

Local History County Yarns

David Arnold would like to hear from readers of *County Yarns* who have stories and illustrations about Sussex to share with us. Email david.arnold@me.com or write to him at 14 St John Street, Lewes, East Sussex BN7 2QE.

Mosquito man's courage and skill earned him the DFC

When I first set out to put a book together telling the fascinating story behind the Memorial Chapel in the grounds of Priory School, Lewes, I had little idea of where the project would lead me.

I knew the tale in broad outline: During the Second World War, part of what is now Priory School had been Lewes County Grammar School for Boys. The headmaster at the time was Neville Bradshaw. As the war went on he was both saddened and appalled as news arrived of the deaths of former pupils and became determined that somehow they had to be remembered.

By the end of hostilities, 55 of his "Old Boys" had been killed, several aged as young as 18. By then Neville Bradshaw had determined on building a Chapel of Remembrance. Even before the war ended he had set in train fundraising initiatives and these only gathered pace in peacetime. Even so, it was a monumental task but one in which Bradshaw never lost faith. Eventually, on 10th July 1960, with the Chapel finally completed, a dedication service was held attended by 1,500 parents, pupils and Old Boys. Three weeks later, Neville Bradshaw retired after 30 years as headmaster. The chapel is considered unique in being Britain's only building within a state school that is registered as a war memorial. The names of the 55 fallen are recorded within it but for the purposes of the book I needed to know the stories behind those names. Fortunately, my research has been greatly facilitated through the contents of the "Barbican", the Grammar School's own periodical that carried the grim tidings of each death as the news was received.

What quickly became clear to me was how these 55 Sussex men represented Britain's war effort in microcosm. They had joined up to become soldiers, sailors and airmen and went on to serve worldwide on every continent and sail on every sea and ocean. In the case of one particular casualty, Frederick Henry Ruffle, I was also amazed to discover that my wife Barbara and I had much in common with him and his family.

Fred was a Volunteer Reserve in the RAF and qualified as a Navigator in twin-seater Mosquito fighter-bombers. Fred saw action on the island of Malta when it was under constant attack by the German and Italian air forces. In 1943 he flew with the air umbrella protecting the Allied army invading Sicily. The next year he returned to England to fly in support of the men who landed in Normandy on D-Day.

Later in 1944, Fred's squadron was deployed as pathfinders in "Intruder"

attacks on dams and canals in Germany's industrial heartland. Their task was to knock out the enemy anti-aircraft guns leaving the way clear for heavy bombers to follow up and sow mines in the waterways.

It was for his actions on one such raid on the Kiel Canal that Fred, as a Pilot Officer in 515 Squadron, won the DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross). The recommendation for his medal reads: "Over a total of 61 sorties on Intruder Operations, P/O Ruffle has always displayed qualities of an exceptional Navigator. His courage and skill have contributed to the successful operations carried out by himself and his pilot.

"These qualities were well in evidence on the night of 5th/6th October 1944 when his aircraft was detailed to silence the ground defences of the Kiel Canal. It was necessary that his aircraft should arrive only a few seconds in advance of the mine laying force. That this was accomplished and the defences silenced, was in no small measure due to the skill of Pilot Officer Ruffle."

Fred was promoted from Pilot Officer to Flying Officer on 2nd November 1944. It was a sad irony of war that having survived so many hazardous "ops" Fred should be killed on a training flight out of Little Snoring Airfield in Norfolk on 23rd November 1944, at the age of 23.

When "Barbican" carried news of Fred's death, the report told of how he had lived a full life at school, played for the School XV as a scrum half and gained excellent qualifications.



Above left: RAF Flying Officer Fred Ruffle DFC. A Navigator flying in Mosquito light bombers, he was killed in an air accident in November 1944. To his right is a Mosquito being prepared for the very last bombing mission of the war in Europe in May 1945. The destination was Kiel, a place that had been a target for Fred Ruffle the previous year.

Below: Holy Trinity Church, High Hurstwood, north of Uckfield. Fred Ruffle married Nellie Muddle here in February 1943. The airman was buried in Holy Trinity churchyard on 29 November 1944.

It concluded: "Fred was one of the country lads who have given Uckfield House so outstanding a record in this war. A finer set of fellows could not be found anywhere. We mourn his loss."

Fred's DFC was received from the King at Buckingham Palace by his widow, Nellie, and his father late in 1946. Just the two were allowed in to meet the King. Nellie's daughter and Mrs. Ruffle stood outside the gates. I indicated earlier that my wife and I had something in common with Fred Ruffle.

Before going to Lewes Grammar he was a pupil at the little school in High Hurstwood, the village where he lived. It was the same school that my wife Barbara attended some 30 years later. Fred married local lass Nellie

Muddle in Holy Trinity Church, High Hurstwood, in February 1943. This is the same church where Barbara and I were married in June 1974. Fred is buried in Holy Trinity's churchyard.

The ashes of my wife's parents, Geoff and Betty Huxley, along with those of her elder sister Margaret are also interred in that same churchyard.

Incidentally, at the time of his death, Fred Ruffle was with a squadron set up to intercept German radio and radar transmissions. By coincidence, Nellie's war work was similar. She was trained to track the radio signals of incoming German bombers and feed the information into Bletchley Park. She was able to identify individual airmen by the way they tapped out their Morse code.

