

THE 'BOWLER BOYS'

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The account that follows draws heavily on a privately published book written by Leslie Bowler's son, John. I strongly recommend reading his book *Leslie William Harold Bowler* (available from the Library) because, apart from containing many more details, it also contains a mass of information about life in the trenches in WWI and quotes extensively from war diaries. These provide a most interesting insight into the small detail of day-to-day life in one of the bloodiest wars in history.

In his book John acknowledged his indebtedness to Christopher Bowler and Audrey Cox (née Bowler) for information about their parents (Geoffrey and Frank respectively). I also thank all three of them for this information.

How the Bowler family came to Deddington

At the turn of the last century Thomas William Bowler was the Managing Director of the family business, Victor Jay and Co. in Southwark, London. The 1901 census records that he and his family lived in Wandsworth. The company were felt and straw hat manufacturers and are attributed with the development of the original bowler hat. In 1891 Thomas had married Alice Turner of Deddington. The Turner family¹ lived at The Poplars now known as Castle End. Thomas and Alice, with their growing family, moved to Deddington in 1909 to live in what was then called Eastleigh but has since been renamed Bowler House. They had six children - Leslie (b 1893), Geoffrey (b 1895), Frank (b 1898), Kathleen (b 1900), Cyril (b 1903) and John, known as Jack (b 1906). All five boys went to Bloxham School. The two youngest children, Cyril and Jack, were drowned in September 1917 in the River Cherwell near Clifton while swimming. Their graves are in the churchyard.

¹ The Turner family had lived in Deddington for many years. Briefly:

The Reverend Edward Turner (1752-1836) had 12 children and was uncle of the famous engraver, Charles Turner.

Thomas William (1800-63) was the Reverend's 12th child and a GP. He was the first Turner to occupy The Poplars in 1825 when it was then known as The Green. He married Elizabeth Newman (1799-1878).

Edward William (1834-89) was their second child. He also became a GP and married Louisa Ann Colman (1838-1930) from Norfolk (one of the Colman's Mustard daughters). Louisa was reputed to be quite a formidable character, featuring large in parish affairs and lived to the age of 92. Edward and Louisa also lived at The Poplars, where they had nine children.

Their third child, Alice, married Thomas Bowler. Their only son, Thomas William (1871-1933) continued the family tradition by becoming a GP. NB: Although she coincidentally bore the same surname, Mary Vane Turner - author of *The Story of Deddington* - was not related by marriage to this branch of the Turner family.

The Poplars was sold some time between 1930 and 1939 and later renamed Castle End.

LESLIE BOWLER

Leslie was born in Islington. After school he joined his father in the family business. War broke out in August 1914 when he was 21 years old and he enlisted as a Territorial soldier. He joined the 16th (Public Schools) Battalion, Middlesex Regiment whose part-time training was conveniently carried out near to the Victor Jay factory. The photograph is of Leslie as a Captain wearing his MC decoration with bar and also the laurel sprig of his two Mentions in Despatches.



Photograph taken circa 1919

He was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant on 9 June 1915 into the 22nd Battalion, County of London Regiment (The Queen's). He arrived in France on 11 November. He was now a full Lieutenant and was Platoon Commander for the next 15 months. His Battalion was stationed at Allouagne 10kms west of Béthune. There is insufficient space here to recount his experiences in full but what follows will give some idea of his very busy war.

1915-16

On 15 December he went into the front line trenches at Vermeilles for the first time. This section was only 20 yards from the Germans. From then until February 1917 his platoon was involved in battles for Vimy Ridge and the Somme offensive - particularly the attack on High Wood in September 1916 during which, in one company, all the officers and sergeants were killed. He received a flesh wound affecting his ability to sit.

1917

In March he became Acting Adjutant to the 21st Battalion. Having survived some 16 months at the front, this HQ appointment improved his chances of surviving the war but nonetheless he and his Battalion continued to be frequently in action in the Ypres salient. In July he was gazetted Captain. He had a few days leave in the UK in October but was back in action by beginning of November and was Mentioned in Despatches on 7 November.

The major attack on the Hindenburg Line commenced 20 November. Massed tanks were deployed and an advance of an incredible four miles achieved. Leslie's Division captured Bourslon Wood in an engagement in which he received the first of his MCs. However, nearly all this ground gained was subsequently lost at a cost to the 141st Brigade of 69 officers and 1939 men. Gas attacks were a particular feature ... 'The Division casualties were enormous. The 19th Battalion suffered particularly heavily. 15 Officers and over 600 men took up position ... of these only

one officer and between twenty and thirty of the men remained a few days later, the remainder being in hospital from gas.' At year end they were dug in back on the Hindenburg Line - again.

1918

The pattern continued in the New Year with sporadic attacks and patrols. On 15 March Leslie received the MC he had been awarded at Burlon Wood. The citation stated that 'in a wood ... heavily shelled and gassed ... he went ahead and recce'd the whole position under the most difficult situations. It was largely due to his determination and skills that the Battalion succeeded in occupying the position.' Fighting was particularly fierce throughout March with attack and counter-attack in the Somme area moving the front line backwards and forwards. The defence of Highland Ridge and the retaking of High Hill stand out. The success of the German offensive led to massive reinforcements being sent from UK - mostly boys of 18.

7 April. For a second time the diary records 'Capt. Bowler was awarded a Mention in Despatches.' Shortly after this he became Signals Officer; this was a particularly important and dangerous position as it entailed maintaining miles of telephone wire intact and frequently while under enemy fire.

On 13 June Leslie took over command of B Company. He was 25 years old. The battle for the Somme continued. Records are unclear but it is probable that he won the bar to his MC on the night of 22-23 August when, without orders, he countered a flanking move by the enemy (who had overrun units either side of him) by moving his company to 'straighten the line'. The citation reads in part '... led his company in an attack with conspicuous gallantry and skill, exposing himself under intense fire with a total disregard of danger ...'

In October he was wounded a second time. A bullet passed through both legs leaving a small exit wound but missed arteries and bones. He walked two miles to the regimental aid post. As a consequence he was invalided home and the war finished while he was convalescing.

Post-war he helped his Battalion Commanding Officer form a Territorial Battalion and only resigned his commission in 1921. He married, became MD of the family firm, a keen gardener and, despite his leg wound, an athlete (Ranleigh Harriers) and rower (Vesta RC). At some stage between the wars the family moved to London.

WWII and Deddington Home Guard

In 1940, in order to avoid the London bombing, he took his young family to Deddington where his mother's family lived. After a brief stay in lodgings they rented the wing of an old monastery (now demolished) named Boulder Dyke in Clifton. However, he still had to keep the family business running during the week and so only returned to Deddington at weekends. He became the Platoon Sergeant of Deddington Home Guard and was then promoted to Platoon Commander when the incumbent (Lt Morris) was promoted to Major. He used to say that he hoped that if that dreadful man, Hitler, did invade he would do so at the weekend! Photographs of him can be seen in the Home Guard section on pages 69 and 70. Leslie took his family back to London in 1946 at the end of hostilities.

JOHN BOWLER

Leslie's son, John, also served for his National Service from 1950 to 1952.

He was commissioned into the Welch Regiment and went with them to the Korean War. He arrived in Korea in 1951 on the same day his father had arrived in France in 1915 and, like his father, he was a Platoon Commander and was also wounded twice. He won an MC, aged 19, through patrolling against the Chinese.

Buckingham Palace 1953 where he has just been decorated by HM The Queen



GEOFFREY BOWLER

Geoffrey was the second of the three 'Bowler Boys'. At the end of 1914 he joined the 5th Battalion, Dorset Regiment and was commissioned into it. The Battalion joined the 29th Division destined for Gallipoli.

In the uniform of an Air Commodore during WWII



They arrived at Gallipoli and on 7 August 1915 they invaded Suvla Bay on the west of the peninsular. The bay, which was about a mile across, was ringed by mountains containing fiercely determined Turks well armed with machine guns and field guns but, above all, enjoying excellent visibility of the invading troops on the beach below.

The Dorsets made three determined uphill assaults through dense, troublesome undergrowth which readily caught fire - frequently burning men alive - without capturing the heights. Geoffrey's ankle was shattered by a bullet and he, along with some 300 other wounded in the assault, were shipped back to the UK. This took many weeks and the conditions on the so-called 'hospital' ship were appalling. The bad medical conditions allowed a widespread increase in gangrene and by the time he arrived at a hospital in England it was necessary to amputate his wounded leg just below the knee.

Many would have thought the young Captain, as he then was, had done enough for King and Country, and the Army had little use for him now. So he joined the newly formed Royal Flying Corps and volunteered for balloons - a particularly hazardous activity in those days - where he became an instructor.

At the end of the war Geoffrey was demobilised and discovered, like many others, that it was particularly difficult to find suitable employment. He joined the recently formed Royal Air Force which had evolved from the Royal Flying Corps and trained as a pilot, gained his wings and became a Flight Lieutenant.

He was rapidly posted to Mesopotamia (now Iraq) to support the Army in their battles against determined and effective tribal attacks. The RAF was able to provide rapid communication, valuable information about enemy movements and give effective support for the defence of isolated British camps, if necessary, using airborne gunfire or even bombs.



About to take off in a Bristol to take part in a Hendon Air Display - probably in 1922

Geoffrey had an illustrious career in the RAF becoming an Air Vice-Marshal towards the end of World War II. His final appointment in 1944 was Deputy Commander of Maintenance Command, a most important post in view of the large size of the RAF at that time. He had a Mention in Despatches but the family are not sure when he was awarded this, maybe at Gallipoli. He retired in 1949 and had been made a CB (Commander of the Bath) and a CBE (Commander of the British Empire).

FRANK BOWLER

Frank was the youngest of the surviving 'Bowler Boys'. He joined the Royal Flying Corps, became a 2nd Lieutenant and commenced his flying training at 7.15am on 20 April 1918.

**In the uniform of a 2nd Lieutenant
in the Royal Flying Corps**



His log book says his first flight was for 15 minutes at a height of 500 ft and 'No Control landing'. The family are not sure what this means. The training appears to have been extensive and included 'landings, low flying, formation flying and stunting, firing, cloud flying and aerial fighting.' He appears to have flown three types of aircraft - a de Havilland, an Avro and a Sopwith Pup - before he became a qualified pilot and received his wings on 12 September 1918.

2nd Lieutenant Frank Bowler was then posted to an aerodrome in France named Fienvillers which is 12 miles north of Amiens in the Somme. His first flight was for 25 minutes on 5 October 1918, during which he carried out three landings. The squadron was flying S.E.5As. They were designed and built by the Royal Aircraft Factory at Farnborough. The armaments were a .303 Vickers machine gun firing through the propeller arc and a .303 Lewis heavy machine gun mounted on the upper wing. It was capable of a maximum speed of 138 mph and could operate up to 19,500 feet.



An S.E.5A aircraft

During October he explored the front line at Bouvincourt, 16 miles south of Cambrai and he noted in his log book that he collected a bent axle on landing. He went to the front line at Le Cateau, 10 miles south east of Cambrai, flew formation with the squadron to the front line, fired on targets and 'scrapped' at the aerodrome, flew 1½ hours cross-country and was lost once on his return. On another sortie to Bouvincourt one of his fellow pilots was killed. This is the sector where the 22nd Battalion, County of London Regiment (The Queen's) were holding the final German offensive, and then drove them back, but it is unlikely that he flew over his brother, Leslie, as he was wounded early in October.

His duties also included flying damaged, but still airworthy, aircraft across the Channel to a particular airfield in Kent, to be repaired and later returned to active service in France.

The day came when Frank reported to the aerodrome workshops as usual and was told that there was just one aircraft needing to be flown back to 'Blighty' but its compass was not in working order. The sky was clear and Frank overcame his own and the workshop's misgivings and took off towards the nearby French coast. With the Channel below him he now had fewer than 30 miles to fly but before long he could see that there was thick fog ahead.

With the happy optimism of youth he decided not to turn back but once in the fog he hoped to gain better visibility by losing height. He was well aware that if he lost course he might even miss Kent altogether and fly northwards out of the Channel eventually to run out of fuel over the North Sea. He had been revving his engine intermittently as he caught glimpses of the waves below and then he saw something as he flew almost right over it - a small English fishing boat with its crew of two on deck, both looking skywards and both with outstretched arms pointing to the north. Frank waved in gratitude as he made a considerable correction to his course. The fog was lifting when he flew over Dover's white cliffs. He never forgot the experience of that day.

Frank later served in WWII and was promoted to acting Wing Commander in South Africa where he was the Transport Officer.