

A family's poignant pilgrimage

By Mike Dewey

LAST year in a series of articles on the Nostalgia page we looked at the history of the Red Lion Hotel that was located in the High Street in High Wycombe.

The series concluded with the detailed history of the Mogford family, who were proprietors of the hotel for more than 30 years from the early 1930s until it closed in 1968. The head of the family at that time was Peter Mogford, who had four brothers. They all served in the Second World War and two were killed in action, Lewis in Bangladesh on July 5, 1944, and Gerald in Italy on October 2, 1944.

When he was called up into the army after the war started Lewis was living at the Red Lion Hotel and working in the headquarters of the family hotel business in Southampton Row in London.

His room in the hotel was at the front, overlooking the High Street. This was directly opposite the offices of the Insurance Brokers Bennett & Sons.

Most mornings he would look out of the window and wave to Pamela Bennett who was working in the offices. Pamela went on to marry Lewis's brother Peter.

Thomas Mogford, a grandson of Lewis's brother Peter, has provided us with a moving account of the visit he made with his father and grandfather to the cemetery in Chittagong, Bangladesh, where his great uncle is buried.

Here is his story:

“The overriding feeling, as we entered the cemetery through the small iron gate, was of relief. Relief at the clipped hibiscus hedges, at the freshly mown grass, at the high surrounding teak trees casting cool shadows on the neat rows of graves below. Our initial impressions of Chittagong had not augured well.

As Bangladesh's main commercial port, it boasted all the frenzied traffic and half-finished buildings you'd expect of the second largest city – six million and rising – in the world's most densely populated country.

Not a great place to end up buried, you'd have thought, yet now, as we approached the white stone cross in the centre of this jungle clearing, we felt our pace slow. Monkeys rustled in the undergrowth; a pariah kite landed in a banyan tree, sending a flock of parakeets squawking overhead. Warning sounds, perhaps: would the grave really be here?

My grandfather, father and I had travelled halfway across the globe for this moment: what if our journey had been in vain? Then, on the opposite side of the cemetery I saw my grandfather stooping down to lay a poppy wreath.

My father and I joined him, and there, embossed on a plain steel plaque in the bright Bangladeshi morning, we read the name: ‘Lieutenant Lewis Mogford, South Lancashire Regt., 5th July 1944’.

The impetus for the trip had come from ‘Heroes Return’, a National Lottery scheme providing grants for



A busy street scene of the High Street, High Wycombe, in about 1932. The Red Lion Hotel is in the right foreground.

veterans to return to countries where they saw active service. My grandfather had already visited his brother Lewis's grave once. Having survived Dunkirk, and seen two of his brothers killed in the war (Lewis on the Burmese front, Gerald in Italy), he'd requested a posting to India in 1945.

The War Office had duly obliged, and, on his first period of leave, my grandfather had caught a boat from Calcutta to what was then East Bengal, and found Lewis buried in a parish churchyard in Chittagong.

The grave had subsequently been moved to a Commonwealth War Cemetery out of town; ‘Heroes Return’ would let my grandfather fulfil a long-held ambition to visit his brother in his new locale.

As we settled into our seats on the flight to Delhi, my grandfather pressed a wodge of photocopied papers into my lap. Lewis's letters home to Buckinghamshire. I wondered how much I actually knew about this man on whose behalf we were journeying. He'd been older than my grandfather, but younger than me, when he died. Both my father and I had his first name as our middle names. He had surprisingly neat handwriting...

27th November 1943: Now on active service in the most malarial dysenteric place on God's earth. The main job here, as far as I can see, is to keep the men from getting malaria – at one time I had two thirds of my strength in hospital. So far I have been exempt... Met Bert Yarrow here or near here. We had a pleasant chat. Nice for both of us.

10th November 1943: In hospital getting over malaria.

Life has been very tragic lately. My OC Bill Caulfield, through taking an overdose of quinine etc., went and shot himself. He was a great friend, and we all feel it badly. What a bloody business is this war.

Then, on 10th June 1944, the handwriting changed: A kind friend is writing to you by proxy as I am too weak. Have really gone and done it this time and have gone down with malaria and pneumonia

together. During the last nine months you must have realised we've had rather a sticky time in my part of the world.

It has been a hard life and I have been one of the unfortunate ones in having had malaria five times in six months. Of course I am paying for it and I do not know what the result will be. You know what I shall endeavour for. It will only be a fifty-fifty chance. My main concern is to get as fit as possible. This I have no doubt. Let us leave it there.

Two days later, new handwriting again, and a letter from an Asst. Matron Weallens: This is just to let you know that your son is very much better and will soon be writing to you himself, I hope. He sends you his love and to all the family and says you are not to worry about him as he is much stronger.

After a three-day stopover Delhi we took a flight to Dhaka, and from there we caught an internal flight to Chittagong. Playing over in our heads was the advice we'd received from the UK Foreign Office: ‘You'll be fine as long as you don't go to... where was it... Chittagong.’ Inconsiderate of Lewis, really.

It was dusk when we landed, and we hailed a taxi to our hotel, Harbour View. Guards in ill-fitting uniforms stood in shop doorways, leaning on the barrels of AK-47s. A man in a singlet with crazy eyes staggered up to the cab. There were no tourists.

The hotel had evidently been named by someone with a taste for the dramatic – the harbour was at least four miles away – but the receptionist was fantastically friendly, and the poppy-wreaths my grandfather had sent ahead from England were waiting.

In my hotel room, I took out the last of Lewis's letters.

28th June 1944: Many thanks for the telegram received today. I am slowly and surely getting better. My present hospital, the 68th IGH is very pleasant, and I feel it won't be long now before I get up. Incidentally, apart from the

complaint mentioned in my last AMCL, I have typhoid – in fact I seem to be doing the rounds properly. My main trouble is my tummy. The monsoon has started but we have been very lucky this week with the sun, and have had little rain. I expect Bucks is looking its best – I only wish I was there to see it. Your letter is being written by a very kind Sister, as I am unable to hold a pen firmly enough for long,

but should be able to do so in a few days. After the show is over, I expect to retire from the battlefield a trifle scarred but with a lot of experience. What the final outcome will be I do not know until I have a final medical board. Finally I repeat DO NOT WORRY as I am on the right road.”

Lewis died on 5th July 1944.

When the time came to leave the cemetery, I checked my watch. Not only was it the 11th day of the 11th month – a complete coincidence: we'd only chosen to visit in November to avoid the monsoon – but it was also 11 in the morning.

We are indebted to Thomas Mogford for permission to publish this article. Thomas is the author of a series of crime novels called ‘Spike Sanguinetti. The fifth Spike Sanguinetti novel, *A Thousand Cuts*’, will be published by Bloomsbury on February 23.



Thomas, Peter and Jeremy Mogford at Lewis's grave

Great War timeline

TO remind ourselves of the progress of the First World War, we are detailing the main events affecting Great Britain which took place each week.

The week up to December 29:

On December 23rd Private William Bryant from Colshill died of wounds back in England.

Private Henry Adams from Fulmer died of wounds at the Western Front on December 24.

On December 26 Privates George F Clark from Chalfont St Peter and Gordon S Stirling from Gerrards Cross both died of wounds.

On December 29 General Sir Douglas Haig submitted his report on the Battle of the Somme. In it he claimed that the British army had fought half of the German Army and taken 38,000 prisoners.

The week up to January 5:

During December German submarines are credited with sinking 167 vessels. Of these, 70 were flying the flag of neutral countries.

On December 31 General Sir Douglas Haig is promoted to the rank of Field Marshall.

Three local men died on New Year's Eve 1917, and two on New Year's Day.

On December 31 Rifleman Charles W Gibbons from Marlow died of wounds at the Western Front. Private Ernest T Smith from Bourne End died in Mesopotamia.

The following day, January 1

1917, Lance Corporal Henry T Bolton from Gerrards Cross was killed in action at the Western Front, and Rifleman Harold Yates from Wooburn Green was drowned at sea on board SS Ivernia (see below).

On January 2 Officer's Steward Walter H Beaver from Marlow who served on HMS Sentinel, died from tuberculosis in University College Hospital after being invalided out of the Royal Navy.

SS Ivernia

SS Ivernia was an ocean liner owned by the Cunard Line which was launched in 1899. She was one of Cunard's ‘intermediate ships’, catering for the vast immigrant trade to the United States.

Following the outbreak of war the Ivernia was hired by the British government as a troop transport. In the autumn of 1916, William Thomas Turner was given command of the ship.

On January 1 1917 the Ivernia was carrying some 2,400 British troops from Marseille to Alexandria, when at 10.12am she was torpedoed 58 miles south-east of Cape Matapan in Greece, in the Kythira Strait. The ship went down with a loss of 36 crew members and 84 troops. Rifleman Harold Yates was one of those lost.

Captain Turner remained on the bridge until all aboard had departed in lifeboats and rafts “before striking out to swim as the vessel went down under his feet.”