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Odds and ends

Change of programme

Our speaker on 12 January will now be Arthur Moreton, vice-chairman and immediate past chairman of the North Weald Airfield Museum Association, who will tell us about the history of this illustrious airfield. The first part of his article on North Weald during the Second World War appears on page 2 of this issue.

Living history – the purlieu hedge*

GEORGINA GREEN

When the Epping Forest Act was passed in 1878, it contained a section 7 (iii) under which the conservators were to preserve the purlieu bank, something which most of us know nothing about. W R Fisher in his authoritative book, *The Forest of Essex*, published in 1887, explains that the purlieus were areas adjacent to the legal forest over which some, but not all, of the forest laws applied. They were a sort of buffer zone which originated in 1215 in the Magna Carta. According to Fisher, 'part of the purlieu bank still remains at Epping . . . this and the "purlieu farm" on the east side of Epping Thicks are believed to be the only remaining traces of the purlieus of Epping Forest'.

So where is, or was, the purlieu bank? According to B Winstone in his book about St John's Chapel, Epping (1885), the purlieu bank was still visible then on Bell Common and could be traced from Ivy Chimneys Road to the field between Hemnall Street and the High Road, on through the field adjoining the 'Duke of Wellington', and so on through the town. There is little evidence of this today.

The exact location of the Purlieu Farm is not given anywhere, and it was by chance that I came across it, mentioned in the papers drawn up by the Epping Forest Commission in 1875. These included a map which shows the Purlieu Farm near Piercing Hill, Theydon Bois. The present-day OS map shows it as 'Little Gregories'.

By now I had become quite intrigued and decided to try to trace the boundaries of the forest in this area, as quoted by Fisher in his book. This lists the Perambulations of 1301 and 1641: these were the boundaries as agreed by a number of gentlemen summoned for that purpose. The route in 1641 was easier to trace and it seems to coincide well with the limits of the physical forest as shown by the Chapman and Andre map of 1777. The route in Theydon Bois was:

' . . . from the church of Theydon Bois, to the house of the rector, to Theydon Green Gate and thence by the purlieu hedge to the corner of the hedge called Piershorne Corner, and by the purlieu hedge to the end of Hawcock Lane [the turn off to Ivy Chimneys] and so to the bank near the end of the town of Epping called "Purlieu Bank" . . . '

It seems fairly clear that this line was similar to the limit of the forest today: up Piercing Hill, along Little Gregories Lane, north beside the golf course, but then continuing straight north, passing Great Gregories Farm on to 'Hawcock Lane' (Ivy Chimneys Road) and Bell Common.

What about the 1301 Perambulation? This was not so easy to ascertain, unless one happens to know where Gilbert de Theydon, John Sprigg, Roger atte Fryth and William le Gardiner lived in 1301, as the boundaries bordered their estates. However, I have been able to discover that Gilbert de Theydon was the lord of the Gregories manor in 1301 and it seems probable that his manor house was near to the present Great Gregories Farm, and that his estate would have covered the present farmland.

The perambulation does quote 'the hedge of the said Gilbert' as part of the boundary, so I decided to try dating the hedge to see if it could be the old purlieu hedge. Dr Max Hooper discovered that, by and large, the age of a hedge can be estimated by counting the number of different species of trees and shrubs growing along a 30-yard length and multiplying this by 100. To try to be more accurate, I checked several consecutive lengths and worked out an average.

The hedge on the south side of Little Gregories Lane included holly, hornbeam, hawthorn, oak, beech, hazel, silver birch, sycamore and elder in a 90-yard stretch, with an average of 6.3 species over 30 yards. In this case I was only able to look at one side of the hedge and it is possible that there was rose growing on the other side.

The hedge growing between the golf course and farmland and stretching from Little Gregories to Great Gregories Farm was even more interesting. A length of

180 yards was examined and included hawthorn, elder, ash, rose, hornbeam, silver birch, oak, apple, field maple, sallow, blackthorn, hazel, holly, sycamore and elm. Averaging this out for one 30-yard stretch gives us seven species, which would indicate that the hedge could be 700 years old. If so, it was there in 1301 when the forest boundaries were listed. How many people have walked along the hedge over those 700 years, I wonder? We may have lost the purlieu bank, but perhaps we have found the purlieu hedge.

* The author asks us to point that this article was originally written some time ago and may not represent the hedge as it now exists.

RAF North Weald in the Second World War – I

ARTHUR MORETON*

This summer saw the nation commemorating the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and this gives the opportunity for a brief look at the part North Weald Airfield and its community played in this global conflict.

As a Sector station of number 11 Fighter Group, RAF North Weald was put on 'War Alert' in August 1939. The squadrons resident at this time were 56 and 151 with Hawker Hurricanes, plus 604 Squadron equipped with Bristol Blenheim twin-engine fighters.

Dawn on Sunday, 3 September 1939 saw the North Weald squadrons dispersed around the airfield under armed guard and ready for whatever was ahead. The station records for that day show the entry: 'war has broken out with Germany only.'

During this tense time accidents were inevitable. One tragic incident ('the Battle of Barking Creek') occurred on 6 September when a No 56 Squadron pilot was killed after two North Weald Hurricanes were shot down by Spitfires from Hornchurch who mistook them for the enemy. The unfortunate pilot of one of the Hurricanes, Pilot Officer Hulton Harrop, who is buried in St Andrew's cemetery, was the first pilot to be shot down over England in the Second World War – albeit by his own side.

During the so-called Phoney War, 11 Group carried out an extensive programme of co-ordination with radar and Observer Corps units, who were soon to be tested to the limit. However, there was little work for the pilots during the harsh winter of 1939/40 as the weather prevented flying and there were signs that morale was beginning to suffer.

The station's mood was lifted by the arrival of a new commander in January 1940. Wing Commander Francis Victor Beamish, one of the RAF's most charismatic and respected figures, proved to be just the man to lead a front-line fighter station in battle. He flew regularly in combat and ensured that the squadrons remained sharp and hungry for a fight.

This was just as well, for, during the German invasion of France in May/June 1940, elements of both Nos 56 and 151 squadrons were sent to the continent to replace the losses sustained by other RAF squadrons.

Both North Weald Hurricane squadrons sustained heavy losses during this period and their battles over the beaches of Dunkirk during the evacuation of the allied troops were extremely costly. Despite this setback, there was little time for any sort of recuperation for, as Winston Churchill said, the Battle of Britain was about to begin.

During his visit to North Weald on 27 June 1940, King George VI presented the DSO and DFC to Flt Lt Lee of No 56 Squadron in recognition of his actions in the skies above France and the English Channel.

The Battle *for* Britain began during the spring and summer of 1940 with the Luftwaffe initially targeting coastal towns and shipping. The North Weald squadrons quickly became heavily involved in fierce encounters with the Germans and many good men were killed. Everybody at the airfield felt the losses intensely but, under Beamish's command, the station pulled together to do whatever was necessary to give the pilots the best possible chance in combat.

The next phase of the battle saw the Luftwaffe turn its attention to the destruction of the RAF's airfields. The first major raid on North Weald airfield took place on the afternoon of 24 August, when more than 200 bombs were dropped. At around 4.30 pm German bombers and fighters, harassed by the defending RAF Hurricanes, headed for the airfield at around 15,000 feet and proceeded to bomb in a straight line through the western part of the village across the Epping to Ongar road, before hitting the airfield itself.

The Officers' Mess, the Officers' and Airmen's Married Quarters, a power house and other facilities were damaged. Nine young members of the Essex Regiment, who were attached to the airfield for ground defence, were among those killed that day and, in North Weald High Road, the old Post Office, a cottage and the Woolpack pub were wrecked.

German attacks on the airfields of south-east England continued into early September and the battles that took place in the skies over Essex were particularly brutal. So brutal that 56 Squadron lost 11 aircraft in just five days of fighting and 151 Squadron was reduced to just 10 serviceable machines. The loss of pilots on 31 August was so high that both squadrons became non-operational and were withdrawn to Boscombe Down and Digby to re-form. Their replacement squadrons – Nos 249, 46 and 245 – had little time to get used to their new surroundings before plunging into action.

On 3 September, just as the fighters were taking off, the Luftwaffe again bombed North Weald. The damage was substantial with aircraft, hangars, living quarters, the operations room and other station buildings

destroyed – leaving five people dead and 39 injured. Unfortunately, during the fierce fighting in the skies over Essex two Blenheims of 25 Squadron were shot down by Hurricanes of 46 Squadron from Stapleford.

The attacks exacerbated the exhaustion that all the airfield felt, but Beamish was an inspiration throughout.

Mid-September brought an opportunity for the station to catch its breath when the German attacks on airfields abated, but it was not long before the fighters were again in demand to combat German raids over London. Throughout this period, North Weald played a pivotal role in the struggle to keep the skies above the capital clear of enemy aircraft. Losses were heavy, but many in North Weald thought that at least the threat to the airfields had passed.

Sadly, they were wrong, for, on 29 October, just a few days before the Battle of Britain ended, the station was bombed again, killing six and wounding 42. This attack was an agonising end to a defensive battle that had seen North Weald and her resident squadrons emerge with a great deal of credit.

However . . . On 11 November a large force of fighters and bombers of the Italian Air Force approached the East Coast. They were met by Hurricanes of 46 and 257 squadrons who claimed the destruction of six and 11 aircraft, respectively.

Throughout this period 25 Squadron continued the battle in the night skies, while actively converting from its Blenheims to the new radar-equipped Bristol Beaufighter. In September one of its pilots destroyed a German Dornier 17 and a Heinkel 111 in one night.

Forty-one aircrew from North Weald and its satellite airfield at Stapleford Tawney were killed during the Battle of Britain period (officially 10 July to 31 October), along with 17 people who died on the ground during raids on the airfield. But thanks to them and their comrades on the ground and in the air, the airfield was never put out of action.

*Arthur Moreton is vice-chairman and immediate past chairman of the North Weald Airfield Museum Association, a charitable trust which runs the North Weald Airfield Museum at Ad Astra House (the former station office of RAF North Weald) near to the old main entrance of the airfield. The museum is open each weekend from Easter to the end of October between noon and 5pm (last entry 4pm). This article was first published in *The Hurricane*, the Association's newsletter in May 2005, and is published here by kind permission of the author and the NWAMA. Part II will be published in *Newsletter 168*.

The hatchments in St Mary's Church, Chigwell

RICHARD MORRIS

The set of 17 hatchments in St Mary's Church, Chigwell, are the largest collection in Essex and within the top three in England. The hatchments have recently been cleaned and restored, thanks to a grant of £29,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

A hatchment or funeral escutcheon is a painting of the arms of the deceased on a canvas or wooden diamond-shaped panel enclosed in a black frame. Sometimes the family motto appears beneath the coat of arms, but often it is replaced by the words: *Mors janua vitae* (Death the gateway to life) or *Resurgam* (I shall rise again). Hatchments were formerly hung in front of the house of the deceased, as a sign of mourning, and were later placed in the parish church.

Some simple heraldic rules make it fairly easy to tell the status and sex of the deceased:

- If the background is all black, this refers to a bachelor, spinster, widow or widower.
- Where the left hand (dexter) half is black and the right hand (sinister) half is white, a married man has died and his wife survives him.
- Where the dexter is white and the sinister black, the wife has died and her husband survives.

Other rules with regard to the arms emblazoned on the shield also reflect the sex and married status of the deceased. The 17 hatchments in St Mary's date from 1656 to 1872, and include those in memory of:

Isabella Mary Fane (died 1838). The wife of R G C Fane, and eldest daughter of Admiral Sir Eliab Harvey of Rolls Park, Chigwell. [Married woman, husband surviving.] The hatchment of another of the Admiral's daughters, Emma, and that of her husband General Sir William Cornwallis Eustace, may be seen in the Church of St Mary the Virgin, at Little Sampford, in north Essex.

Lady Louisa Harvey (died 1841). The wife of Admiral Sir Eliab Harvey of Rolls Park. [Widow.] The hatchment of Admiral Sir Eliab Harvey may be seen in St Andrew's Church, Hempstead, in north Essex.

Edmund Denny (died 1656). Lived at Brook House, Chigwell. [Married man, wife surviving.]

Francis Comyns (died 1696). Lived at the White Hart, Chigwell. He married Anne, widow of Edmund Denny. [Widower.]

Mary Hodgson (died 1837). Lived at the Bowls, Chigwell. [Widow.]

William Scott (died 1725). Lived at Woolston Hall on the road to Abridge, the family home for many generations. The Scotts were Lords of the Manor of Woolston. [Widower.]

Robert Bodle (died 1851). Lived at Woolston Hall. His father was a cousin of George Scott, the last Scott to live at Woolston Hall. [Married man, wife surviving.]

Robert Knight (died 1744). Lived at Luxborough. He was the cashier of the South Sea Company. [Widower.]

John Bramston (died 1718). He lived at Chigwell Hall, although the family home of this well-known Essex family was Skreens, at Roxwell. [Married man, wife surviving.]

Caroline Elizabeth Abdy (died 1838). Wife of J R Abdy of Albyns, and eldest daughter of James Hatch. [Married woman, husband surviving.]

The hatchments are displayed in the roof of the South aisle at St Mary's. The church has many other memorials of distinction including the Harsnett monumental brass (1631) and the delightful monument

to Thomas Colshill, who died in 1595, his wife and two daughters, who all kneel at a prayer desk.

Review article: Gin, Wine and Horses

Jane Kidd: *Gilbeys, Wine and Horses* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1997).

Earlier this year a book was passed on to me which did not seem very promising and which, mistakenly, I felt was boring corporate history. However, as I began to read I realised that the story had a tenuous connection with this area and was far from boring.

The book relates the history of the Gilbey family of gin and wine fame and, particularly, Sir Walter Gilbey who with his younger brother, Alfred, founded the family business.

Walter Gilbey was born on 2 May 1831 in Bishop's Stortford the seventh of six previous surviving children. His father, Henry, was landlord of the Bell Inn at Stansted when he married (1814) but gave this up to become a coachman. Improvements in the design and springs of coaches and the growth of the macadamised road network had led to a boom in the coaching trade.

In 1824 Henry set up his own company to run from Bishop's Stortford, through Epping Forest to the Bull Inn at Aldgate. Coachmen were local heroes and greatly admired. 'Old Harry Gilbey' became famous after a great drive through one of the heaviest snow storms ever recorded in Britain on 26 December 1836. A poem records his efforts.

This life came to an end with the advent of the Eastern Counties Railway to Chelmsford in 1839 and the Northern and Eastern Railway to Harlow in 1841. Henry Gilbey refused to believe that coaching was finished and this led to financial disaster and Henry's death in 1842. The Gilbeys were penniless.

At 13 Walter Gilbey became an office boy and began to drive carriages and ride horses: he said later he had found 'the joy of his life'. At 19 he was a solicitor's clerk and loved the bustle of the City and the House of Lords. In those days 250,000 horses worked in London and he noticed that many were worked very hard.

In 1853 Walter and his younger brother, Alfred, went to the Crimea as pay clerks. They were soon aware of the inefficiencies of the medical and military aspects of the campaign. While there he indulged his passion for horses both in hunting and racing and imported goods from England.

Returning home the brothers were penniless but as they had relations and contacts in the wine trade this became their career, concentrating on the mass market and Cape wines which did not carry duty of 12 shillings a case. Cape wines were cheap and the Gilbeys kept their margins low. They used advertisements and supplied handbills to local postmasters. Within a few months they had 20,000 customers. With income tax at 1% and no company tax they prospered, although Walter was in the office for 10 hours a day and did not have a day off in the first 10 years. He married Ellen Parish, the daughter of an innkeeper from Bishop's Stortford, on 3 November 1858.

The business expanded so fast that they gave up their original premises, moved to Oxford Street and three years later moved the cellars and dispatch to Great Titchfield Street.

The free trade budget of 1860 reduced the duty on French wine to 2 shillings a dozen and removed the competitive advantage of Cape wine. The Gilbeys bought French wine and sold it cheaply when their competitors just increased their mark-up and retained the pre-budget price.

In 1867 they bought the historic Pantheon building at 35 Oxford Street. In 1870 an early version of the telephone was installed, in 1877 the voice telephone. In 1887 electricity came to the Pantheon.

They were the first British firm to buy a French vineyard with the purchase of Chateau Loudenne, in the Medoc district in 1875. The 1870s also saw exports to India and, in 1885, Australia and New Zealand.

When at Christmas 1877 French sparkling wines were being sold in England as champagne at champagne prices, they cut the price, sold them as sparkling wines and sold 2000 dozen in a fortnight. In 1889 'Invalid Port' was marketed; by 1912 it had become a best seller.

Gilbeys began to distil gin in Camden Town in 1879, coinciding with further expansion. Cellars were rented from the LNWR at Chalk Farm and the famous Round House was used for storing casks of spirits. Irish Whiskey was sold from 1858 and they bought the Glen Spey-Glenlivet distillery in Scotland in 1887.

Walter Gilbey led the company through most of its first 50 years but, after disputes, resigned in October 1904.

In 1878 he moved to Elsenham Hall near Bishop's Stortford. He lived comfortably and bred horses of every type except racehorses and was a great collector, especially of sporting paintings by Stubbs, Morland, Sartorius, etc. The Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, was a visitor to Elsenham Hall, as he greatly admired Walter's contribution to horse breeding.

Walter Gilbey had an extensive library on sporting and agricultural subjects and was author of *Treatise on Wines* (1869) and other titles on alcohol. *The Great Horse or Shire Horse* was published in 1888 and a second edition in 1900. It was reprinted in the 1970s as were *Farm Stock of Old*, and *Sport in Olden Times*. *Small Horses in Warfare* (1900) caused much discussion when it was published.

In 1890 Sir Walter founded Elsenham Jams, using the quality produce from his orchards – the company still exists.

He was a benefactor to Elsenham and Bishop's Stortford: he gave the village hall to the village and almshouses and land for the Rye Street Hospital to Bishop's Stortford. A lectureship and readership in agriculture were endowed at Cambridge University.

In 1886 Walter Gilbey became chairman of the first London Cart Horse Parade Society to improve the general condition and treatment of London cart horses and encourage drivers to look after them. He was a prime mover in the Shire Horse Society and encouraged the formation of Hackney and Light Horse societies and stud books.

He became a baronet in 1893 for services to the horse-breeding industry and died at the age of 83 on 12 November 1914. The company went through a number of takeovers and mergers to become part of a large international drinks group. The Sir Walter Gilbey archive is held at the Bishop's Stortford Local History Museum. The book has a good index, an appendix and postscripts. TED MARTIN

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