

W4270



THE LAST CREW OF
LANCASTER W4270

Di Ablewhite
Ian Hinks
Annie Hogg

£3.50

(All profits go
towards the
Staunton Lancaster
Memorial Fund)

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Design by Juritsu.

1. THE BEGINNING



Sid Baggaley
outside his
home.
Date: 1990's

In November 1999, Mr Sid Baggaley, a retired farmer of Staunton-in-the-Vale, Nottinghamshire, asked Di Ablewhite, a family friend, if she could do an investigation into an accident that he witnessed involving a WW2 aircraft. He knew she was interested in history and archaeology and may take on the project. Sadly he had very little information as a starting point. All he could remember was it happened on a dark, cold, winters night, possibly 1942, and he thought it was a Wellington bomber. He saw it had an engine on fire and watched it go over his house and then disappear into the valley when he heard a large bang. A few hours later he was woken by the RAF recovery team. The aircraft had crashed onto his land, but in a difficult location to get to. He was asked to lead the team to the accident site. For obvious reasons this tragic event left a huge mark on him. Due to wartime security he was told nothing about the events, and since that night he wondered what had happened and who the men were. Sid heard rumours including the possibility that a Canadian was part of the 6/7 man crew, but knew no more than this. A short time after, while ploughing the field he uncovered a small piece of corroded metal which he kept and placed in one of his barns.

Working on the information given, Di decided the best place to start was nearby Newark Air Museum. The curator was very helpful and offered the use of their library and advised her to look through Bill Chorley's series of books, Bomber Command Losses of WW2, all eight volumes. This she did over the next few months on her days off, noting Wellington crashes in the general area but none matched Sid's description of events.

The curator then asked to see the piece of wreckage and luckily it was identified as a piece of a Lancaster bomber not a Wellington. So it was back to the books. Eventually the search narrowed down to just one aircraft, Lancaster BMk 1, W4270 of No.61 Squadron based at nearby R.A.F. Syerston.



Original piece of wreckage found by Sid.



Part of the rim of one of the wing mounted landing lights.

2. THE AIRCRAFT



RAF Syerston's Watch Office today.

Avro Lancaster BMk1 W4270, QR-?

On the 18th of February 1943, a crew from No.61 Squadron, RAF Syerston had been on a long cross country training flight. They were diverted to land at RAF Bottesford due to operational aircraft being in the Syerston circuit. Just as the crew were coming in to land a fire broke out in the Starboard inner engine. A connecting rod had broken and smashed out of the engine. They struggled around Bottesford's circuit but the fire quickly took hold and before they could get the aircraft on the ground it crashed near the village of Staunton-in-the-Vale. The low altitude and the fact that the undercarriage and flaps were in the landing configuration contributed to their loss of control, although it is possible the fuel tank behind the engine exploded before they crashed.

W4270 was built at AVRO Chadderton and delivered to No.61 Squadron in October 1942. She took part in some key operations including attacks on Kiel, Milan, Genoa, Turin, Duisburg, Berlin and Hamburg. W4270 had a total of 196 flying hours when lost.



Lancaster artwork by Pete West.

4. THE CREW

The Crew of
LANCASTER BOMBER
MK1 W4270

1: The pilot for W4270's last flight was Warrant Officer Second Class (promoted posthumously) Thomas Herbert Warne, RCAF, from Saskatchewan, Canada.

2: Flight Engineer Sgt George Hitchon was a 19-year old from Lancashire.


3: The navigator was 22-year old Sgt Robert Preece from Somerset.

4: James Milton Whitehead from Lanarkshire was the crew's bomb aimer even though his Commonwealth War Graves Commission record lists him as a wireless operator. His personal records, obtained from RAF Cranwell by his sister, show he started training as an observer before re-mustering as a wireless operator/air gunner and cross training as a bomb-aimer while at his OTU.

5: The crew's wireless operator was 21-year old Sgt Thomas Newton from Durham.

6: Air gunner Sgt Edward Loverock, aged 21, came from Matlock, Derbyshire, and worked in the local post office before joining the RAF.

7: Along with his fellow air gunner, Ed Loverock, 22-year old Sgt John Coaker from Devon had already flown over Berlin as part of his training.



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THOMAS HERBERT WARNE

Herb was born on the 13th February 1920 in Fletwold, Saskatchewan, Canada. He had 2 brothers and 2 sisters. Herb joined the RCAF as a pilot in January of 1941. One of his brothers, David also joined the RCAF as a pilot at about the same time. Herb and David carried out their training in Canada at various places qualifying on twin engine aircraft in January 1942 and they travelled to Britain in February that year to continue their training. Herb was streamed into Bomber Command and joined up with four men who were to form the core of his crew at 19 Operational Training Unit flying Whitley's in June of 1942. His brother David survived the war although he was once shot down in his Beaufighter into the Mediterranean.

ROBERT JOHN PREECE

Jack was born on 7th June 1920 in Bridgwater, Somerset, England, an only child. Jack joined the RAFVR in July 1940 as an Observer, aircrew. He was sent to Canada to do most of his flying training and returned to England shortly after Herb Warne arrived, although it would be mid June before they met at the Whitley OTU.

JAMES MILTON WHITEHEAD

Milton was born on 7th September 1920 in Cambusnethan, Scotland. He had two younger sisters. Milton attended an aircrew selection board in September 1939 and joined the RAFVR in December as a Wireless Operator. After qualifying he served on a Hurricane fighter squadron before moving on to aircrew training still as a Wireless Operator. He was switched to an Observers course in mid 1941 but failed to complete this course. After a time in holding postings he returned to his wireless operator trade finally passing out as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner moving on to join the core of Herb Warne's crew.

THOMAS NEWTON

Tommy was born on 23rd January 1922 in Ushaw Moor, Durham. He had an older brother as well as two younger brothers and sisters. Tommy joined the RAFVR in September 1940 as a Wireless Operator and like Milton spent a while on a fighter squadron before moving on to complete his training as aircrew passing out as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner.

JOHN COAKER

John was born in late 1920 or early 1921 in Leusdon, a small hamlet on Dartmoor and had a young brother Walter. John joined the RAFVR towards the end of 1941 and trained as an Air Gunner.

OPERATIONAL TRAINING UNIT AND ANTI-SUBMARINE PATROLS

The above men came together as Herb Warne's crew and learned to fly on Whitleys, an aging bomber soon to be removed from Bomber Command's front line squadrons but it was still in use with other commands. Here they learned to work together as a crew in all aspects of operating a bomber aircraft, melding all their individual skills into that of 'The Crew'.

While at the OTU Milton cross trained as the Bomb Aimer for the crew. In earlier years they would now be ready for war operations, however; in September 1942 having completed this part of their training they spent a month flying this type of aircraft on anti-submarine operations seeking out German U-boats over the Bay of Biscay and the Western approaches before they were then posted to a heavy bomber training unit.

GEORGE ARTHUR HITCHON

Arthur was born on 25th August 1923 and had one brother. When he turned 16 he joined the regular RAF as an Apprentice at RAF Halton a few days before the start of WW2 thus making him the longest serving member on the crew although he was the youngest. Arthur spent two and a half years learning his trade as an Airframe fitter before he was posted on to Major servicing and repairs on Oxford aircraft. After a couple of months he volunteered for aircrew and was accepted for training as a Flight Engineer. He did a short course at St. Athan before moving to join the rest of Herb's crew.

EDWARD JOHN LOVEROCK

Eddie was born on 27th December 1921 in Burton-on-Trent and had a younger brother and sister. Eddie joined the RAFVR in February 1940 as a Wireless Operator. However before completing the course he re-mustered to general duties. He spent the next year working on Spitfires before volunteering for aircrew and beginning his training in November 1941. For some reason it was not until September that he did his Air Gunners course, however by the middle of October he was the final member to join the crew of Sgt. Herb Warne.

HEAVY BOMBER TRAINING UNIT

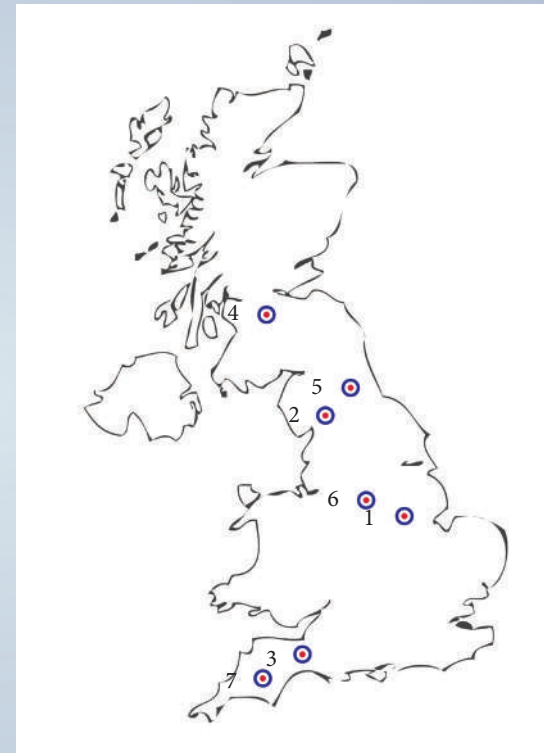
Now as a crew of seven they again would train together to absorb the newcomers into their midst and learn the intricacies of operating the new generation of heavy bombers. First on the unsuccessful Avro Manchester, then on its successor the Lancaster, a four engine aircraft considered by many as the finest bomber of the war in the European theatre of operations. While in this part of their training Bomber Command was using some instructors and some trainees occasionally to boost the numbers of aircraft taking part in operations. Both John and Eddie were to fly with a crew of instructors on raids to Berlin on consecutive nights in January 1943, although Eddie's aircraft only got off the ground on the second of these nights. Finally at the end of January they came to the end of the formal training scheme and were posted to an operational squadron in No.5 group.

B FLIGHT, NO.61 SQUADRON, RAF SYERSTON

The crew were only on No.61 Squadron for 18 days, 9 of these were spent on leave. In the remaining 9 days they had settled in and completed the administration. They flew on an air test and on a night exercise together before Herb flew two operations as second pilot with an experienced crew to get some idea of how things were done. One to Lorient and one to Milan in Italy. It is certain but for events on the night of the 18th of February they would have flown as a crew on their first operation together on the next target. Unfortunately the crew of seven were all killed in the crash that Sid witnessed.

THEIR FINAL JOURNEYS'

The six British members of the crew were returned to their homes for burial, Herb, being a Canadian was buried in nearby Newark Military Cemetery, a request for him to be buried alongside his Navigator, Jack Preece with whom he had spent his last leave unfortunately came too late.



THE CREWS' BURIAL SITES.

1. Herb Warne, Newark.
2. Arthur Hitchon, Padiham.
3. Jack Preece, Wembdon.
4. Milton Whitehead, Cambusnethan
5. Tommy Newton, Ushaw Moor.
6. Eddie Loverock, Matlock.
7. John Coaker, Leusdon.



Their graves are marked with headstones honouring their sacrifice

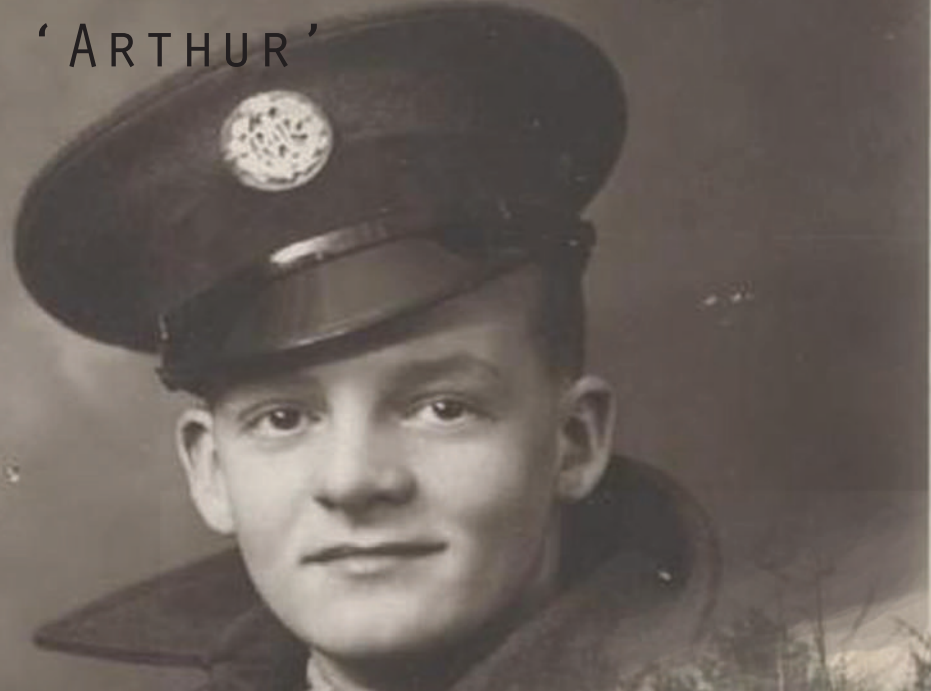
THOMAS H WARNE
'HERB'



*"I FEEL WE HAVE LOST A CAPTAIN WHO LOOKED LIKE
WELDING HIS CREW INTO THE FINEST OF TEAMS."*



GEORGE A HITCHON
'ARTHUR'



*"HE HAD MANY FRIENDS WHO ARE PROUD
OF HIS ACHIEVEMENTS."*



Images supplied by the Hitchon/Weaver families

JACK PREECE



Bridgwater Mercury

AND BURNHAM, HIGHBRIDGE, AND
WESTON-SUPER-MARE CHRONICLE,

INCORPORATING

BRIDGWATER INDEPENDENT AND COUNTY
PRESS SERIES

BRIDGWATER, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1943

PREECE - On February 18th, 1943 Sergt. J. Preece, only son of Mr. and Mrs. H. Preece, Newbury House, Wembdon Road killed on active service. Funeral Wembdon Church, Wednesday, February 24th at 3.30 p.m.

DEATH OF SGT. JACK PREECE

WELL-KNOWN SOMERSET FAMILY BEREAVED

It is with deep regret that we announce the death on Thursday on active service of Sergt Jack Preece, R.A.F.V.R., only son of Mr. and Mrs. H. Preece, of Newbury House, Wembdon Road, Bridgwater.

A week earlier he reported back from his last leave at home, on which he was accompanied by his pilot, who was a Canadian school Master before joining the RCAF.

Jack Preece was an old Morganian, and after leaving school was on the staff of British Cel-lophane until volunteering for the RAF in 1940. He completed his training recently in Canada. He is deeply mourned by his parents and his fiancée, Miss Kathleen Petherbridge, and his many friends.

The funeral service will be at Wembdon Church on Wednesday at 3.30 p.m.

MILTON J WHITEHEAD

Undefeated City Boys' Team



This is the City Boys' team of Southend which played against the Thistle on Saturday. It has not suffered defeat since the season started. ["P.A." Photo.]

Milton - Back row - 3rd from left.



"DEEP REGRET IS FELT BY ALL WHO KNEW HIM."

Images supplied by his sister, Mrs. Sylvia Jamieson

'TOMMY' NEWTON



Military Funeral.

The funeral took place at Ushaw Moor Cemetery of Sergeant T.R. Newton (21), No.61 Squadron R.A.F., who was buried from the home of his Aunt and Uncle, Mr and Mrs A. Aberdeen. 5 Broom Lane, Ushaw Moor, where he had lived since he was ten months old.

Sergeant Newton had been accidentally killed. He had served in the R.A.F. for two and a half years and previous to joining up was employed at Bearpark Coke Works. He has also served his time as a painter. Sergeant Newton was a pupil at Ushaw Moor Council School and was a keen football player for which he won quite a number of medals. He was also a member of Ushaw Moor Church Lads Brigade.

The service was conducted in St. Luke's Church, Ushaw Moor by the Rev. J.H.P. Welby and the under bearers were members of the Home Guard. At the graveside the Last Post was sounded by the Church Lads Brigade and an aeroplane gave the salute.

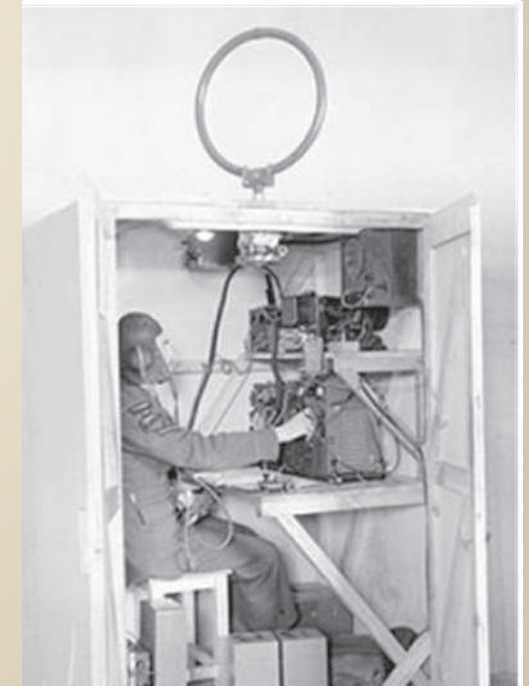
Details from an interview with Hazel Pritchard, Thomas Newton's sister.
Reported by Mark Tallentire in the Northern Echo. 18th August 2010.

Hazel was only a month old when her brother lost his life.

"I remember the plaque on the wall and the telegram telling us he had died. I only knew what my parents and sister had told me about him. In those days your parents didn't talk much about things like that."

She never knew, for example, a memorial had been erected to Sgt Newton and the crew of W4270 until her niece saw an article in an earlier edition of the Echo. Nor of the long search to find the relatives of those killed.

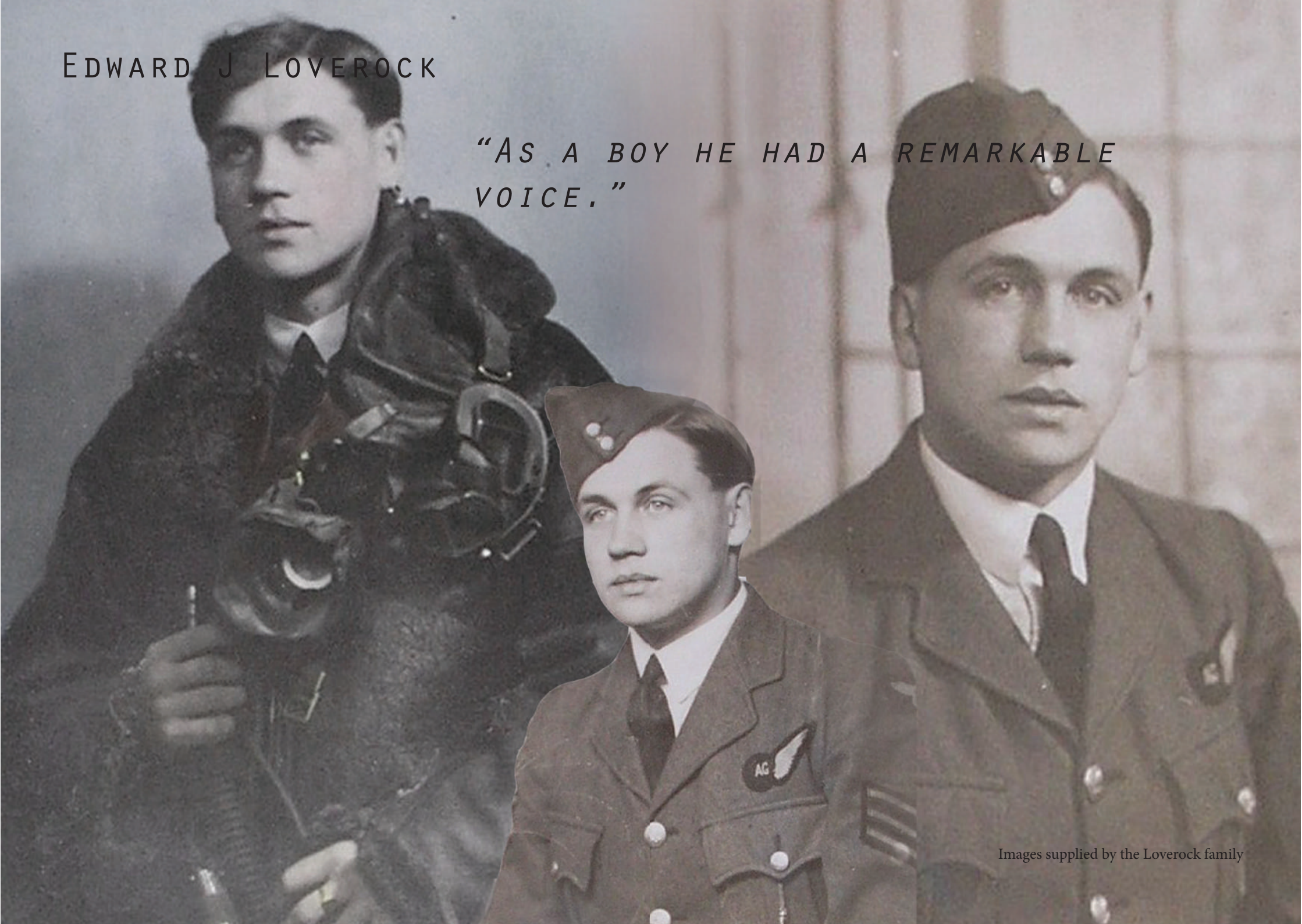
"I have been telling my friends: 'I'm not a big piece, but I'm the last piece in the jigsaw.'"



Wireless
Operator training
rig.

EDWARD J LOVEROCK

*"AS A BOY HE HAD A REMARKABLE
VOICE."*







JOHN COAKER



*JOHN ON THE RIGHT WITH FRIENDS
IN THE RIVER DART.*



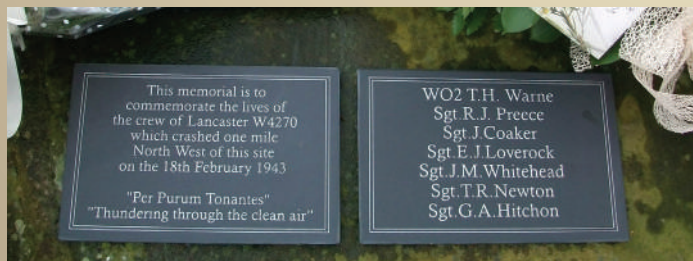
"REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR."



Images supplied by his brother; Walter Coaker

5. MEMORIAL TO THE CREW OF LANCASTER BOMBER W4270

After the initial research a memorial was erected to the memory of the crew of Lancaster W4270. The memorial consists of a propeller blade that was donated by the Lincolnshire Aircraft Recovery Group, (L.A.R.G.). It was built by Lee Brigham with stone donated by Mr. and Mrs. E. G. Staunton of Staunton Hall and a set of brass plaques detailing the events and listing the names of the crew. After seven years the memorial was refurbished and the brass plaques replaced with a set in slate. The memorial is now on the Aviation History in Nottinghamshire trail and draws visitors from far and wide, as well as being a focus point for the relatives and friends of the seven young men.



A visit to the crash site field by Arthur Hitchon's nephew and niece, David and Kathryn (third and second from left) and David's wife Susan (far left) with the researchers, Ian Hinks, Annie Hogg, Barbara Hogg and Di Ablewhite all to the right.

Joan Preece, the widow of Jack Preece's cousin, far right and her daughter Heather, second from left, visited the memorial by Staunton church in the grounds of Staunton Hall.



NEWARK AIR MUSEUM COCKPIT FEST

The group's display (photo from 2011) has become a regular at this event based at the old Winthorpe airfield where the crew completed their heavy bomber training.



STAUNTON HALL'S SNOWDROP SUNDAY 2008

Snowdrop Sunday's are a fundraiser for St Mary's church, Staunton-in-the-Vale. In 2008 the organisers asked if the Lancaster exhibition could be featured as part of Staunton's history. Further research for this event resulted in the discovery of the first ever photo of one of the crew (Arthur Hitchon). Amazingly, a photo of Herb Warne came via email on the actual morning of the event. Over 1500 people attended the event boosting funding for the church.



An earlier version of the exhibition.



Barbara & Annie Hogg toasting the crew.

REDEDICATION OF THE MEMORIAL IN 2010

Sid's greatest wishes were to preserve the memory of these men, and he hoped that one day his granddaughter Annie Hogg, who was too young to be involved when the project started, would take interest and get involved with future plans.

The original brass plaques on the memorial degraded quickly and so Annie took on the task to refurbish the memorial and arrange a rededication day. This took place in July 2010 with a service written by Annie, who also invited delegates from the British Legion, Air Training Corps cadets, WW2 Bomber Command Veterans and family and friends of the crew, culminating with a Flypast from the B.B.M.F.'s Lancaster.



Annie organising the positioning of the Cadets.

A short film of the day was made for relatives who were unable to attend by George Horne:
www.vimeo.com/14431980

Additional footage of the day made by Anthony Weaver can be seen here:
www.vimeo.com/13081596
www.vimeo.com/13147886



Seen here: David Hitchon (Arthur Hitchon's nephew) and his son, Andrew.

"WE WILL REMEMBER THEM"



Summer of '44 Living History Group pay their respects at Snowdrop Sunday 2008.

Many people have played a part in preserving the memory of these young men, especially all of their families and friends who provided personal information and insights into their lives..

Further information on this project is available on various sites on the internet and is now easily searchable.

A full book with all the details of their story is being prepared for publication in the future.

The memorial at Staunton-in-the-Vale is now included as part of the Aviation History in Nottinghamshire Trail booklet. This links many similar memorials and sites and is organised by N.C.C. and is free from Newark Air Museum amongst other outlets.



B.B.M.F. Lancaster Flypast 2010