

BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE

VOLUME 7, NO 4 AUTUMN 2015

BLHA Autumn Event

A visit to

The Church of St Peter de Merton with St Cuthbert, Bedford

on Monday 26th October 2015 at 2.30pm

Beyond the Green at the top end of Bedford's High Street lies the parish church of St Peter's, on a site where people have worshipped for over 1,000 years.

An illustrated presentation will be followed by a brief introduction by Rosemary Evans, Head of the Friends of St Peter's and enthusiastic researcher of the church's history. Masonry in the tower and chancel dating back to the late 10th or early 11th century is a reminder of the building's great age, particular interest arising from Bedford's position at the time of the creation of the Danelaw Boundary. There will be the opportunity to go up the turreted spiral staircase into the Ringers' Chamber in the Saxon tower to see a unique runic stone (which bears no runes!) and, at ground level, the magnificent South doorway and other little known features of the church, extended by the Victorians from 1845–1885. You will be at liberty to wander freely around the church and churchyard, which contains a rare well, older even than St Peter's itself. Refreshments will be provided and parking is available opposite the church. The visit should end by 4.00pm.

Details to be announced and sent to Society Secretaries

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Contributions are very welcome **and needed**: please telephone the editor before
sending any material.

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From the Editor

Still no surge of contributions from members or societies, so I must rely on articles that have been published elsewhere or information that is passed to me from which I can produce an article and the items in this issue, with one exception, have come from those sources.

Also, for only the second time since I have been Editor, absolutely no material for the Notes and News section has been received. Let's be charitable and put it down to the holiday season, however, I regard this as an essential part of HIB, so would like to receive some contributions in the future about the activities of your society.

In this issue we start with the second article in John Thurston's series of 'Disasters from Bedfordshire's Skies' relating the unlikely career and death of the 11th Duchess of Bedford as an aviation pioneer.

The story of the Langford village cobbler follows. It tells of an unassuming and devoted family man who 'in an extraordinary example of dedication and daring' won the Military Medal in the First World War. This article was the result of information supplied to me by his granddaughter.

Finally, we discover that the concept of the care home is not new as we print a very welcome piece from Margaret Roberts about Warden Abbey which fulfilled that function from the 14th century until the dissolution!

I hope you all found the holiday season enjoyable, but now that the nights are drawing in, perhaps you can put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard to record the results of your research or details of your society's activities and send them to me. It would be very much appreciated.

TED MARTIN

Disasters from Bedfordshire's Skies

2.The Flying Duchess

Mary du Caurroy Tribe was born on 26 September 1865 at Stockbridge in Hampshire. She was the second daughter of the Reverend Walter Tribe, the Anglican Archdeacon of Lahore in India. When the Reverend and his wife returned to India, Mary and her elder sister were left behind in the care of an uncle and aunt.



Mary du Caurroy Tribe, 10 May 1898

On a happier note she met her future husband, Lord Herbrand Russell, whom she married in Barrickpore on 31 January 1888.

In 1893, upon the death of his childless brother (George Russell, 1852–1892), Lord Herbrand inherited his brother's titles to become the 11th Duke of Bedford and Mary became the Duchess.

Mary found the atmosphere stultifying at Woburn, but with her husband's support, she took up activities from shooting to ice-skating, canoeing to bird-watching, with such determination that she soon excelled at them all.



Mary also threw her energies into a number of major projects. One of these was the establishment of a Cottage Hospital in Woburn. Mary had had an interest in nursing since her school days and she had the means to fund a hospital at No 1 Leighton Street,

Woburn. This opened in 1898 and provided treatment for local patients free of charge. Further expansion took place to provide a grander, more up-to-date, purpose-built building and after two years' construction the appropriately named 'Marylands' opened in 1903 providing care for 12 patients from Woburn and the surrounding parishes.

It attracted the attention of many distinguished visitors, including Edith Cavell who visited in 1909.

During the First World War, the premises became part of the Military Hospital at Woburn Abbey. Mary, although now aged nearly 50, devoted herself to nursing and in 1917 assumed the post of surgeon's assistant. She would never expect her staff to do anything in hospital that she wouldn't do herself. So she'd be up at 5.45am scrubbing floors and getting the operating theatres ready for the surgeons. Mary became a very accomplished theatre nurse and in some cases did minor operations herself.

By the end of the War some 2,453 battlefield casualties had been treated. Following the War the Cottage Hospital became the Woburn Surgical Hospital with Mary continuing her nursing career for many more years.

One of Mary's other interests was as a collector and watcher of birds. She took a keen interest in bird migration and between 1909 and 1914 spent a substantial amount of time on Fair Isle often in the company of William Eagle Clarke, a renowned ornithologist and curator at Leeds Museum and Keeper at the Royal Scottish Museum. Mary's journals, *A Bird Watcher's Diary*, were published privately in 1938 after her death.

Mary was also politically active being a member of the Women's Tax Resistance League, an offshoot group from the Women's Social and Political Union which used tax resistance to protest against the disenfranchisement of women.

She was rewarded with a number of awards including Dame Commander of the British Empire (1928), Dame of Grace, Venerable Order of Saint John of Jerusalem and investment as a Fellow of the Linnean Society of Imperial College. She was also a member of the Society of Radiographers.

Mary's enduring fame, however, was to come from an activity she took up when she was already 61. After taking to the air for a short flight, she so enjoyed the sensation (it apparently helped with her tinnitus) that she decided to take up aviation as a hobby. Accompanied usually by Flight

Lieutenant Barnard she soon learnt to fly competently (she kept two biplanes in her private hangar at Woburn Abbey).

In August 1929, along with Barnard, she flew to India and back in a world record eight days. The following year they set another record by flying Mary's Fokker plane ('The Spider') to South Africa and back in 20 days, with the Duchess qualifying for her 'A' pilot's licence.



The 'First All-Women's Flying Meeting'

Sywell Aerodrome, Northants, Saturday, 19 September 1931

Attending the opening (left to right): The Hon Mrs Victor Bruce, Molley Olney, The Duchess of Bedford and The Countess of Drogheda

On 9 September 1931 Mary piloted herself from Woburn to open the world's first All Women's Flying Meeting at Sywell in Northants.

Flying in the 1930s was in its infancy and on a number of occasions when she was flying with Barnard they had some close calls. Many times they would have to stop off to refuel, often on runways made of sand. Sometimes they would be stranded in the middle of nowhere and, if something went wrong, they might have to wait days for a spare part for the aircraft.

It could also be quite dangerous. On one of her flights with Barnard they had been flying over a desert area and it was only when they landed that they realised they had two bullet holes in the aircraft. Neither had realised at the time that they'd been shot at by people on the ground.

Her accomplishments as a flyer were indeed phenomenal considering her age and deafness which was evidenced by her many world record times.

Later, she employed Flight Lieutenant Preston who was to plot the route for her last fateful flight. Mary had flown for 199 hours and four minutes and needed just 56 minutes of flying time to reach the magic 200 hours. She desperately wanted this because she believed her pilot's licence might not be renewed because of her deafness and the fact that she was, by then, 71.

On Monday 22 March 1937 she set out from the aerodrome at Woburn Abbey in her DeHavilland Gypsy Moth to view the extensive flooding of the Fens which had just taken place.

She headed out towards Cambridgeshire and, despite an intensive search by the RAF and others, Mary, a truly remarkable woman, was never seen again.

The consensus of opinion was that she had flown out over the sea by mistake, ran out of fuel and had gone down in the Channel.

While her body was never recovered, the four struts between the wings were washed up at four different places on the East Coast and were identified by her ground engineer.

She left a husband and a son, Hastings Russell, who would later become the 12th Duke of Bedford.



Captain Barnard (pilot), the Duchess of Bedford and R Little (Navigator)
Prior to a UK-India flight, 1930

JOHN THURSTON

OBITUARY FOR MARY, DUCHESS OF BEDFORD

Flight magazine, 1 April 1937

It is with universal regret that the death of the Duchess of Bedford has to be presumed. On Monday, March 22 she set out in a Moth from her aerodrome at Woburn Abbey on what was intended to be a short flight, and since then, despite intensive search by RAF aeroplanes and others, no trace of her has been found. She was aged 71.

Very unostentatiously, both the Duke and Duchess of Bedford have done a great deal of useful public work. Future ages will chiefly remember the work both of them have done for zoology and ornithology. *Flight* is naturally chiefly concerned with the Duchess' career as an airwoman. When she was 61 she set out as a passenger in Capt C D Barnard's Fokker (with Bristol Jupiter [engine]) named *Princess Xenia*. This was the machine in which Capt McIntosh and Col FitzMaurice started off on an attempt to fly the Atlantic, though they soon returned to Baldonnell. Afterwards McIntosh and Bert Hinkler started in the same machine to fly a great circle course to India, but were forced down in Poland in appalling weather. On the Duchess' first flight to India she and Capt Barnard were forced down at Bushire by engine trouble, and waited at that very warm spot for ten weeks for a new engine. Then the Duchess bought the Fokker and renamed it *The Spider*. Its bad luck immediately left it. The Duchess immediately engaged Capt Barnard as her private pilot, and in August 1929 they

both flew to India and back in eight days, which was a record and a very fine one. Next year they made another record by flying *The Spider* to South Africa and back in twenty days. The Duchess then qualified for her 'A' licence.

Nearly ten years ago she did *Flight* the honour of writing her impressions of her first year's experience as owner of a Moth; she began flying in an open machine and one cannot help feeling that she would have expressed the hope that she might finish it in that way. Among the first British private owners, Her Grace remained to the end a devotee of the open cockpit aeroplane. Last year the Editor of *Flight* had a most interesting correspondence with her on this subject. To her the small cabin aeroplane was not to be compared with the open type. She loved the great outdoors and did not mind the amount of draught which found its way around the screen. Her deafness kept the engine noise from becoming distressing, and one suspects that when Her Grace used cabin aeroplanes she did so almost entirely out of consideration for her pilots.

By her example the Duchess of Bedford did a very great deal to popularise flying, not only because of her many tours with such pilots as Barnard and Preston, but even more in her personal gift of sensing the kind of trip which would be 'worth while'. One of her favourite pastimes was to get among and above the clouds to admire in perfect peace the marvellous formations and colours there to be found. One one occasion she went up with her pilot in a Moth to 10,000ft or so to see an eclipse of the sun; and she *did* see it. 'It is', she said, 'fortunate that there is not to be another eclipse for 200 years, for obviously the sun was very cross about it, as he has hardly been seen in England since.'

Mary, Duchess of Bedford, must now, alas, be presumed to have made her last flight. Her friends will feel that she would have preferred the end to come during the pursuit of the pastime she loved so well.



Postcard from the Front, 1918

The Cobbler Hero



TEXT OF THE CARD

'Remember me to all at Home. Am quite well, hoping this finds you, & all, the same
(Cheeri-oh)

(Fondest Love) from your true and loving husband Herbert.

XXXXXX'

Addressed to:

Mrs H Thompson, Church End, Langford, Biggleswade, Bedfordshire, England

This card was found in Linda Franklin's mother's effects after she died in 2011. Linda says:

'She used to show it to me from time to time and tell me to keep it, and some others she had kept, as they were very precious. Herbert Charles Thompson who sent the card was my Grandad and he was the village bootmaker.

He served in France as a driver with the Royal Field Artillery and was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field while saving the guns and returning to help other soldiers under fire. He had his horse shot from under him and he kept the shrapnel that went into the horse's neck and I remember him showing it to me.'

Herbert Thompson was born at Scrupps Farm, Langford Road, Biggleswade, in 1894. His father was Fred Thompson who had a shoe shop in Hitchin Street, Biggleswade, and was also a market gardener. His mother was Laura Thompson and their children were Herbert, Percy and Fred Junior. At the 1911 census the boys were all living on the farm – Herbert was 17, Percy 15 and Fred 4. Herbert was working for his father, shoe-mending and Percy worked at an ironmongers. Both older boys went on to serve in France. Herbert joined the Army on 31 October 1916 when he was 22 years and 8 months.

Just over a year before he married Olive Annie Roberts in Langford church on her birthday: 23 October 1915. Herbert was then stationed in East Sussex before being sent to France. Olive moved there with him as they now had a baby girl, Marjorie May, born in May 1916. Sadly, Marjorie died at 10 months and he was allowed compassionate leave to be with his wife but then he had to go to fight in France.

Herbert's Military Medal was the last awarded for gallantry in the opening phase of the Kaiser's battle in May 1918 when:



Olive and Herbert Thompson

'Driver Herbert Thompson won the Military Medal, together with five other drivers in an extraordinary example of dedication and daring. As the Germans were advancing, a section of the Royal Field Artillery found itself under attack and for a while it looked as if their guns would be captured by the enemy. Driver Thompson and his comrades were having none of this and they galloped to the rescue, bringing back both the guns and two wounded gunners as shells exploded all around them.'

Biggleswade and the Great War: Our Own Flesh and Blood, by Kenneth Wood, p 124.

His award was reported in the *Biggleswade Chronicle* on Friday, 14 June 1918:

'We learn with pleasure that the Military Medal has been awarded to Driver Herbert Thompson, of the Royal Field Artillery, for bravery in the field. He is the eldest son of Mr Fred Thompson, bootmaker, etc., and is widely known and prior to the war he was a very prominent member of the Thursday Football Club. He has served on the Western Front for some 14 months and has been in many grim struggles. The Military Medal has been awarded to Driver Thompson and five other drivers for bringing back to a place of safety two of the guns during the great German offensive. The guns were nearly two miles away and a big bombardment was in progress when the drivers set out but they succeeded, despite German gas shells, in bringing back the guns although several of the horses and men were wounded. They also brought with them two gunners who had been wounded. Driver Thompson has sent home to his father a piece of shrapnel that was extracted from his horse's neck.'

Herbert left the army on 28 April 1919 and bought the white cottage in Langford which was then 73 Church Street and he opened a boot and shoe repair shop in the shed next to the house. They had a son Teddy Thompson in 1919 and then Gwendoline Thompson (Linda's mother) in 1929 and lived at the cottage until Herbert's death on 1 November 1966. Olive then moved to a little cottage opposite the Shopping Basket store until she died in 1982. Herbert was known as one of the Iron Backs in the Biggleswade Thursday football team.



Above is a photo of his house in Church Street where he had his shoe repair shop. He is standing at the gate with his daughter Gwen Thompson and her friend Pamela Brown. Later, part of the house was converted

into his shoe repair shop instead of his working in the shed at the side where he had his big machinery where he polished the leather. Leather was soaked in tin baths on the floor. Linda remembers that he always had tacks in his mouth while cutting the leather to the shape of the sole. During the Second World War he repaired boots for the soldiers who were stationed at the Church's 'old tin room' opposite the house. Herbert's cottage is still there, but has been much modernised.

Ralph Turner in *Langford: A Village Walk* says:

'Next we come to Crispin Cottage, this was the home of Herbert Thompson, the cobbler. Herbert had his cobbler's shed in the garden just north of the cottage and boys used to visit him to get studs in their boots to slide with, and in return they had to deliver repaired boots and shoes to all parts of the village. In severe winter weather lots of folks used to go over the common skating on the cow pond; one of these was Herbert. It is said he always seemed to skate with his bowler hat on and his scarf blowing behind him. For many years his wooden skates with steel runners were hanging up in his cobbler's shop.'



The Military Medal (MM) was (until 1993) a military decoration awarded to personnel of the British Army and other services, and formerly also to personnel of other Commonwealth countries, below commissioned rank, for bravery in battle on land.

The medal was established on 25 March 1916. It was the equivalent for other ranks of the Military Cross (MC), which was awarded to commissioned officers and, rarely, to warrant officers, although WOs could also be awarded the MM. The MM ranked below the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM), which was also awarded to non-commissioned members of the Army.

Recipients of the Military Medal are entitled to use the letters 'MM' after their name. Over 115,000 awards were made for actions during the First World War. Additionally, over 5,700 bars were awarded, as well as 180 second bars. There was one instance of a third bar being awarded; this was made to Private Ernest Albert Corey, who was a stretcher bearer in the Australian 55th Infantry Battalion, on the Western Front.

During the Second World War, over 15,000 awards of the MM were made. It was occasionally bestowed upon non-British or Commonwealth subjects, and also awarded to some civilians. In 1993, the Military Medal was discontinued. Since then the Military Cross has been awarded to personnel of all ranks within the British honours system.



Herbert Thompson, MM

With thanks to Linda Franklin for supplying all the biographical details and the photographs for this article. Why not send me information on your village or town's First World War hero?

TED MARTIN

Warden Abbey: **your local residential care home**

In common with other monasteries, Warden Abbey (founded between 22 December 1135 and 24 March 1136) had to undertake various secular obligations, which were imposed by the monarch. These commitments included being treated as a retirement home, and over the years, several kings are known to have sent loyal servants to live out their days in comfort at the Abbey. When the royal pensioner either resigned his livery or died, another would be nominated to take his place.

The first recorded instance of this system dates to 11 April 1314, when one Roger le Portor was sent to the abbot and convent of Warden to receive for life ‘the necessaries of life’ (meaning a pleasant chamber with bedding, candles and sufficient fuel for his fire; food – meat or fish daily – ale, barbering and laundry; plus a little money for his other personal needs) in place of Richard de Rynwode (deceased) and on 21 May 1317, John Broun, who had long served Edward II in the garrison at Berwick-on-Tweed, was sent to Warden for his retirement.

On 12 September 1334, Warin de Bedford, one of Edward III’s falconers, received approval to live out his retirement at Warden where he was to be given such maintenance as Roger le Portor (deceased) had received at the request of Edward I and on 7 March 1367, William de Beyford was sent there after his good service to the king, to take such maintenance in that house for life as Warin de Stanford (deceased) had had there at the king’s request. On 6 February 1393, John Louwyke, serjeant of Richard II’s wardrobe, was sent to Warden to replace William de Beyford (deceased), with approval granted on 6 July 1407 for Thomas Dalahowe, Henry IV’s serjeant, to do likewise. Henry VIII continued this tradition when he sent Walron de Choen (sewer of the chamber) and Roger More (clerk of the king’s bake-house) to Warden in 1521 and it is likely that these were some of the last pensioners to benefit from Warden’s hospitality before the dissolution on 4 December 1537.

MARGARET ROBERTS



Walter Espec, lord of the manor of Old Warden and founder of Warden Abbey in 1135.