

10,000 mile pilgrimage to Epsom

30 June 2024



John Bates, grandson of Beatrice Bates, travelled over 10,000 miles from Australia to Horton Cemetery in Epsom to pay his respects to Beatrice. His grandmother is one of 9000 buried in Europe’s largest and now abandoned asylum cemetery. The **Friends of Horton Cemetery** continue to battle to retrieve this important graveyard from a property speculator. **A petition**, already signed by over 1200 supporters, calls on Epsom and Ewell Borough Council to change its damaging opinion that the Cemetery is “amenity woodland”.

Here is John Bates’ personal account of his May 2024 pilgrimage from Adelaide to Epsom.

In loving memory of Beatrice Miriam Bates, a woman of enduring strength and grace, whose life and legacy continue to resonate deeply within our family. Beatrice’s journey came to an end in 1933 at West Park Hospital in Epsom, Surrey, leaving behind a mystery that lingered for decades. It was a personal mission of mine to uncover the truth of her final resting place, a mission that revealed not only her burial site but also a profound connection to our family’s history.

Beatrice Miriam Bates was laid to rest in Horton Cemetery, a place that, despite the passage of time, faced the threat of being erased by development. Discovering her burial site through ancestry records was a pivotal moment, one that brought closure to our family and deepened our understanding of Beatrice’s life. Horton Cemetery, overgrown and largely forgotten by many, stands as a testament to the lives of those who came before us, including Beatrice.

In 2024, ninety-one years after Beatrice’s passing, I made a personal pilgrimage from Australia to Horton Cemetery. Walking around the overgrown grounds, I felt the weight of history and the importance of preserving this sacred space. The memorial at the entrance stands as a solitary guardian of the memories held within, a symbol of resistance against the encroaching tide of development.

The ‘Friends of Horton Cemetery’ have been instrumental in championing the cause to protect this site. Their dedication ensures that the stories of those buried there, including Beatrice’s, are remembered and honoured. It is a cause that resonates deeply with me, as I believe in the importance of preserving Horton Cemetery for all the souls who rest there and for the relatives who seek a connection to their past.

Beatrice’s story, accessible to all through the efforts of the ‘Friends of Horton Cemetery,’ shines a light on her resilience and spirit. Her life, though marked by challenges, is a testament to the courage and strength that define our family. Her memory serves as a beacon, guiding us to cherish our heritage and to honour the lives of those who came before us.

As we reflect on Beatrice’s life, we are reminded of the importance of family, history, and the relentless pursuit of truth. Her legacy is a testament to the enduring power of love and remembrance. Through the efforts to preserve Horton Cemetery, Beatrice and all those resting there are given the respect and recognition they deserve.

In honour of Beatrice Miriam Bates, let us continue to share her story and all the stories of those buried in Horton Cemetery and protect the places that hold our collective memories. Her spirit lives on in each of us, a symbol of resilience and hope for generations to come.

Rest in peace, dear Beatrice. Your story will never be forgotten.

With all our love,

Your Grandson.... John E. M. Bates.

Beatrice Bates full story can be read on The Friends of Horton Cemetery **website HERE**

Campaign to save Ewell Village’s Glyn Hall

30 June 2024



Tucked away in the heart of **Ewell Village** is **Glyn Hall**, a not-for-profit community space providing a venue for local organisations, including those linked to the arts, music and education. Glyn Hall also caters for social gatherings, society meetings, birthday parties and exercise classes for all generations. Located at 3a Cheam Road in Ewell Village, Glyn Hall has served the local community for over a century.

The precise age of Glyn Hall is not known but it is thought to have been built between 1866 and 1894. Archived records show that during this time **Sir Arthur Glyn** had a small wooden building built for his daughter, **Margaret Henrietta Glyn** to practice playing her music in and it is thought that this building was the original to the little green hut that now stands at 3a Cheam Road.

Margaret Henrietta Glyn, the last member of Ewell's Glyn dynasty and a champion of conservation of the local area's heritage, bequeathed Glyn Hall, which had been used by the Adult Education movement since the 1920s to the people of Ewell Village just before she died in 1946.

Mike Ralph, a retired blacksmith from Ewell Village knows Glyn Hall well and has commented as follows:

'My parents and grandparents were very involved with The Adult School at Glyn Hall until the 1960s. They held social events such as beetle-drives and whist-drives. My father would give talks about blacksmithing and his great passion, astrology. The family also arranged for other speakers to present at The Adult School.'

Lovingly looked after by volunteers, Glyn Hall has played a key role in local life ever since it was generously gifted to the village, but despite the best endeavours of the volunteers, the building has now sadly reached the end of its long life.

Determined to stop the hall being sold to developers and the space irretrievably lost, a new group of volunteers has stepped in to save the much-loved community hub that is as original and independent as the area it serves.

Unlike other halls in the area, Glyn Hall is not a religious or a commercial enterprise, but a community hall available 365 days of the year for members of the community to use and enjoy for a minimal fee.



Despite the age-related problems with the current structure, Glyn Hall is now set for an exciting new chapter, as preparations are made to replace the original structure with a modern, sustainable and fit-for-purpose design that is built for the future, whilst respectfully honouring the past. Boasting a large hall, kitchen facilities and meeting space, the new not-for-profit venue will provide the backdrop for a range of local gatherings - from social clubs and society meetings to exercise classes and birthday parties.

Having worked tirelessly to secure planning permission and with £90k in funding already in the bank, the volunteer trustees must now raise a further £300k to construct the new hall and are appealing to the public for donations.

Every donation received by the volunteers overseeing the project takes them one step closer to realising their dream of creating a space where the community can meet and make memories for generations to come. The names of financial donors will be displayed inside the new building unless they wish to remain anonymous.

Margaret Glyn left a precious gift to the people of Ewell that the volunteers are working hard to replace in a way that she would have approved of. The volunteers believe that there is a duty to protect the space occupied by Glyn Hall, thereby retaining its place at the heart of the community and extending its legacy for the future.

To find out more about the history, project and fundraising, please visit www.glynhallewell.co.uk.

Ewell Village Hall Registered Charity No: 305031

A beacon of hope in a troubled world?

30 June 2024



6th June 2024 marked 80 years since D-Day. The massive allied military campaign that signaled the beginning of the end of Nazi tyranny in Western Europe.

The Borough of **Epsom and Ewell** came together on Epsom Downs to celebrate this momentous day. Events organised by Epsom and Ewell Borough Council, the Epsom branch of the Royal British Legion and Epsom Bid Ltd honoured the ultimate sacrifices of a then young generation of servicemen.

About 1500 residents flocked to the Downs, enjoying fish and chips while entertained by a choir and the **Epsom and Ewell Silver Band**. The Grandstand exhibited a gallery of photographs of Epsom and Ewell in wartime. The exhibition will be transferred to Bourne Hall in Ewell in due course.

The Worshipful Mayor of Epsom and Ewell Cllr. **Steve Bridger** addressed the assembled, paying tribute to the fallen and survivors of the historic day. Just before 9.15pm the Mayor lit the great Beacon at the viewpoint car park on Grandstand Road.

Related reports:

D-Day celebration on Epsom Downs

Epsom’s gypsies celebrated this month

30 June 2024



Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) History Month is a chance for everyone to celebrate the rich and unique histories of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people across **Surrey**. This year’s theme is ‘What does family mean to you?’ and encourages everyone to think about the importance of family. With the diverse cultures of nomadic and travelling communities, family is the bond which ties everything together. The community has an amazing oral history tradition of sharing stories of ancestors and cultural traditions that garner a sense of pride in Romani heritage.

You can find out more about this year’s campaign and download a fantastic GRT history timeline on their website.

Did you know that Romany Gypsies have been present in Britain since at least 1515 after migrating from Europe during the Roma migration from India? The first mention of the GRT community in Surrey dates back to 1596 and can be found in the papers of the More family of Loseley.

Surrey Heritage has celebrated GRT History Month for many years now and supports the work of the Surrey Gypsy Traveller Communities Forum with their events such as Romany Day at the Rural Living Museum, Tilford. The Forum has deposited records relating to their community and the work that they do to the archive here, including poetry, newsletter, videos and publicity material (SHC reference 10379)

Text and image courtesy Surrey History Centre. See more local history news [HERE](#).

Related reports:

Daughter of Lord Rosebery who helped Derby Gypsies

Image: Photograph of Gypsies leaving **Lady Sybil Grant’s site at Epsom**, early 20th century (SHC reference 6035/1/18)

Should the Epsom Derby go back to Wednesday?

30 June 2024



The first Wednesday of June used to be for many an unofficial bank holiday. Office, retail and factory staff parties filled **Epsom Downs** enjoying a day off and the annual **Epsom Derby** flat-race. The Epsom High Street shops used to close.

Of course, this year the Epsom Derby will take place on Saturday 1st June and the shops will remain very much open.

In a bold statement aimed at reviving the charm and prominence of the Epsom Derby, retired jockey **Dane O’Neill** has suggested returning the event to its traditional Wednesday slot. This proposal comes in light of apparent declining attendances and the Derby’s diminishing distinctiveness against competitors like Royal Ascot.

O’Neill was speaking to Boyle Sports, who offer the latest odds for the Epsom Derby event, said “I think they have messed things up by moving it around a lot, and as a result has lost its identity for the wider public. We have seen it under several different guises. For the aficionado it is always going to be the Epsom Derby, one of the mainstays of English racing, but they have changed it so much that it has lost its spark.”

For much of the 20th century, the Epsom Derby was synonymous with the first Wednesday in June. This midweek scheduling created a unique atmosphere, drawing massive crowds not only for the race but also for a festive day out. Historically, even Parliament would adjourn to allow members to attend, highlighting the event’s national significance.

However, in 1995, the race was moved to Saturday in a bid to boost attendances and television ratings, a decision that has since been met with mixed reactions.

The switch to Saturday was intended to increase visibility and attendance, capitalizing on the weekend’s leisure time. Yet, O’Neill and other critics argue that this move has diluted the Derby’s unique character, making it just another event in a crowded sporting calendar. O’Neill believes that returning to a Wednesday would

help restore the Derby’s distinctiveness and might reignite public interest by creating a midweek spectacle that stands out on its own.

Epsom’s course is renowned for its challenging nature, likened by O’Neill to a rollercoaster ride with its steep climbs and sharp turns, particularly at Tattenham Corner. This distinctive track demands exceptional skill from both horse and jockey, adding to the race’s allure and prestige.

The Derby remains a cornerstone of English flat racing, celebrated for its history and the high calibre of competition it attracts.

Do you have a view? Write to our letters page.

Images credit: @EpsomRacecourse

D-Day celebration on Epsom Downs

30 June 2024



A special event to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the D-Day Landings is taking place on Epsom Downs on Thursday 6 June, 7-9.30pm. The event is being jointly run by Epsom & Ewell Borough Council, Go Epsom and Epsom Downs Racecourse.

The D-Day Landings are recognised as the largest naval, air and land operation in history, with more than 150,000 troops landing on five beaches in Normandy and bringing about the liberation of north-west Europe from Nazi occupation. Commemorative events are taking place nationally to remember those who gave their lives during the D-Day Landings.

The public are invited to come down to the Racecourse from 7pm, when the grandstand will open. Refreshments and fish and chips will be on sale, and there will be a range of entertainment on offer. The event is free to attend.

At 9pm, a ceremony will take place at the beacon on Epsom Downs, including a lone piper playing, and at 9.15pm the beacon will be lit. The beacon lighting is part of a national chain of beacons being lit across the country, and along the Normandy coast of France, and is designed to represent the ‘light of peace’ that emerged out of the darkness of war.

Cllr **Clive Woodbridge**, Chair of the Community and Wellbeing Committee at the council, said:

“The beacon lighting event is an opportunity for the community to come together to honour the thousands of people involved in the D-Day landings. Their brave actions enable us all to enjoy the peace and freedom we have today.

“We look forward to welcoming residents and visitors to this special and important event.”

Karen Pengelly, BID Manager at Go Epsom, said:

“Epsom’s beacon was erected two years ago to mark the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen. It is an absolute honour to be involved in the D-Day 80th commemoration. Epsom, just like many other places, played an active part in World War 2; this is our chance to remember the sacrifices made by so many.”

Tom Sammes, General Manager at Epsom Downs Racecourse, said:

“We are honoured and delighted to be a part of the D-Day 80th commemoration. The racecourse was a key part of Epsom’s World War 2 response and we look forward to welcoming the community to remember the brave personnel who risked their lives for freedom and peace.”

Background image credit Expert Infantry CC BY 2.0 DEED

Surrey’s corpse railway and death in Victorian times

30 June 2024



The Victorians treated death very differently to people today and would photograph their deceased alongside living members of their family, take locks of hair from the departed and seal it in jewellery, (which they would wear) display bronze figures of dead animals in their homes and make plaster death masks from the faces of the dead.

If like me, you are fascinated by the Victorians’ treatment of death, then you will be pleased to learn that a rare opportunity has arisen to find out all about Victorian gravestones, mourning traditions and spiritualist experiments in art and writing.

This is because researchers from the **University of Surrey** and the **Surrey Arts and Humanities Network** are offering a family-friendly event series exploring the Victorian culture of death and memorialisation.

Included in the event series is an exploration of the legacy of the **London Necropolis Railway** and a craft afternoon at the Watts Gallery.

Dr Lucy Ella Rose, Lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Surrey, believes that:

“Memorialisation is a cornerstone of how we engage with the past, understand the present and shape the future”.

When referring to the events organised, Dr Rose stated that:

“The series offers a unique opportunity to explore our county’s and indeed, our country’s rich variety of Victorian memorials, from traditional gravestones and grand statues to mourning attire and the artistic expressions of grief.”

Family-friendly events to be held across Surrey include:

- **Surrey History Centre** (Saturday 8 June): Immerse yourself in informative talks and delve into the archives that unveil the lives commemorated in Victorian memorials.

- **Watts Gallery** – Artists’ Village (Saturday 29 June): Participate in a “crafternoon” session, drawing inspiration from Victorian mourning practices and artistic expressions of remembrance.

When discussing the forthcoming family-friendly events, Dr Rose stated that:

“Surrey boasts a rich history of memorialisation, having served as the destination for London’s Necropolis Railway, a transportation line dedicated to carrying bodies for burial. The London Necropolis Railway was opened in 1854 by the London Necropolis Company (LNC) to carry corpses and mourners between London and the LNC’s newly opened Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey. At the time, Brookwood Cemetery was the largest cemetery in the world, designed to be large enough to accommodate all the deaths in London for centuries to come”.



Trains carried coffins and passengers from a dedicated station in Waterloo, London along the tracks of the London and South Western Railway with the compartments of the trains, both for the living and for the dead passengers being partitioned by religion and class.

The London Necropolis Railway did not close until 11 April 1941 and Dr Lucy Rose and her colleagues do not believe that these gothic, but fascinating stories should be forgotten and that is why The Epsom and Ewell Times is delighted to be able to assist with the promotion of the series.

For further information and the full event schedule, please visit the “Victorian Memorials” website:

<https://victorianmemorials.wordpress.com>

Image: Post mortem photo of a peaceful-looking woman. Attribution (CC BY 2.0)

Antiques Roadshow’s poor sign of value?

30 June 2024



In my article of 30 July 2023, I reported on the sale of a 4-inch high Japanese cloisonne vase at auction after it had been purchased for only a couple of pounds in an Epsom High Street charity shop.

Readers may recall that the charity shop find referred to sold for many thousands of pounds, so when I discovered that one of my own charity shop finds was identical to a bronze wild boar that featured in an episode of the BBC’s Antiques Roadshow TV programme, I became very excited.

Upon discovering that my **porcine** statuette was Roman and potentially worth ten thousand pounds, I positioned it away from Dobby, my cat on a much higher shelf so it would not get knocked over and damaged.

The Antiques Roadshow expert advised the young man who dug up his bronze Roman wild boar as a child to report his find, but who should anyone in Surrey report similar finds to?

Dr Simon Maslin FSA ACIfA is the Finds Liaison Officer for Surrey who works on behalf of the Portable Antiquities Scheme for Surrey County Council at the Surrey History Centre in Woking, Surrey.

The role of Dr Maslin is to identify archaeological finds in England and Wales, but this does not include charity shop finds with no secure provenance like my bronze boar.

Dr Maslin is unable to consider finds unless they are archaeological items found (not bought) locally and he cannot provide assistance with valuations.



The items considered therefore include my metal detecting finds eg the medieval cruciform pendants shown in the photo because Dr Maslin is the point of contact for items that people may find when metal detecting, gardening or out walking etc which may be part of the local archaeological record. He is also the person to contact for any finds which need reporting under the 1996 Treasure Act.

If Dr Simon Maslin had appeared on the BBC's Antiques Roadshow TV programme, he would have been quick to tell the millions of people watching at home that the bronze boar identical to the one I found in a charity shop was not Roman and that it was in fact of far eastern origin, most probably Javanese and a modern reproduction that is only worth a few pounds – not ten thousand pounds as claimed by the Antiques Roadshow expert (pigs may fly).

If nothing else, my miniature, bronze Javanese wild boar figure has become a conversation piece that has enabled me to write this article about who to contact when real Roman artifacts are dug up in a garden.

My bronze wild boar has now been returned to its original position on a lower shelf, as I no longer live in fear of Dobby the cat knocking it over.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme website and database can be accessed through the British Museum's website at www.finds.org.uk.

Related Reports:

Urning a big profit on rare Epsom find

The Great Escape - New Unpublished Evidence

30 June 2024



A man from Ewell was involved in the Great Escape. He was caught and executed. 80 years to the day of the Great Escape The History Detectorist tells his story.

80 years ago today, on the night of 24 March 1944, more than 200 captured Allied aircrew attempted to escape from Stalag Luft III, a Prisoner of War camp located in an area of Nazi Germany that is now part of Poland.

The attempt was the culmination of many months of careful preparation, including the digging of a narrow tunnel more than 330 feet in length which formed the subject of the 1963 blockbuster movie, "The Great Escape" starring Steve McQueen, James Garner and Richard Attenborough.

Of the 76 Allied prisoners who escaped from Stalag Luft III, 3 managed to get home to the UK and 23 were returned to POW camps.

The other 50 men were murdered in cold blood by the Gestapo. One of those murdered was 106173 Ft/Lt John Francis Williams from Ewell, Surrey who lived with his parents in Stoneleigh Park Road.

John was only aged 26 years old when he was executed contrary to the Geneva Convention. Prior to the outbreak of World War 2 he had worked for the Milk Marketing Board. He belonged to the Lyric Players in Wimbledon and was keen on photography and driving his blue MG sports car (a photo he took of his girlfriend leaning against his MG sports car is shown below). John volunteered for the RAF and was stationed at Dereham, Prestwick and Rainham.



John inside a WW2 aircraft

Disappointed that he did not become a pilot, he instead became an observer on Boston Bombers. He was with 107 Squadron when his Boston III was shot down on 27 April 1942 and upon being captured he was sent to Stalag Luft III.

John's family were made aware that he was missing on the 4 May 1942, but did not know if he was safe and well until the end of May 1942.

On the 10 June 1942 there was a knock on the door of his girlfriend's home by a lady looking for her.

The lady had heard a request from John on German radio for anyone listening to the broadcast to contact his girlfriend and to tell her where he could be contacted.

The subsequent correspondence exchanged between John and his girlfriend is not only historically significant, but it also tells the story of an enduring love between a young couple, which with the assistance of Bourne Hall Museum in Ewell, Surrey we would like to give people the opportunity to read about for the first time on this, the 80th anniversary of "The Great Escape".

In a letter to his girlfriend dated 11 June 1942 John revealed that boredom was an issue, but that he had started to learn German, Spanish and Italian, whilst sunbathing more than he had ever done previously.

John's letter to his girlfriend confirmed that he shared a hut with 5 other officers and that they all cooked their own food, some of which was supplemented by the contents of Red Cross food parcels.



John's girlfriend

John did not lose any of his sense of humour and wrote, "Some well-known people in this camp, Wing Commander Bader, Stamford-Tuck, Eyre and me!"

At the time of writing again, John had received 4 letters from his girlfriend and another 3 from family members, but he was only permitted to write 3 letters and 4 postcards in response each month.

In his correspondence, John provides details of camp life and the prisoners' daily routine. Breakfast was between 9 and 9.30 am, lunch was at 12.30 pm, they had a cup of tea between 1.30 pm and 2 pm, tea at 4 pm, dinner between 7 pm and 8.30 pm and another cup of tea at 11 pm. John added, however, that "It's not as much as it sounds" and went on to explain that there were a lot of classes and lectures for him to attend. John missed the everyday things that people often take for granted "like riding on a trolley bus and seeing a film".

On 7 September 1942, John wrote to his girlfriend and enclosed a photo of himself with one of the other officers he was sharing a hut with. John borrowed a camera from a German officer in order to take the photo.

In the same letter John complained that he had run out of hair oil and had been trying alternatives without success. "I have stopped parting my hair on the side so it now falls in soft waves PHEW!" he wrote.

In many of his letters John asked for photographs to be sent to him and he positioned these on the wall around his bed.

In his letter of 25 September 1942 John informed his girlfriend that the amount of mail he could send home each month had been reduced to 2 letters and 2 postcards. He also told his girlfriend that a fellow prisoner, Ft/O Zakazewski had drawn her using one of her photos. Drawing classes were held and many sketches and drawings exist of the camp.

In his letter of 2 November 1942 John wrote about around 500 officers going over to the sergeant's compound to see "French Without Tears", a show written and performed by POWs, which he found entertaining.

There had been quite a lot of snow and a white Christmas was anticipated, but despite only being early November, John wished his girlfriend a happy Christmas in case she did not get to hear for him for a while.

On 13 December 1942, John wrote to his girlfriend telling her that he had received another 29 letters from her and therefore had 147 letters in total which she had sent him. A Red Cross parcel had arrived with a Christmas pudding inside it which they were all looking forward to eating. John was also attending church services and added, "This morning brought forth another of our usual good service and very good padre".

John confirmed that spirits were high and that they had flooded a football pitch to create an ice rink, on which the Canadian officers could play ice hockey in the afternoons. They had a merry time over Christmas and New Year as they were given 3.5 litres of beer at Christmas and another 1.75 litres for New Year. John had grown a moustache, but shaved it off when it developed twirly ends.

On 29 March 1943, John sent a postcard telling his girlfriend he was due to be moved to another compound within the camp. The camp was becoming overcrowded and had to be enlarged. As the weather was getting warmer and John did not have enough pairs of shorts to wear, he complained about not receiving the right clothes for the right seasons. He had taken up gardening and had planted seeds in order to grow onions, carrots, spinach, and lettuces. The soil in the new compound was much better than in the previous compound John had spent time in and John remarked that there he had only managed to grow one radish.

By June 1943, John was giving elementary German lessons and had grown nine tomato plants which he was very proud of.

John’s girlfriend had been to the dentist so in his letter of 20 July 1943 he wrote that he hoped she “held his hand spiritually” and went on to recount a visit to the dentist in the camp who told him “That he had good teeth for an Englishman”.

John went on to ask for a picture of his girlfriend wearing sunglasses and expressed concern over the fact that she might be called up to serve her country.

John had had an attack of appendicitis and was waiting to find out if he was going to be operated on.

John confirmed in his letter of 20th July 1943 that on 13th September 1942 he had been promoted to Ft/Lt Williams.



John and his MG sports car

On the 24th July 1943, John confirmed that he had had his appendix removed in a nearby French Prisoner of War Camp Hospital and that he was due to spend the next nine weeks recovering.

On 29th September 1943, John wrote in a communication to his girlfriend, “I am sure I shall be holding you in my arms again, looking into your eyes seeing that lovely smile of yours”. His girlfriend had been to the Rembrandt cinema in Ewell, Surrey, which he had fond memories of, and he hoped that they would soon be able to visit the Rembrandt cinema together.

John had seen a production of “George and Margaret” at the camp, “You should have seen the leading ladies,” he wrote. His girlfriend asked whether she should postpone the celebration of her 21st birthday on 13th March the following year until he got home. Initially, he told her not to, but by his next letter on the 24th October 1943, he had changed his mind and expressed a desire for her to do so if she did not mind.

During December 1943, John told his girlfriend about plays and classical concerts that had taken place at the camp and about how the prisoners had built their own theatre. “I wish you could see our theatre, all our own work; it has 350 armchair seats made from tea-type plywood chests in which the Canadian food parcels come,” he wrote. There was also a fad among POWs to design their ideal homes, he explained.

In mid-February 1944, John lovingly wrote, “I’m sure it won’t be long now, my love, before we are together again and then we must endeavour to make up for lost time, mustn’t we? I’m sure you won’t mind me telling you this, but recently I’ve felt a little lonely, my darling, I miss you so very, very much; your letters are a wonderful antidote for the gloom and I love receiving them. I spent yesterday afternoon framing a couple of pictures of you, a very pleasant way to pass time which seems to bring you very close to me.”

John passed on news to his girlfriend from a family friend whose daughter’s husband had been killed in December 1943 while serving in the RAF. The couple had only been married since June 1943, and prior to that, the daughter had been engaged to a merchant shipping captain who was killed when his ship was torpedoed.



John's final resting place

John's final postcard to his girlfriend was written on the same day of the escape and contained the message "I hope to see you soon!"

Sadly, John would never be reunited with his girlfriend and was not able to find a way back home to celebrate her 21st birthday with her as he had planned.

John was last seen alive on the 6th April 1944 before being brutally murdered by the Gestapo under the direct orders of Adolf Hitler and cremated at Breslau.

John is remembered with Honour at Poznan Old Garrison Cemetery in the west of Poland and was mentioned in Despatches.

The notes John's girlfriend kindly allowed the curators of Bourne Hall Museum in Ewell, Surrey, to make in 2015, when she lent John's letters and postcards to the museum, also help to keep John's memory alive because without them it would not have been possible to write this article.

Even with the considerable passage of time, John's girlfriend never wanted to be parted from his correspondence, so it is a great privilege for us to be able to refer to the historically significant parts of the letters and postcards sent by John from Stalag Luft III.

80 years after The Great Escape, John and his girlfriend's love story continues in the hearts and minds of the people who read about it, regardless of the country in which they live.

This article is therefore as much about an enduring love as it is about one of the most talked-about events of World War 2.

Top photo: John in his MG sports car.

Spitfire downed Messerschmitt over Epsom

30 June 2024



What connects Epsom's Market Square statue of Emily Davison and the Spitfire that shot down a German Messerschmitt over the Town in World War 2?

"WW2 People's War" is an archive of World War 2 memories that have been documented by the public and gathered by the BBC.

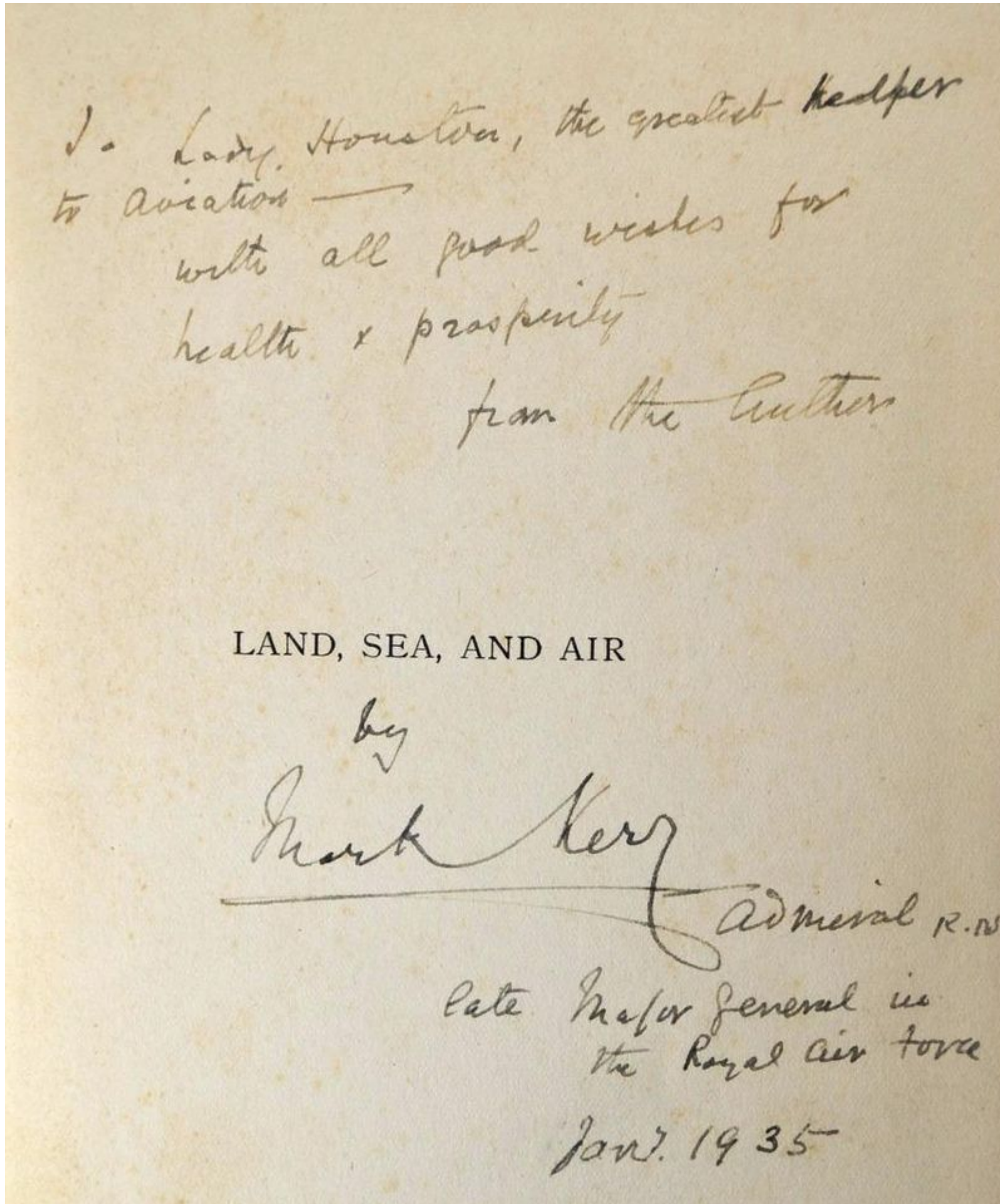
A gentleman who was a young boy living in West Hill, Epsom when war was declared in 1939 contributed to the archive in 2003 and referred to the time a Supermarine Spitfire flew down Epsom High Street:

"I remember a German Messerschmitt flying very low along Epsom High Street, coming down over the Clock Tower. It was heading towards Ewell and being chased by a Spitfire. Everyone ran into the shops to take cover. The aircraft was shot down by the Spitfire over Epsom Downs; the pilot bailed out and was

captured”.

It seems likely that the Supermarine Spitfire flew over the space now occupied by the bronze statue of the suffragette, Emily Davison and if this is indeed the case then the statue of Emily Davison also serves as a reminder of an almost forgotten suffragette who played a major role in the development of the iconic Supermarine Spitfire that was only just created in time for The Battle of Britain in 1940.

I have to be honest and admit to not knowing who the forgotten suffragette referred to above was until I commenced researching the life and career of Admiral Mark Kerr and acquired an old book from an online auction site.



The first photo shows the inscription I was amazed to find inside the book which was written by Admiral Mark Kerr, who was one of the founders of The Royal Air Force and who had been beaten by Alcock and Brown in the race to fly across the Atlantic Ocean in 1919.

The book was therefore given to Lady Houston by its author, Admiral Mark Kerr and it was Admiral Mark Kerr who described Lady Houston as “the greatest helper to aviation”, but who was Lady Houston and why was she so highly respected?

Lady Lucy Houston had been a suffragette and in 1931 donated the £100,000 funding the Government refused to give Supermarine and the aircraft designer, Reginald Mitchell (see the film “The First of the Few” on You Tube) allowing the RAF to win the Schneider Trophy and Reginald Mitchell to make inroads into the creation of the Supermarine Spitfire which came just in time for The Battle of Britain.

In 1933 Lady Houston financed the Houston – Mount Everest flight expedition, in which aircraft flew over the summit of Mount Everest for the first time – a feat Admiral Mark Kerr had previously claimed could not be achieved until 1918 at the earliest.

Lady Lucy Houston was therefore instrumental in the development of the Supermarine Spitfire and in aviation advancements that enabled man to fly over Mount Everest much sooner than anticipated. It is for this reason I believe that Admiral Mark Kerr, one of the founders of the RAF referred to Lady Houston as being “the greatest helper to aviation” in 1935 when gifting her this book one year prior to her death.



The book was Admiral Mark Kerr's own copy because he made some amendments inside it which only he would have known to have made.

Without Lady Lucy Houston's generous £100,000 donation to Supermarine and Reginald Mitchell the Supermarine Spitfire would not have been ready in time for The Battle of Britain and the consequences could have been very serious indeed.

Admiral Mark Kerr, one of the founders of The Royal Air Force clearly wanted to thank Lady Houston for her endeavours whilst acknowledging the fact that she proved him wrong re flying over Mount Everest by giving her the book I later acquired from a well-known online auction site with the inscribed page shown above inside it.

The bronze statue of Emily Davison is suitably positioned in Epsom's Market Square to remind us of the Supermarine Spitfire that once flew over the Clock Tower in defence of our town, which would probably have never been created if it had not been for the enormous generosity of one of Emily Davison's fellow women's rights campaigners - the remarkable Lady Lucy Houston.