

# Fairford Flyer

## Extra No 43

July 2022

FAIRFORD HISTORY



SOCIETY

There will be no newsletter in August but it will restart in September. The next FHS meeting is on **September 15** when Edwin Cuss will introduce us to the postcards of T. Musto of Bibury. This will include old views of local villages. Membership fees are due in September and remains at £5.

**The next Tomb Trail will be Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> July at 2pm. Price £3. Meet by the porch. Booking and enquiries to [enquiry@fairfordhistory.org.uk](mailto:enquiry@fairfordhistory.org.uk)**

**FHS AGM:** During the year Chris Hobson took on the role as Acting Chairman. The treasurer reported a satisfactory balance. There were fewer meetings so fewer expenses were incurred but less income from publications due to few sales opportunities. However, the increased membership provides a steady income. The membership fee will remain the same at £5. The report was approved. The Chairman reported that we now have the highest membership ever of 161 Members. A few statistics: 19 members don't live in Fairford although 7 of them live in the local area; the other 12 live as far afield as Yorkshire, Kent and Somerset. Events that have been held included the Farmor's School World on Your Doorstep and Edwin Cuss's photographic display will restart in 2022 as part of Fairford Festival. Publications issued were Fairford Year by Year, Tudor Fairford and Tudor Trail. More titles are planned for the forthcoming year. Donations to the Archive Room continue and we should be happy to receive more. Thank you to members of the Committee especially Richard Harrison as Jennie Sanford has replaced him as FTC representative and to Dave Matthews who has joined the Committee. The Committee of Chairman-Chris Hobson, Secretary-Alison Hobson, Treasurer-Gill Compton, Vice-Chairman-Ian Westlake, Syd Flatman, Edwin Cuss, Margaret Bishop as FCC Representative, Jennie Sanford as FTC Representative, Joanna Petty and Dave Matthews were all elected.

### **Woodchester Mansion by Liz Davenport**

Liz, the Woodchester Mansion Archivist, gave a very interesting and informed talk about how the house came to be built from 1857. It was originally designed by Pugin for William Leigh but Pugin later resigned and Benjamin Bucknall from Rodborough took over the project. Bucknall was influenced by the French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. The mixture of styles can be seen in the building. The building was left unfinished with floors and ceilings missing, walls unplastered and the builders' tools left in situ. William Leigh died and the money which had only been dribbling in from the sale of his lands in Australia ran out. The mansion is currently being restored by making it watertight and repairing the water damage. There is a colony of bats in the roof and its setting in Woodchester Park is beautiful. The connection with Fairford is that Benjamin Bucknall was the architect of St Thomas of Canterbury's Roman Catholic Church presbytery.

Liz emailed me the next day "Thank you for asking me to speak to your lovely group. You obviously have a flourishing group of people with an interest in history in Fairford, long may it continue! I hope to see some of you at Woodchester one day."

### **The London Road Garage by Syd Flatman**



Most of us in the surrounding area have at some point or other re-fueled our vehicles at the London Road Garage. So how did it come to be? Out there on its own, on the site of the old milestone that once read "London 80 miles, Cirencester 10". It opened in 1955, a humble affair consisting of three fuel pumps, with a small two-roomed concrete block kiosk selling cigarettes and matches as a sideline.

To the casual observer, the opening of this fuel stop appeared to be financial suicide. There was not a need, we were already suffering fuel supply overload. Fairford, for example, had four pumps at Busby's Garage at the Town Bridge. Four pumps at Lees Garage at the Hatherop turning. One pump at Bert Aston's Cycle Shop (now part of Londis) and one pump at East Glos Engineering by The Railway Inn. In Lechlade: Young's Garage, now the Cat's Pyjamas Gift Shop (frequented by super model Kate Moss and her daughter Lila Grace) again with four pumps. The Priory four pumps, more pumps at Harrison's at Kempford, Dingles at Quenington, Collett's at Southrop, Coln St Aldwyn and Poulton Post Offices, Arlington, Bibury and so on.

So, what was going on? Well, this was all part of a plan hatched by two brothers from Sunderland, Frank and Ronald Grierson. Going off piste now, but it's all integral to the story. During World War II a Scottish company called Taylor and MacDonald were awarded the contract to extract gravel for the construction of an airfield in readiness for the invasion of Europe, to be known as RAF Fairford. The General Manager in charge of extraction was Frank Grierson. Such was the abundance and the fine quality of the gravel deposits by the Whelford turning on the A417, that the company decided to put down roots, setting up a concrete block making plant after airfield construction was complete with Frank Grierson staying on as General Manager. Introduction of the block making plant was perfectly timed with the acute housing shortage after the war and the fact that Swindon had been designated as one of the towns to take in the London overspill.



The Greater London Council was paying the Swindon Corporation £500 for every family they rehoused. Large estates sprang up, Pinehurst, Gorsehill, Penhill and Walcot. Mass employee companies were to follow, Plessey, Garrard, Square D, Pressed Steel etc. Taylor and MacDonald, now calling themselves Taymac, were having to expand rapidly. My father joined the company in 1950 as a Maintenance Engineer after we moved from Tottenham. Concrete blocks were being produced like there was no tomorrow, thanks to the large labour pool of hardworking Polish refugees from their hostel in Fairford Park. In 1954 Taymac's purchased a quarter acre site at West End Gardens, Fairford, erecting the first of two semi-detached houses of course constructed of their own concrete blocks and who was the first occupant? None other than Frank Grierson's younger brother Ronald and his family fresh down from Sunderland.



Frank, I think, felt duty bound to help younger brother Ron. Frank did not see active service himself, but Ron was less fortunate having been captured by the Japanese. What horrors he had to endure was never known, not even to his loving wife. Ron's campaign medals went unclaimed. These were applied for by daughter-in-law Madeleine many years after Ron's passing. Ron worked for Taymac for a short while

then, as mentioned earlier, in 1955 leased a small area of land from the Company opening his fuel stop on the side of the A417.

Ron and his new filling station took on the Taymac fuel account and by the late 1950's both Frank and Ron were riding the crest of a financial wave but the storm clouds were gathering. Due to some financial irregularities coming to light in 1961, Frank was given a custodial sentence of four years. Ron, around this time, put his Filling Station up for sale. He had already planned his next move which led him to even greater riches, creating Agricultural Supply, a mushroom compost company which became the largest in the UK, also owning their own mushroom growing complex based in Herefordshire. Ron was now driving Austin Westminster motor cars and purchased the finest house in the Loaders, Lechlade's most prestigious address.



Ron died in 1986 aged 70. The business passed to son Peter, but by the end of the last Millennium due to cheap imports from the EU and the company giving extended credit, Agricultural Supply folded. The sad skeletal remains of this once state of the art business can still be seen at Sunhill, just north of Honeycomb Leaze. Ron

Grierson's legacy - his London Road Filling Station has endured, seeing off all the competition that are now just a distant memory.

### The mysterious case of the Horcott Spitfire - solved!

As a young boy Ivor Tully was one of the evacuees who was sent to Fairford to avoid the German attacks on London during the Second World War. In his memoirs he wrote:

"As well as the gliders, another plane made a forced landing. It was a Spitfire that crashed in a field quite close to the Napiers. [*Brigadier Vernon Napier and his wife Margaret lived in Horcott House so the aircraft crashed in one of the adjacent fields.*] Allegedly, when it didn't catch fire a spectator ran across to see if he could help, only to see the pilot sitting with the canopy pushed back. He was said to have uttered one expletive and died with a broken neck. I got all this information a long way down the line, only learning it when I got home from school. Then I hot-footed it to see it before it was taken away. Close up it was a marvellous plane, not much damaged it seems. The opinion was that the pilot was low on fuel and tried to get to our airfield but couldn't make it to safety just the other side of the hill. That might explain why it didn't catch fire as seemed the norm."

Having researched and written books on Royal Air Force casualties of the First and Second World Wars I tried to find details of the Spitfire that crashed at Horcott but I could not find any Spitfire that crashed at Horcott or Fairford which was puzzling as other Fairford residents also knew about the Spitfire crash. However, recently, almost by chance, I came across mention of an accident in an Air-Britain publication which stated "Spun into the ground off a turn at Horcott Farm near Fairford during an air test." The mystery was solved and the reason that I had difficulty in finding information on the event was that it was **NOT** a Spitfire!

The aircraft that crashed at Horcott was a Hawker Hurricane Mark IIc serial number LB596 which crashed on 16 June 1943. Ivor Tully's mistake in thinking it was a Spitfire is understandable as he was quite young and the Hurricane was similar to the Spitfire in some respects which often led to confusion. During the recent Queen's Platinum Jubilee one television 'expert' made exactly the same mistake when describing the aircraft taking part in the flypast over London.



VICKERS-SUPERMARINE SPITFIRE



HAWKER HURRICANE

Having found the date of the crash at Horcott further research provided details of the accident and the pilot who died. The pilot was Squadron Leader Peter Elkins Bennett who was stationed at 5 Maintenance Unit at RAF Kemble. The aircraft was brand new having been built in the Hawker factory at Langley, Buckinghamshire and delivered to Kemble in May for final preparation before being delivered to a squadron. Squadron Leader Bennett was making an air test to ensure the aircraft was ready for delivery. It is unlikely that the aircraft ran out of fuel as air tests did not usually last very long and the aircraft was just a few minutes away from Kemble. It is more likely that the aircraft stalled during a low level slow-speed turn and the pilot could not recover before it hit the ground in a flat spin. The lack of an explosion and fire from a flat spin was not uncommon as the vertical rate of descent was much lower than a headlong dive into the ground.

Peter Bennett was born in Southampton in 1912. He attended the 'Nautical' College at Pangbourne and joined the Royal Naval Reserve on 1 May 1929 as a Midshipman and was later commissioned as a Sub-Lieutenant. He learned to fly in a De Havilland Tiger Moth biplane at the London Aeroplane Club at Stag Lane, Edgware and received his pilot certificate on 16 October 1934. He then transferred to the Royal Air Force as a sergeant and was posted to 3 Flying Training School at Grantham in March 1936 for Service flying training after which he was granted a Short Service Commission. One of his fellow students at Grantham was the South African Adolph Gysbert Malan who, known as 'Sailor' Malan, became one of the most successful and famous fighter pilots of the Second World War. In December 1936 Peter Bennett was posted to 220 Squadron at Bircham Newton flying Avro Anson twin-engine coastal reconnaissance aircraft but in October 1937 he transferred to 201 Squadron at Calshot which flew the Saro London biplane flying boat. After then being posted to 209 Squadron at Felixstowe where he flew larger flying boats including the Short Singapore, Supermarine Stranraer and the unsuccessful Saro Lerwick. Soon after war was declared in September 1939 209 Squadron moved to Scotland where it flew anti-submarine patrols and Peter received a Mention in Despatches for his work during this period.

At the outbreak of war his Short Service Commission was terminated but he immediately re-engaged in the Royal Air Force Reserve of Officers. By January 1941 he was a Flight Lieutenant and a flying instructor at 16 Elementary Flying Training School at Derby which trained ab initio pilots on the Tiger Moth and Miles Magister light aircraft. Having been promoted to Squadron Leader on 1 December 1941 Peter Bennett was awarded an Air Force Cross on 31 March 1942 the citation for which reads "This officer commenced the duties of flying instructor on 1st January 1941. He has displayed great skill and keenness which, combined with his operational experience, have been largely responsible for the high standard of efficiency of his flight, both from a flying and administrative point of view. In addition to the administrative work, his flying hours exceed those of any instructor in his flight. Squadron Leader Bennett is a first class pilot and instructor and has proved a valuable asset to the station". Peter Bennett was obviously a highly regarded pilot and officer and would probably have been posted to command an operational squadron had he lived.

On 17 June 1942 Peter married Esme Bryde Lange Adie at Bristol. Esme was originally from the Shetland Islands and the couple set up home in the Henleaze suburb of Bristol. An added twist to the tragedy that occurred at Horcott was that in Edinburgh on 16 December 1943, exactly six months after the death of her husband, Esme gave birth to a son who she named Peter. Probate was granted to Esme and Peter's mother Gertrude Madeline St Clair Bennett and amounted to £1,390 2 shillings 7 pence although Esme would also have received a War Widow's pension. She remarried in 1964 and died in 2004.

Squadron Leader Peter Elkins Bennet was buried in the church cemetery at Kemble and rests alongside six other airmen in the small Commonwealth War Graves Commission plot. One of the airmen was Canadian, one was a New Zealander and one was Polish showing the spread of nationalities of the airmen who served in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. Three of these airmen also died while flying Hurricanes. By a strange coincidence one of the other airmen was also named Bennett, the New Zealander called Leonard William who died in similar circumstances to that of Peter Bennet when his Hurricane stalled and spun into the ground while on the approach to Kemble during a ferry flight.



So the Horcott crash did not involve a Spitfire but it did involve the sacrifice of a courageous young man; not one of the Battle of Britain's 'Few' but one of the many.

CMH