



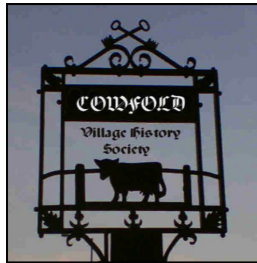
FOR LOVE AND COURAGE

**The Letters of Lieutenant Colonel E W
Hermon**

from the Western Front 1914-17



by Anne Nason



For Love and Courage

Introduction

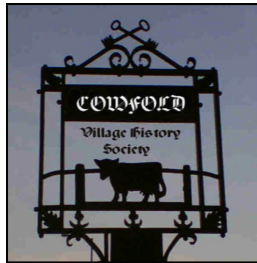
The following is the transcript of a talk given by Anne Nasan to Cowfold Village History Society on Friday 4 May 2012. The presentation describes the life of her grandparents and the book 'For Love and Courage' and was followed by actors reading letters from the book.

The Talk

Good evening. I am very honoured to have been invited to talk to the Cowfold Historical Society about my grandparents' connections with the village. To be here in the Village Hall is particularly special, as this is where my parents had their wedding reception in 1929 as my Hermon grandmother was too ill to hold the reception at Brook Hill, where the family lived. Sadly she died the following year at the early age of 50.

I will give you a very brief history of my grandfather's life and then talk about how I came to publish his letters, and finally show you some slides of the memorabilia saved by my grandmother before the reading of more extracts from the letters. He was born in 1878 to Sidney and Fanny Hermon who later lived at The White House, Balcombe. My grandfather, whose name was Edward William, was known as "Robert" by his family – why, I am afraid, history doesn't relate!

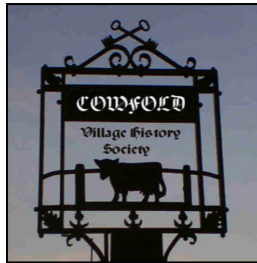
He was educated at Eton and Oxford but did not complete his degree as he answered the call of duty to fight in the Boer War. He joined the 7th Queen's Own Hussars and went to South Africa where he took part in operations in the Transvaal



and Orange River Colony, but unfortunately no letters survive from this period. After the war was over, his regiment stayed for some time at Pochestroom, near Johannesburg, to keep the peace and on one of his leaves in England he married his cousin Ethel, who was the love of his life. She followed him out to South Africa and their eldest daughter Betty was born in Cape Town. In 1905 they returned with the Hussars to Aldershot where my Uncle Bob and later my mother Mary were born. In 1911 when the 7th Hussars were posted to India, my grandfather resigned from the Army as he did not want to take his young children to India because of the risk to their health, but nor did he want to leave them behind in England. By this time their fourth child, Meg had been born, so they had four young children, and it must have been at this point that they moved to Cowfold. Unusually perhaps, for this period, he was very much a family man and was devoted to his children.

My grandfather was then given a territorial command - the Oxford and Cambridge Squadron of a Special Cavalry Reserve regiment called King Edward's Horse, The King's Oversea Dominion's Regiment. It was made up of many young men from the Dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa who were attending Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

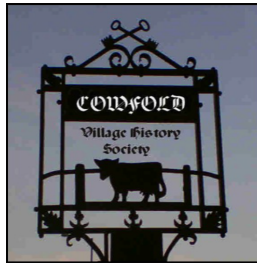
In 1914 when the First World War was declared on the 4th August, the regiment were training near Canterbury and continued their training in different parts of southern England until they were "battle ready" and sent to France in April, 1915, and from there my grandfather wrote to his wife nearly every day. His squadron was deployed as a separate unit and as his officers and soldiers were strong young men from the Dominions, they were given many of the most physically exacting tasks like digging trenches, recovering guns from the battlefield and burying the dead under the cover of darkness. All this is clearly described in his letters. To begin with they were all fairly "Gung ho!" but later the realities of war clicked in. During this time



they held Horse Shows and other entertainments behind the lines, which helped to keep up morale. The welfare of his squadron's horses was one of my grandfather's great concerns and he employed his soldiers in making makeshift stables to keep the horses out of the worst of the rain and snow. Those of you who have seen or read "War Horse" will know of the difficult conditions the horses suffered in the 1st World War.

In 1916 the separate companies of King Edward's Horse were brought together as one regiment, and my grandfather was very disappointed not to get command, but it went to an officer senior to him which was the usual practice.

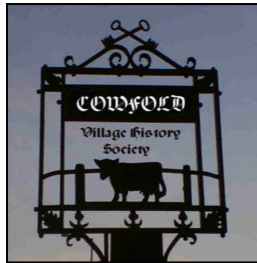
He was in any case frustrated that he was not "having a go at the Hun" and felt acutely that he was not doing his bit, so he had the courage to join the infantry and was appointed to command the 27th Battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers, the Tyneside Irish, whilst the CO was recovering from minor wounds. When he returned my grandfather was immediately transferred to command the 24th Battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers and saw fighting on the Somme where he had great admiration for the soldiers who fought under the most appalling conditions. During this time he had a couple of home leaves, and he and my grandmother stayed at the Berkeley Hotel in London for a few days – a memory he greatly treasured. In April 1917 his Battalion took part in the battle of Arras, and he was killed leading his soldiers on the first day, the 9th April. He was carried from the battlefield by his soldier servant Gordon Buxton, and buried in the military cemetery of Roclincourt, just outside Arras. In the 1990's my husband and I visited the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery and I was amazed to see a small cross with the words "Not forgotten in his home village" on it. This was particularly surprising as it was nearly 80 years since his death. By looking at the visitor's book I was able to find a name from Partridge Green and followed it up by a telephone call on our return. The



couple, whose name I have sadly forgotten, had made it a quest to visit all the graves of those whose names were on the War Memorials at Cowfold and Partridge Green, but now I believe, they have been traced by the sleuthing efforts of Sue Crofts, and are in the audience tonight!

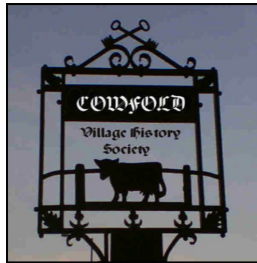
After the war, Gordon Buxton returned to the employment of my grandmother and when she died in 1930 he worked for my Aunt Betty and her husband Luke Leslie Smith, at Cooks Farm, Nuthurst. I just remember seeing him in 1939 when I was five, as I had come back from New Zealand with my mother and elder brother to see our relations, and we stayed with Aunt Betty for a few days. We had intended to stay for three months but unfortunately our trip was curtailed by the outbreak of World War 2 and we actually sailed from Southampton back to New Zealand on the 1st September 1939. My mother was afraid that my father, John McKergow, who had been in the Royal Scots Greys for five years before his marriage, might “go to the war” before we got back home, as the voyage took nearly six weeks. In fact we got home in time but he sailed to the Middle East in 1940 with the New Zealand forces and we did not see him again until he returned in a hospital ship to New Zealand in 1944, with a severe wound to his arm. Like his father-in-law, he also commanded a regiment in action, but his theatre was the Middle East, Crete and Italy.

Gordon Buxton remained in close touch with all the family, as he was a very strong link to the father they hardly knew and his daughter Jessica gave me letters written to him from my mother and also my Uncle Ken, the fifth child of the Hermons, who was born in 1915 while his father was in France. These letters were from Oflag IVC – the infamous Castle of Colditz where he was a prisoner during the Second World War. Jessica Hawes, was the 7th child of the Buxtons, and the only girl after 6 boys. She told me that when she was born, the bells of St. Peter’s were rung in celebration! She has been most generous in giving me letters and memorabilia



which were collected by her parents, including the photograph of my parent's wedding, taken at Brook Hill, which I did not already have! I know too, that she has contributed an oral history to your Society.

Now I will tell you how the book came about and I think it is true to say that a certain amount of "serendipity" was involved! My mother was left the desk by her mother with the letters in the top drawer where they had always been kept at Brook Hill. The desk went to New Zealand with us when we went to live there in 1935. I remember as a child seeing the letters, but almost regarding them as a sort of holy relic, as my mother couldn't bring herself to open them, her father's death had affected her so deeply and they remained untouched until shortly before she died in 1991. When I in turn inherited the desk and the letters were shipped back to England, I read them and was very moved by their contents, but didn't really know what to do with them. I felt if I gave them to a Museum they would never see the light of day. It was not until we were at a silver wedding party in London that I met a master from Eton and he put me in touch with Michael Meredith, the librarian at the time, who is still very closely connected with Eton and is a great enthusiast. We went to see Michael one day, taking letters and memorabilia and he told me to go home and "transcribe every single word!" As my grandfather wrote as often as he could, in fact over 600 letters, it was a daunting task and that took me the best part of two years. When I had finished, and this is where serendipity again plays a part, I showed the transcript to James Holland a young historian who lives only 200 yards from us and keeps his chickens in our field! I don't know whether anyone saw his film about the Battle of Britain, "The Real Story", last year when he interviewed some of the remaining Battle of Britain pilots and ALSO some of the Luftwaffe pilots involved? Anyway, he was fascinated by the letters and invited a publishing friend of his to come and visit me after I had prepared two or three chapters and collected together the memorabilia. Trevor Dolby, from Preface Books, part of the Random



House publishing company, was extremely helpful and assigned me a picture editor to plan the illustrations and a text editor to make the final cuts, as I had got to the stage where I needed someone to look at it with a fresh eye. It was very difficult in the final stages to decide what was of interest to the general reader rather than to the family. 'For Love and Courage' was published in October 2008, just in time for the 90th anniversary of the end of WW1.

I have now donated the letters to Eton and they are safely kept for posterity in the MacNaughten Room, where they have a magnificent collection of artefacts in their WW1 archive.

The talk was followed by readings from the letters and the presentation of a small number of slides.