

# JOHN BABINGTON, GC

**John Herbert Babington, GC, OBE, former bomb-disposal specialist and headmaster, died on March 24 aged 81. He was born on February 6, 1911.**

JOHN Babington was a strong, quiet man taken by the demands of war from the teaching of physics to its practice in disarming unexploded bombs. His persistent courage in disarming dangerously booby-trapped bombs which had already claimed the lives of colleagues earned him the George Cross in 1940 and appointment as OBE (military) in 1943.

Babington was born in Tai Chow Foo, China, the son of medical missionary parents. On his return to Leicester he attended the Wyggeston School. Declining to follow the family traditions of church or medicine, he read physics at St Catharine's College, Cambridge. The war found him teaching physics at King's College School, Wimbledon. Although his family was devoid of maritime tradition he volunteered for the submarine service but was rejected, presumably because of his great height (6ft 3in). Instead he opted for a quiet life in bomb disposal.

His most dangerous operation was a mine which had brought Chatham Dockyard to a standstill in December 1940. It was believed to be protected by an anti-handling device of a kind which had already killed another officer. The impetus of the mine had driven it 16 feet underground. Babington, by this stage temporary acting sub-lieutenant, RNVR, volunteered to deal with it and prepared the fuse for removal. It could have detonated at any time. The line which he attached to the fuse to remove it broke. Eventually he had to be lowered three times into the 16ft pit before his attempts succeeded and the bomb could be lifted and taken away.



He spent the rest of the war in dangerous tinkering and teaching such skills to others, and was appointed military OBE in 1943, once more for "coolness and courage in operations involving great risk to himself".

After the war he returned to education as assistant education officer in Hertfordshire, becoming headmaster of Diss Grammar School in 1947. In 1951 he became the headmaster of the Royal Hospital School at Holbrook, a magnificent naval establishment, fully equipped with cannon and training mast, but then devoted to the relatively perfunctory academic education of the orphans of ratings of the Royal Navy. His mission to turn it into the substantial educational establishment which it has now become

did not initially find favour with the authorities who jibbed even at the provision of facilities and funds.

Babington did not win that battle and left in 1955 to become headmaster of Ashlyn's School, Berkhamsted, a secondary modern school which, before its transfer to the county, had been the rural incarnation of the Foundling Hospital's School. As at Holbrook much charitable money had been lavished on splendid architecture; once again his role was to turn buildings into a school. He left it a showpiece comprehensive on his retirement 25 years later.

John Babington's manner was dignified but warm; his speech careful, humorous, even ponderous. A lifelong churchgoer of low church tastes, he was a lay reader for many years. He followed the dictates of conscience with the same logical rigour and punctilio with which he removed fuses from bombs. He never cut corners and never bent rules, sometimes to his considerable disadvantage. He was preserved from sanctimony by his belief that his place was with the publican rather than with the Pharisee — a conviction which extended from communion rail to saloon bar. His anger was the more impressive for being rare. To friends and acquaintances he seemed to be one of the last gentlemen in England. No-one could recall his ever being rude through lapse or intent; his elaborate courtesy never deserted him.

He retired to playing golf and enthusiasm over rugby. His wartime career fiddling with bombs lived on in building gadgets, making jewellery and amassing tools of every description; scientific interests which recalled the PhD which circumstances had prevented his following before the war. For more than ten years he served on the committee of the VC and GC Association.

His wife Muriel died in 1990; he is survived by a son and two daughters.