

Not Forgotten – research brings people to life

by Christine Bury

During the Covid lockdown many people have begun researching their family history or investigating some aspect of local history that intrigues them. This type of research is not new and, although today we are blessed with access to enumerable online avenues, it is staff at the local records office, museum or research centre who can provide experience and support when an apparent dead end is reached.

For over 30 years, volunteers at Emsworth Museum have been helping enquirers facilitate their research. This article is about one such request and its aftermath. Answering an initial query led to a rich vein of material, some of which can still be seen on a swingboard in the Museum.

Arthur B Woods

In 1994 Museum Administrator Tessa Daines was contacted by Leslie Zupan, an American lady who was investigating the life of a young film director Arthur Woods who had died in a plane crash in Brook Meadow some 50 years earlier. Tessa recalled seeing the scene of the crash as a young girl growing up in Emsworth.

Interviewed a year later by the *Portsmouth News*, Tessa said, “I found plans and a map of the area as it was during the war and took it to Leslie while on holiday in the States”.

Who was Arthur Woods and why did he crash?

Arthur Bickerstaffe Woods was born in 1904 in West Derby, an affluent suburb of Liverpool. His father was managing director of the Nelson (Shipping) Line and Arthur was educated at Downside School and Christ’s College, Cambridge. A boyhood visit to a silent film studio began a lifelong fascination with motion pictures. A short spell in medical school after university convinced Woods that he had chosen the wrong career path and in 1926 he joined a repertory company, gaining experience in many roles – actor, art director, stage manager – to name but a few.

A year later his boyhood interest led to a career in films when Woods joined British Instructional (BI) as a film editor. Although he appeared on screen once Woods preferred

Charcoal portrait of F/Lt Arthur B Woods, AFC, by Capt. Cuthbert Orde, official RAF artist. Sketched at RAF West Malling on 29th November 1943



to spend his time behind the camera as a set designer and producer. When BI merged with British International Pictures Arthur Woods turned to screenwriting and feature film direction. His output was extensive and versatile: shorts, documentaries, spy stories, musicals, historical adventure and murder mysteries. Woods’ finest work is now regarded as a classic film noir of the 1930s. This is the thriller, *They Drive By Night*, which he made for Warner Brothers by whom he had been poached in 1936.

Made in 1938, *They Drive By Night*, was released in the spring of 1939 to critical acclaim and it seemed as though its director was poised for a major film making career but war intervened and all theatres and film studios closed.

Woods was a keen amateur pilot who had taken up flying in 1932 after co-directing a short film about the aviation pioneer, Amy

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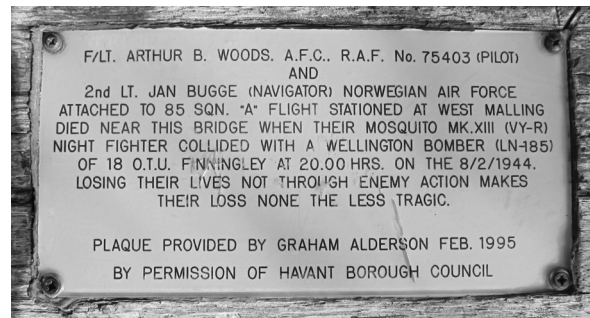
Arthur B Woods continued

Johnson. Subsequently, Woods often did the flying stunts in his own films. It was only natural then that he should join the RAF in the Volunteer Reserve in October 1939. However he wasn't done with the film world, because when the studios re-opened in early 1940 MGM obtained his temporary release from his ferry pilot duties to take over direction of *Busman's Honeymoon*. This film, based on the Dorothy L Sayers' novel of the same name, featured an all-star cast that included Robert Montgomery, Constance Cummings, Sir Seymour Hicks and Robert Newton. France fell as the last scenes were being shot at Denham Studios and Woods promptly returned to his squadron.

At 35, Woods was past the usual age limit for combat pilots. He ferried fighter aircraft during the Battle of Britain before transferring to Training Command where his skills as a pilot were passed on to young recruits. In early 1942 he was assigned to a newly formed glider training unit and later that year was awarded the Air Force Cross for his role in experimental work with glider towing. A stint with the Parachute Training Squadron followed before at last he got his wish and was assigned to combat duties. He was posted to 85 squadron in West Malling, Kent, led by the charismatic night fighter pilot John 'Cats-Eyes' Cunningham.

Woods' wartime colleagues remember him as a modest and unassuming man. They recall his keen sense of humour, his artistic talent, especially of caricatures of his fellow pilots and navigators, and his kindness.

So how did Flight Lieutenant Arthur Woods come to crash his Mosquito night fighter in Brook Meadow on 8th February 1944 killing both himself and his navigator, Norwegian 2nd Lieutenant Jan Bugge? It was not the result of enemy action, instead it was a tragic mid-air collision between the Mosquito fighter plane and a Wellington bomber that caused both crews to perish.



Above & Right: Plaque and North Bridge in 2020

A Merlin engine from the Mosquito landed in the garden of 1 Rose Cottage in Lumley Road while the rest of the plane came down in what is now the Brook Meadow Nature Reserve. The Wellington bomber crashed in Prinsted.

Adrian Voller saw and heard the crash when he was four years old.

"I was returning with my parents one night from visiting my aunt in Cosham and as we disembarked at Emsworth railway station, I could hear the drone of aircraft engines..... As we reached the pavement on the far side of the road there was a tremendous crash in the sky to the south. As we looked up a yellow streak of flame appeared which took about 20 seconds to fall to earth. The rising crescendo of engines on full power abruptly stopped as the aircraft hit the ground....with a thump that could be felt through our feet."

Fifty one years later Adrian chanced to hear a Radio Solent announcement that a ceremony would be taking place in Brook Meadow to commemorate a plane crash in Emsworth during WW2. Mr Voller and his wife Mary joined a party on 8th February 1995 of about 60 people on the nature reserve's north bridge by Seagull Lane. Emsworth Museum played host to those attending the ceremony of placing a plaque on the then new bridge. The plaque is still there.

Among those present on a very wet day in 1995 was the Mayor of Chichester, officers from the Norwegian and Canadian embassies, local dignitaries, representatives from the British Legion and other ex servicemen. Meridian TV sent a film crew.

Tessa Daines had been instrumental in having the plaque, which was provided by Graham Alderson of Cosham, as a commemoration.

Tessa said, "I suggested that the plaque should be placed where it is because the bridge signifies the stretching across time of people of the present, remembering people of the past."

Twenty five years on from that ceremony, her sentiment is still valid.

