunately, Gretna shone like a beacon and became a target for a German bomber.

Using eye-witness accounts and primary sources, this book details the tragic evening Gretna was bombed.



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