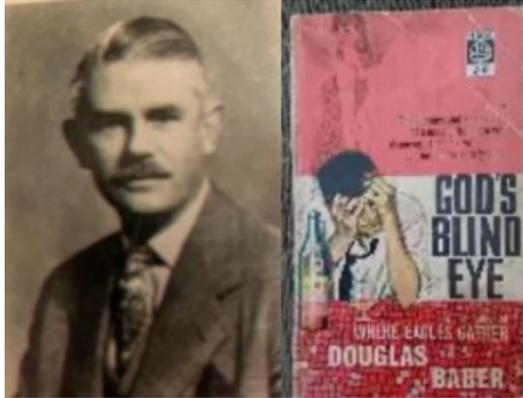


# Tragedy of War Hero turned writer who lived in Epsom

12 December 2025



In June 1960, Douglas Baber, 42, was found comatose through drink in the garden of his former home in Woodcote Green, a well-to-do housing estate in Epsom. A court appearance followed, during which the magistrate noted that Baber had been before the Epsom bench seven times on drink-related charges. Baber, for his part, expressed appreciation for the care the Epsom constabulary had shown him while in custody. The Sutton and Epsom Advertiser described him as a “local author”, but there was far more to Douglas Gordon Baber than that.

Born in Belfast in 1918, he was living in middle-class comfort in South Croydon by 1921 in a household that included his mother Isabella, siblings and two servants. His father, Charles Johnstone Baber, was absent, later remarrying in 1929 and fathering a daughter, Hazel. Charles was an entrepreneur in the high-end footwear trade, at one time operating a shop on London’s Regent Street.

The family later moved to Bexhill on the south coast. At 11, Douglas came to public attention when newspapers reported his dramatic rescue after being swept out to sea by Channel currents — perhaps an early sign of the adventurous spirit that would define him. He developed a passion for flight and, in 1935 at just 17 years old, obtained a flying licence in a Gipsy Moth plane. On his certificate, he described himself as a student in boot and shoe manufacturing, likely intending to follow his father’s trade.

In 1937 Douglas travelled to Canada, finding work in factory administration. But the outbreak of the Second World War brought those plans to an end. He returned to England, enlisted in the RAF and, at 21, was flying bomber planes over occupied Europe as a Flight Lieutenant in 77 Squadron.

On 17 August 1941 he bailed out over Belgium and survived. He fled the crash site and was given refuge by the Rigaux family, farmers in Zingem, who risked their lives by sheltering him under German occupation. After nearly three weeks, German soldiers raided the farm following a suspected tip-off. Douglas was captured and the Rigaux family taken away to an uncertain fate. At Gestapo HQ in Brussels, he later said he was first subjected to rough treatment, then friendliness, then threats to shoot him — a deliberate psychological tactic.

Douglas passed through several POW camps: Dulag Luft in Germany, then Oflag XC in Lübeck, followed by Oflag VI-B Warburg, where he was imprisoned at the same time as the celebrated pilot Douglas Bader. The similarity in their names likely caused administrative confusion, and it is improbable the two men were not at least aware of each other.

In 1942 Baber was transferred to Oflag XXI-B Schubin in Poland, where fellow prisoners included future Chancellor Anthony Barber and Eric Williams, author of *The Wooden Horse*. He was later sent to Stalag Luft III at Sagan — now Zagan, Poland — famous for *The Great Escape*. Fellow prisoners included Paul Brickhill, who would later write *Reach for the Sky*, and actors Peter Butterworth and Rupert Davies. In February 1945 Douglas was moved again, to Marlag Nord, where he was soon liberated by Allied forces.

After returning home, Douglas collaborated with two former POWs to write *Oflag 3*, a play about prison camp life. Directed by Charles Hawtrey and featuring a young Pete Murray, it was staged at the X Theatre in Richmond and well received. Misleading online claims that Hawtrey collaborated with Douglas Bader rather than Douglas Baber have unfortunately muddied the historical record.

Douglas married Phyliss Fox in 1947. Their daughter Vivienne was born in 1950, and the family settled first in Christchurch Mount and later on the Woodcote Estate. His writing career flourished. He first signed with avant-garde publisher Werner Laurie, then with Heinemann, who released his debut crime novel *My Death is a Mockery* in 1952. The book, involving the murder of a policeman, was an immediate success and was quickly adapted into a film starring Donald Houston, Kathleen Byron and Bill Kerr.

The film became embroiled in the notorious Craig and Bentley case after Christopher Craig, the 16-year-old who shot PC Sidney Miles, revealed he had seen it earlier that day. Tabloid speculation unfairly pointed towards Baber, and he began receiving hate mail. This publicity placed immense strain on him and his family. Douglas had already shown vulnerability: in 1950 he was convicted of assaulting a ticket collector after a POW reunion. He expressed deep remorse in court, admitting to having drunk too much.

Through the 1950s Douglas published prolifically, producing *Where Eagles Gather*, *The Guarded Years*, *Love on the Verge*, *A Road to Disaster*, *The Mortal Triumph* and *The Slender Thread*, alongside short stories and journalism. He also published under the name John Ritson and worked as a publishing editor and executive. In 1956 he became advertising promotion manager at ABC TV, part of the early ITV network. On the surface, life in the stockbroker belt appeared successful.

But privately Douglas was spiralling. He increasingly found himself in Epsom Police Station for drink-related incidents, and once smashed his car into a shop in Bexhill. His marriage appears to have come under great strain. According to his daughter Vivienne, Douglas was devastated when he learned during the 1950s that members of the courageous Rigaux family who had sheltered him had been murdered by the Gestapo or deported to camps, where some later died. She said the guilt haunted him for the rest of his life.

It is easy to imagine how the emotional burden drove him towards alcohol. In 1963 he was still producing work — he published a short story in the *Birmingham Evening Mail* and took a post as advertisement controller on the Reverend Timothy Beaumont's magazine *Aspect*. But on 21 October 1963 Douglas Gordon Baber died at 21 The Hill, Wheathampstead, near St Albans. He was only 45.

One of his later works, *God's Blind Eye* (1960), features a businessman battling alcoholism. A line from the book seems to echo Baber's own torment: "When the effects of the alcohol wore off, the sense of impending disaster and loneliness was far worse, crouched in his mind like an enemy."

Martin Knight



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## Local Epsom lad who became a radio shock-jock in sport passes

12 December 2025



James Whale (Michael James Whale) - 13 May 1951 - 4 August 2025

James Whale was born Michael James Whale on 13 May 1951 in Ewell, Surrey, into a middle-class family. His father, David, worked in a family clothing business before running The Green Man pub in Ewell; his mother, Anne (née Price), was a former ballet dancer. He attended Linton's Lane Secondary Modern and Longmead County Secondary Boys School in Epsom, as noted in your original obituary—he later admitted to disliking Longmead.

After first taking a job at Harrods and briefly becoming a DJ for Radio Topshop in the early 1970s, Whale began his radio career more formally in 1974 at Metro Radio in northeast England, gaining traction later at BBC Radio Derby.

Whale became nationally known during the late 1980s with The James Whale Radio Show on Radio Aire, which became a hit when simulcast on Yorkshire Television and later nationally on ITV. He pioneered what became known as "shock-jock" radio, with a brash, provocative style echoing American counterparts—this defined much of his broadcasting identity.

Broadcasting career highlights

- **TalkSPORT (1995–2008):** Whale hosted the late-night show on Talk Radio UK, later renamed TalkSPORT. He became a fixture of overnight radio until his controversial suspension in 2008 for urging listeners to vote for Boris Johnson—he considered legal action against TalkSPORT, which he later withdrew.
- **LBC (2008–2013):** Following TalkSPORT, he moved to LBC 97.3, hosting drivetime and other slots.
- **Podcasting and BBC Radio:** In 2013, he launched The James Whale Radio Show podcast, and later joined BBC Essex as a breakfast show presenter (2013–2016).
- **Celebrity Big Brother:** He appeared in Celebrity Big Brother in 2016, finishing in ninth place.
- **talkRADIO & TalkTV (2016–2025):** Beginning in 2016, he hosted evening shows on talkRADIO. He also presented James Whale Unleashed on both TalkTV and talkRADIO. He was suspended briefly in 2018 for a controversial interview—he later returned to air.

Whale was married to Melinda Maxted from 1970 until her death from lung cancer in 2018; they had two sons. In 2021, he married Nadine Lamont-Brown, who remained devoted to him through his illness.

Diagnosed with kidney cancer in February 2000, Whale underwent surgery and chose not to have chemotherapy. In 2006, he launched the James Whale Fund for Kidney Cancer, which later became Kidney Cancer UK (2016), a leading charity supporting patients and research.

In 2020, the cancer returned aggressively, spreading to his spine, brain, lungs, and remaining kidney—he documented this battle publicly and urged others to get tested. In 2023, he stopped treatment, acknowledging he was nearing the end of his cancer journey.

Whale was appointed an MBE in the 2024 New Year Honours for his contributions to broadcasting and charity. He spent Christmas 2024 in intensive care but celebrated his 74th birthday before entering hospice care, passing away peacefully on 4 August 2025 at age 74, with Nadine by his side.

James Whale is mourned as a broadcasting maverick—Britain’s first “shock-jock”—who blended confrontation with compassion, particularly in helping distressed callers. Described as fearless and a beloved figure to many, he leaves behind a legacy of entertainment, advocacy, and resilience.

Image: James Whale - Taken whilst recording The James Whale Radio Show By Rob Deadairpodcast - Own work CC BY-SA 4.0

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## Fancy a sausage sandwich?

12 December 2025



**Danny Baker - The Sausage Sandwich Tour- Epsom Playhouse - 12 April 2023.** A review by Epsom and Ewell Times.

Once television’s go to cheeky chappie Cockney, Danny Baker demonstrates how much more there is to his life and career than that lazy characterisation: West End record shop assistant at 14, partying with Elton John and Rod Stewart by 17, co-founder of *Sniffin’ Glue* underground punk magazine at 19, *New Musical Express* journalist, TV presenter, radio host, script writer to Jonathan Ross, Chris Evans, Peter Kay, Ricky Gervais *et al* all by 40, and now at 66 add to that list raconteur touring the country and playing to sell-out audiences with his stand-up show.

Stand-up? More like stand still, Danny for Pete’s sake! Baker notches up his 10,000 steps comfortably in the first half as he walks to and fro across the stage in his fezz and brandishing a wand. After four hours we are exhausted, one can only imagine how Baker is feeling. Leaving the Playhouse at 11.20 p.m. after kicking off at 7.30 p.m. you can see that our host is giving the late Ken Dodd a run for his money in giving his audiences value for money.

The wonderful undercurrent of Danny’s life is the sheer unpredictability of it. John Lennon once famously said ‘Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans’, well in Danny’s case life is what happened to him when he was busy making no plans whatsoever. Driven only by the advice from his Dad never to sign on because ‘then, they’ve got you’, Danny meandered into one fabulous job after another. Of course, if he wasn’t innately talented and possessing a natural connection with audiences of all kinds he would have fallen at the first hurdle. Baker also has bucketloads of gumption.

Danny hurtles through his life until his knee deep in the names he has dropped. But, why not? He has worked with and knows nearly everyone from Q4 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture. But his feet remain firmly planted in Deptford soil as he refused to play the celeb game. Despite it all he remains one of us, not one of them. He’s our imposter in their world. He’s a fighter, shaking off cancellation and cancer along the way. He’s funny. He doesn’t do emoting. He has no messages for us. If there is an opposite to virtue signalling this show is it. He has no lofty pronouncements on his “art”. Instead, he tells us his nice home is “the house that Daz built”, referencing his cringy TV ads from the 1990s. Danny Baker is an unvarnished old school cockney and there are few left. Go and see him while you can.

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## We can help your school reunite.

12 December 2025



Follow the example of a 50 year reunion for Ewell County Secondary School reported here. Epsom and Ewell Times can help your school reunion by putting the word out in these pages.

Former pupils of **Ewell County Secondary School** gathered at **The Station** pub in **Stoneleigh** on Saturday to reminisce and celebrate fifty years or more since they left and entered the working world.



The poster for the event borrowed from the **Rolling Stones** back catalogue to stress: "This Could Be The Last Time" and over a hundred schoolmates took heed and presented themselves for register. The reunion was aimed at those pupils that left the old schools then situated in Ruxley Lane and Danetree Road between 1971 and 1976. Organised by Ray and Bob Baxter, Tony Jones, Dave Reynolds, Martin Knight, Kevan McIlroy and Kevin Merchant the event was a huge success with only minimal corporal punishment and detentions administered. Friendships that were interrupted by leaving school and moving away in some cases were resumed after fifty years. Bob Baxter commented: "It was wonderful to lean our walking sticks against the wall, kick our zimmer frames away and boogie to T. Rex, Slade and The Rubettes again." By popular demand another reunion is being planned for 2025.

## One more Titanic plus another sinking survivor

12 December 2025



Following Epsom and Ewell Times story on George Pelham, who survived the Titanic disaster and another ship sinking, local writer and historian **Martin Knight** tells us the story of another Titanic double-sinking survivor, buried in our Borough:

Few will be aware of Ewell's connection to the most famous maritime disaster of all time in which 1,514 people perished on RMS Titanic. Mary Kezia Humphries was born in Liverpool in 1870. In 1912 she was living in Nottingham with her husband David Roberts, who was the proprietor of the West Bridgford Motor Company. Mary joined the historic ship as a stewardess in 1st class and was rescued in lifeboat 11 as the boat was swallowed by the North Atlantic Ocean after colliding with an iceberg on the night of 15 April 1912.

Her husband and children experienced a torrid few days without knowing whether Mary had survived the tragedy or not and it was only after she was deposited by the Carpathian in New York that word finally reached home. However, the experience did not deter Mary from going back to sea, and in 1914 she was working again aboard the Rohilla when that ship went down in the North Sea. Mary told her family that the rescue from the Rohilla, a ship that was built in Belfast by Harland & Wolf like the Titanic, was a far more frightening ordeal than the one two years earlier. The sea was eerily calm when the Titanic sunk and if you were lucky enough to get into a lifeboat you were relatively safe but conditions were far more treacherous with the Rohilla. Eighty-five lives were lost. Mary is thought to be the only survivor of both disasters.

At some point Mary and David opted for a quieter life and settled in Ewell. Mary died in 1932 and her husband David was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident just a year later. They are buried together along with their daughters Daisy Bell and Kezia Nora in St Mary's Churchyard.

Related stories

Epsom's Titanic Ties

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## Murderer who blew himself up in the effort...

12 December 2025



*Image Source: The Illustrated Police News 01 January 1870*

Shortly after 11 pm on the night of 21 December 1869, **Thomas O' Brien**, the stationmaster on **Ewell West Railway Station** prepared to turn the gas lights off as he awaited the last train of the night - the 10.40 pm from Waterloo. A single passenger alighted who Mr O' Brien would later describe as wearing a 'villainous expression of countenance'. He was so alarmed at the man's appearance and odd manner he ordered him from his pristine new station.

The man, **Thomas Huggett**, had no intention of hanging around as he had murder in his heart and he set off, following the course of the **River Hogsmill**, to the gunpowder mills owned by Sharp & Company and that were situated by the river in the areas leading up to what is now **Ewell Court Park**. He knew the mills well as he had delivered and collected from there in the past. Breaking into an outhouse he stole 25lb of gunpowder and feeling in his pocket to ensure he also had his knife he headed back towards Ewell Village and the house in West Street where his former lover, Lizzie Richardson, was now living.

Huggett worked in a warehouse at Rotherhithe and had been living with Lizzie Richardson for six months after she had left her husband for him. They had never married and the relationship had quickly broken down and Lizzie had moved away from him to live with her sister Eliza and her husband George Spooner and was acting as housekeeper as Eliza had been ill for some months. Also living in the cottage, which stood close to the newly opened Ewell Boy's School in West Street, was a man called William Smith, a porter with the railway company, and another lodger George Mason, as well as the Spooners' two young children Ellen and Frederick. It was rumoured later in the many pubs of Ewell that Huggett believed that Lizzie and William Smith were romantically attached.

Hiding in the Spooner's coal house he watched as the lights of the Hop Pole Inn opposite (now the site of John Gale Court) were turned down and waited quietly. At 3.40 am Lizzie rose from her bed to begin to prepare George Spooner's breakfast as he was due to make a delivery to London early that morning. She went outside to fetch coal to top up the fire she had lit and was shocked to be faced with Huggett sitting on the coals with a bag between his legs. Screaming she ran back into the house followed by Huggett who was shouting that he would kill her and himself. He was also brandishing his knife and tipping gunpowder on to the floor. By this time George Spooner had jumped from his bed and ran down the stairs to restrain Huggett from following Lizzie Richardson who had taken refuge in her bedroom. A struggle ensued and Huggett managed to break free and throw the bag of powder on to the fire. The house exploded demolishing the adjoining wall of the cottage next door and Huggett was blown through it.

Huggett was dead either from the blast or a knife-wound to his heart which had been inflicted with his own weapon. It was possible that George Spooner may have wrestled it from him but he was in no fit state to tell as he had been carried across to the Hop Pole pub with horrendous burns. Witnesses said that his 'outer skin had come off'. William Smith was also less seriously injured and he was taken to Guy's Hospital.

The explosion would have rocked the village but would have been no great surprise as accidents emanating from the gunpowder mills were not uncommon. Only six years earlier Ewell resident James Baker had been blown to bits by one such 'accident'. Messrs Sharp & Co. were moved by the Spooner tragedy to write to the Times not to express sympathy but to assure readers that their premises were not unmanned at nights. George Spooner, 38 years of age, lingered a few days but died from his injuries and a subsequent inquest recorded wilful murder by Thomas Huggett whose own inquest had concluded suicide.

When Thomas O'Brien, the stationmaster at Ewell West station, heard of the incident when he rose on the morning of 22 December he immediately said, "That man I saw last night did it." He marched across the Gibraltar area to West Street to view the body which still lay in the half-standing house and confirmed that Huggett was indeed the man that had got off the train the previous night. He had to be steadied though when he realised that the lodger that had been taken to Guy's Hospital (and would later recover from his injuries) was his new employee, porter, William Smith.

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