

## Oxfordshire's Commemoration Story

### Julie Summers

In Oxfordshire there are now 167 Commonwealth War Graves Commission sites containing 2,114 burials based on the post 1974 county boundary changes<sup>1</sup>, including 6 in Oxford itself. Woodstock Cemetery has 14 burials, five from the First World War and nine from the Second World War. The youngest boy in this group is sixteen year old Ronald Peter Hoare from Woodstock. He had joined the Navy as a 'boy' and was at HMS St George, a Royal Navy shore establishment in the early months of 1940. The cause of death is unexplained but it is likely to have been as a result of accident or disease.



Fig 1. © Julie Summers

A small number of Commission burials are spread throughout Woodstock Cemetery, so that it does not have the appearance of a large CWGC cemetery such as one might see in Oxford (Botley) Cemetery (Fig 1)

or in the burial plot in Kidlington Burial Ground. But each headstone

is cared for and in the case of Woodstock the maintenance of the graves has been subcontracted by the Commission to children of the Marlborough School. Thus the link with the community is kept.

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<sup>1</sup> Before 1974 a significant number of CWGC sites south and west of Oxford, such as the Vale of the White Horse District were in Berkshire

The exact number of boy soldiers buried in Oxfordshire cemeteries is impossible to establish since the Commonwealth War Graves Commission only has ages at death if the family completed the relevant forms giving such details. Where boys had lied about their ages or the families had moved on or simply did not wish to give the dates the Commission was not in a position to make assumptions or guess.

One of many moving stories from the Second World War is that of ATC Cadets Leslie Shearwood who was killed on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1944, in a training flight along with a 19 year old Australian pupil pilot, Flying Officer Norman Davies (buried in Botley) and 28 year old RAF Flight Lieutenant John Patrickson. They were practising low level flying over Steeple Aston when the plane hit trees and crashed. Shearwood's epitaph reads: 'He wanted to fly/ God gave him wings'.

Eighteen year old Air Cadet Sergeant William Albert Hughes from Wallingford Grammar School cycled to RAF Harwell with a 16 year old friend, Richard Ayres, to experience flying. They made up the crew of seven men in a Wellington Bomber (HF855). The flight ended in disaster when the pilot missed the runway and all seven, including the two boys, were killed.

Hughes is buried next to his younger brother, Vivien who was killed in 1945, in All Saints Churchyard, Didcot. The two boys have the rare distinction of a double Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone (Fig 2). Richard Ayres is buried in Wallingford Cemetery.



Fig 2. © Richard Steele

The Commission may care for hundreds of thousands of names on memorials and headstones worldwide but every name is an individual and the Commission's duty is to honour the memories of individual men, not massed ranks. It is a very human organisation with a remarkable ethos and at its heart very real care for and pride in its work.