

By

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The stories of the men who died in both World Wars from Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire

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Lieut. Gordon Alick Brodrick Birdwood

The Memorial Tablet in St Peter's church at Gustard Wood is an ornate carved oak panel bearing the inscription: "In Glorious memory of the men of Gustard Wood who fell in the Great War 1914-1918". Among the 16 names is 2nd Lt G. Birdwood. Looking into his brief life we found not just one story but two.

The first is how an 18-year-old junior officer, fresh out of Sandhurst, was brutally cut down while performing an act of amazing heroism, at the very moment he achieved his objective.

The second is a mystery — who was he and why is he remembered as one of "the men of Gustard Wood" when he appeared to have no connection with the area? It was a puzzle that baffled and frustrated us for some time.

We tell the story here of how we solved it as it was only through our efforts to do so that we discovered the full tragic story of Gordon's heroism.

The hero

In such a family, it would have been surprising if Gordon had *not* gone into the Army. His father was Colonel William Spiller Birdwood, of the Indian Army, who commanded the Baroda State Army in Gujarat. William's father was General Christopher Birdwood, also of the Indian Army. And Gordon's older cousin was Lieutenant-General Sir William Riddell Birdwood, who commanded the Australian and New Zealand forces (the ANZACs) in the war and later became Field Marshal Lord Birdwood.

Gordon's father married three times and was widowed twice. Gordon, born in December 1895 in Mhow, northern India, was his son with second wife Evelyn (nee Sheppard). The boy was sent to a

preparatory school in Tonbridge, Kent, and in 1910 became a pupil at Tonbridge School, winning prizes at both places for athletics and swimming.

The book *Tonbridge School in the Great War* tells us he "joined the Army Class in May 1911 and gained a Prize Cadetship at Sandhurst in the summer of 1913. His commission in the South Lancashire Regiment was dated August 15th 1914 and he went out to France with the 2nd Battalion of his Regiment on September 6th. "They took part in the Battle of the Aisne".

The Germans had retreated after the first Battle of the Marne but were now making a stand, digging in on a long ridge near the River Aisne in northern France, an early instance of the switch from mobile to trench fighting on both sides that condemned the war to hideous stalemate for years.

On September 12th British and French forces attacked. Two days later a force including Gordon's battalion crossed the river and established a bridgehead.

One account says that on September 20th the battalion was in support behind other troops on a thickly wooded hillside. That afternoon a German attack broke through the two battalions in front. The South Lancashires fixed bayonets and charged and the hill was retaken but at a heavy price in dead and wounded — seven officers killed and 66 other ranks, including the Company Sergeant Major and three Platoon Sergeants.

The Tonbridge School book says Gordon "was killed in action whilst gallantly charging with his Platoon a battery of German machine-guns ... His body was found within ten yards of the guns."

A soldier, Private Downs, helped to carry his body from the battlefield and related the story to one of the Captains. Later the unnamed Captain wrote to Gordon's grandfather, Mr G. Sheppard, saying: "The extreme gallantry of your grandson seems to have been

the cause of his very early death." He quoted the words of Private Downs:

"There was a young officer who joined us called Lt Birdwood and he was almost too brave and as a matter of fact it eventually knocked him over. He led a brilliant charge and it was mainly due to him that this was successful and that part of the position was captured. A number of the enemy surrendered to the charge; the Germans turned their Maxim guns on their surrendering comrades, also killing Lt Birdwood. He was riddled with bullets and his death was instantaneous."

The Captain's letter ends: "Your grandson's death was all too premature and we can do with many of the same breed."

The war was only 47 days old when Gordon died – making him our first casualty – and he had been at the front for two weeks. His body was buried with those of two other officers beside a road. It was eventually moved to Vailly British Cemetery, about a mile and a half away.

Solving the mystery

There is only one G. Birdwood listed on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records and that is Gordon. However it states that his parents lived not in Wheathampstead or Gustard Wood but in Colmer, Modbury, South Devon. So our question was, what was his connection to Gustard Wood? Searching genealogy websites revealed no one with the surname Birdwood in the area. William Spiller Birdwood gave the middle name Brodrick to all his children, sons as well as daughters: was this the connection? A similar search drew a blank; it was the maiden name of his grandmother.

It was suggested to us that if Gordon was at boarding school in Kent and his parents were still in India, he probably stayed with relatives in school holidays. We emailed the school on the (extremely) unlikely chance that they might have a surviving record which could shine some light. They did not, but the librarian kindly

sent a photocopy of the entry in the Tonbridge School book quoted above, which revealed the story of Gordon's heroism.

Normally official letters of condolence were sent to next of kin, in this case Gordon's father, so the unnamed Captain mentioned in that account must have had another, personal, reason for writing also to Gordon's maternal grandfather, Mr Sheppard, in such detail. Perhaps that surname might give us a clue ...

In the 1881 Census a magistrate named George Wood Sheppard lived at Garden House, Lower Luton Road, Wheathampstead, on the corner of the junction with Lamer Lane. With him were three grandchildren, all born in India, which hinted at a connection. In the 1891 Census he lived in St Pancras, London. With him this time were his son George F. Sheppard, Bombay civil service (retired), and daughter-in-law Adeline B. Sheppard. But George senior died in London the year before Gordon was born.

We looked at Gordon's mother Evelyn Stuart Sheppard. The website *thepeerage.com* revealed that she was the daughter of G.F. Sheppard, who "was in the Indian civil service". Was this the same George F. Sheppard, son of the magistrate and husband of Adeline? Genealogy websites confirmed it. We had linked Gordon's great-grandfather to Wheathampstead but still the link had been broken before Gordon was born.

Time for a flash of inspiration to bring us the answer. Yet another exhaustive search discovered that George Frederick Sheppard had a sister, Emma Flora Sheppard, who in 1876 married George Upton Robins – also a magistrate and from a family who had lived for generations at Delaport, their estate in Gustard Wood. George and Emma, who also lived there, were the parents of Captain George Upton Robins, who is remembered alongside Gordon on that carved oak Memorial Tablet in Gustard Wood church. Emma doubtless wanted the name of her great-nephew, who must have been a favourite, to be included on it. A story in the Herts Advertiser of April 2nd 1921 tells us that when it was unveiled:

"Underneath ... was hung a laurel wreath, at the bottom of which were camellia blooms. The wreath was made of leaves from the laurels at Delaport."

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Sadly no picture can be found of Gordon.

A family of heroes

William Spiller Birdwood's first wife Ellen died in 1882, the year after they married and not long after her only child, Christopher William Brodrick Birdwood, was born.

Christopher joined the Yorkshire Light Infantry in 1902 and fought in South Africa. In 1904 he was transferred to 1st Battalion, 6th Gurkha Rifles and in 1911 was promoted to Captain. He fought in the disastrous Dardanelles campaign and was Mentioned in Despatches for bravery.

On June 4th 1915 he was wounded and died three days later, aged 32, leaving a wife and two children in Burgess Hill, Sussex, where he is remembered on the town's War Memorial and another in the parish church. He is buried in Turkey.

A cousin, Richard Lockington Birdwood, brother of the Field Marshall, also went to Sandhurst before joining the Indian Staff Corps, rising to Captain and serving in Tibet. In the war he was Assistant Political Agent in the Persian Gulf and later served with the Indian Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). Its HQ was in Basra, where he was killed in action in 1914, aged 35. He is buried in Basra War Cemetery.

Another cousin, Herbert Frederick Birdwood, of 20th London Regiment, was attached to the Royal Flying Corps as an observer and was shot down on a lengthy reconnaissance mission over France in March 1916, aged 22. He is buried in Somain Communal Cemetery, France.

Claude Tilbury and brother George William Tilbury

After heavy fighting and many killed and wounded — "a terrible time", says one history — 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment had been put back in reserve near the front line for just six days.

On August 25th 1916 they were moved back to the front, just north of Devil's Wood (*see Francis Randall*) which had just been captured again – but not for the last time – by the Allies. The history says "there are no words in which to describe the horrors of this part of the line. It had just been captured and was in a horrible condition and shelled continuously." Claude was killed the next day, on August 26th.

Back home he left his wife Ethel, who he had married just over a year earlier in Staines, and their one year- old son George Claude. Before the war Claude had worked at a nursery in Feltham, London, growing plants in a greenhouse, plainly inheriting his skills from his dad George, a gardener at Lamer Park estate, home of the Antarctic explorer Apsley Cherry-Garrard.

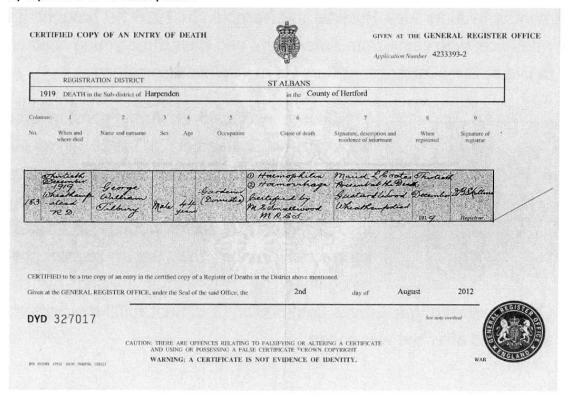
Claude is remembered on Thiepval Memorial to the Missing, the Wheathampstead War Memorial, the old Roll of Honour and the Memorial Tablet at St Peter's Church in Gustard Wood.

His elder brother George served, according to his medal index card, in the Bedfordshire Regiment and then the Scottish Rifles. Beyond that we know nothing of his service – thanks to another war. In September 1940 the London Blitz was at its height. In one raid a storage building in Southwark, London, was set on fire. Inside were the service records and pension records of nearly all the men and

women who had served in the First World War. Many of those documents were destroyed or badly damaged by the flames and the water poured into the building from the firemen's hoses.

So we know only that George, who like their father was a gardener, died aged 44 on December 13th 1919. He is buried in Wheathampstead. As he died a year after the war ended he does not appear on Commonwealth War Graves Commission index. However he is remembered on the Wheathampstead War Memorial, the old Roll of Honour and the Memorial Tablet at St Peter's Church, Gustard Wood.

• Mysteriously George's death certificate states he died of haemorrhage due to haemophilia – but if he really did suffer from that condition, surely he would never have passed an Army medical? Perhaps a poor diet while fighting at the front had an effect, as more recent research has shown that a diet lacking certain vitamins can produce similar symptoms to haemophilia.



Fred Douglas Wootton

There is a delightful picture of little Fred and his younger brother John on a very old fashioned tricycle riding down the hill past the Marford Road junction.

It looks as if it was taken from near his parents' shop on the corner with Church Street, where the Kippings Restaurant now stands.



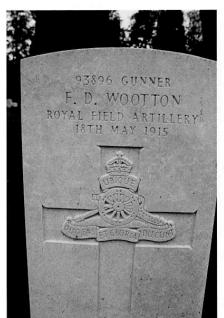
Picture courtesy of Brian Joyce, www.wheathampstead.net

This was listed as an ironmonger's on the 1901 census when their dad Frederick gives his trade as oil merchant. Ten years later Frederick says he is a general dealer with his wife Ann "assistant in the business" and Fred, now 14, working there. Five-year-old John is at school and their sister Ellen, known as Nellie, appears to have left home.

We know little of Fred's war service except that he served in the 18th Divisional Ammunition Column, Royal Field Artillery. His death on May 18th 1915, aged only 18, is registered at Colchester in Essex, the regiment's home base.

The St Albans and Wheathampstead Times of May 20th carried a photograph of mourners following his coffin past the family shop. The paper reported: "The death of Driver Fred Douglas Wootton ... was an event which called forth much sympathy in the village.

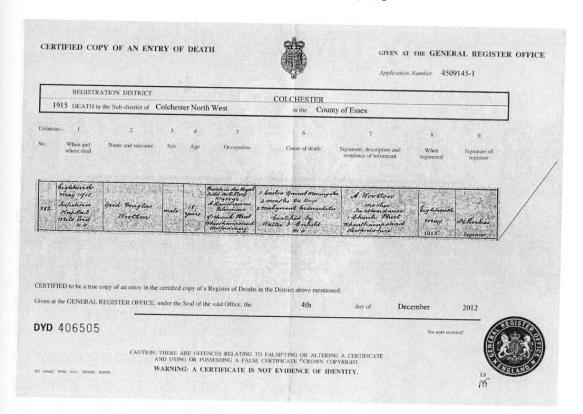
"In private life the deceased was a salesman at the establishment of Messrs Osborne and Garrett, of Frith Street, Soho, but heeding his country's call he 'chucked his job' and enlisted...



"Therefore the body, enclosed in a coffin covered with purple cloth, was conveyed by rail to Wheathampstead on Friday and rested at his home for a night. On Saturday the funeral took place, military honours being accorded. The coffin was placed upon a gun carriage and covered with the Union Jack, upon which rested wreaths sent by the family."

The rector and church choir met the cortege at the Lych-gate and "a large assemblage of parishioners" attended, says the paper.

Fred is remembered on the War Memorial close to his grave and on the old Roll of Honour.



Death certificate for Fred Douglas Wootton



In the Picture is Frederick Douglas Wootton (left) with his brother John Ellis Wootton. Picture by kind permission of www.wheathampstead.net