

Letchworth, Hitchin & District
Branch



RAFAGEN
2018



*RAFAGEN is the winner of the SE
Area Newsletter competition 2018*

**ROYAL
AIR FORCES
Association**

The charity that supports the RAF family



Patron: Her Majesty The Queen
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RAFAGEN



The official newsletter of the Letchworth & District Branch of the Royal Air Forces' Association

The charity that supports the RAF family

ROYAL AIR FORCES' ASSOCIATION LETCWORTH , HITCHIN & DISTRICT

BRANCH OFFICIALS

Life President: Gordon Collinson

Vice President : Dennis Dawson

Chairman: Lisa Berry

Vice Chairman: Roy Newbury

Hon. Secretary: Ken Needham

Hon. Treasurer: Ken Needham

Committee:

John Airey: Rev. Lindsay Dew:

Marie Mahoney:

Branch R.A.F.A.L.O. Warrant Officer Shaun Griffin

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Meetings are held on the second Thursday of each month at the Conservative Club, Birds Hill, Letchworth Garden City,

Supporting something special

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT



You will notice when you are looking through the events calendar that a trip is scheduled for next April. This will be the second time that the Branch have had a visit to this Aircraft Museum. Every member who went on the trip thoroughly enjoyed themselves, and wanted to return as they had not had time to see it all.

Well now is your chance, but beware the site is bigger than it was the last time we visited. We want to make this visit the success it was last time, so tie a knot in your handkerchief (2019 diaries not yet ready).

Entry is free, so all we will have to pay for is the coach. We will open this trip to other associations in the area, so if you are interested please pass on your name and the number of guests you will be bringing to Ken Needham. You will not be committed at this time, it is just to get an indication of numbers.

Our Vice Chairman, Roy Newbury, used to play golf at Royston Golf Club, but as time is catching up with him, he has decided to join a couple of us 'oldies' at the more leisurely Par 3 course in Letchworth. Roy plays a fair game, but every now and again he plays what is known in polite golfing circles as a 'bad shot'. With these 'bad shots' goes the now familiar excuse. Only this week a shot which only just made a third of the distance to a 100 yard hole, was followed by "The air is different in Royston as it is in Letchworth. The balls don't go as far".

I have now decided to record these gems, and use them as page fillers in our RAFAGEN so watch out for more of 'Roy's Golfing Excuses'.

BRANCH WINGS APPEAL 2018

This year has been a difficult year for our Wings Appeal. Believed to be for two reasons. The first is something we would like to resolve for next year. It was the intention of our Wings Appeal Coordinator, that at each Wings Appeal event, he would co ordinate the day, and members would help by just giving an hour of the time to help man the stall. But this is not the way it has worked. At each event it is the same old faces who volunteer, and they are so few that they have to stay all day. In some cases an event has to be cancelled due to the 'usual few' having other arrangements. On top of these problems one of our usual Super-market collecting points would not allow us to collect this year. This was a two day event usually bringing in a fair amount of cash.

The second reason is that Charities in the whole are going through a rough time at the moment due to the publicity a small number are getting for malpractice. In no way does the Royal Air Forces Association fall into this category, but the good ones feel the errors of the few. This is not the feelings of the Charity Commission. They feel that there is an apathy towards all Charities by the public at the moment due to the number of Charities and the methods they use to collect. For this reason they are tightening up on the way money is collected by Charities

Now for the positive side.

The first main event of the year was the Letchworth Armed Forces Day. This was the best AFD so far, not only for our Wings Appeal, but for the people of Letchworth and area. Full details later in this issue. Takings £488.80

Collecting started at the Stotfold Co-op, as area dominated in the past by the late Cyril Grey. The Coordinator himself (Roy Newbury) has taken on Cyril's task. A hard act to follow, but he is getting to know Cyril's regulars, and not quite up to the figures of the past, is well on the way. With the help of a couple of members, Roy handed over £704.89 to our Treasurer.

Letchworth Sainsburys added £373.25 to the pot, making the total for the year so far to £ 1819.60.

This included £83.00 from the Par 3 Golf Centre in Letchworth. £51.80 from a coffee morning at R.A.F. Henlow. £117.86 from a Families Fun day at JFC Chick-sands.

ROYAL AIR FORCE HENLOW ANNUAL RECEPTION AND SUNSET CEREMONY



The Annual Reception and Sunset Ceremony at R.A.F. Henlow, was held on the evening of Wednesday 20th June. The reception is held each year when the Commanding Officer invites representatives from the area who are helping the community in some form. In the past the Branch has been represented by various officers of the Branch, including Gordon Collinson, Ernie Brown, and this year our new Chairman, Lisa Berry.

The evening consists of, a welcome by the C.O. Wing Commander Clulo Msc* RAF, followed by drinks and 'nibbles' on the lawn of the Officer's Mess. Here you mingle with serving members of the camp of all ranks and trades, which leads to some very interesting conversations. At a given time guests move to the front of the Mess and are entertained by a military band. This year the Band of the Royal Signals. As the sun goes down the band plays 'Retreat Call' and the R.A.F. Ensign is lowered.



Usually at this point guests are treated to a low level flying display from a Spitfire, but this year, something a little different, something a little larger, something a little noisier. A Dakota. A lot of low level flying over the Officers Mess, but no aerobatics.

ARMED FORCES DAY

LETCWORTH GARDEN CITY



What a day!!!! We have never had so many people man the Branch stall before. From veterans through to uniforms from R.A.F. Henlow, and a few in between. The event was well organised, and the weather was perfect.

The opening ceremony was around the young and the old, and I mean old. Veterans from WWII though to young cadets. Audrey Poynter (nee Bennett) was presented with her World War Two medal for her services during the war as a member of the W.A.A.F. The medal was presented by our own W.O. Shaun Griffin. A very proud moment for both of them. After the presentation cadets from the three forces let off 20 doves as a mark of future peace.

The day continued with bands, majorettes, cadet skills, choir, and a boot camp. All around this activity was local stalls making the day a really truly family day out.

Nationally the people were asked to come out and support the Armed Forces past and present, and in Letchworth Garden City they certainly did just that.

The following pages are a montage of the event. All photos by member Alan Millard.





JEAN WILLIAMS

1924 - 2018



Jean William was a very active member of the Branch, when I joined she was our Social Secretary ably assisted by Gordon Overton. Health reasons made it difficult for her to attend meetings, but the Royal Air Force was never far from her thoughts.

Jean Vandeeper, as she was know during her years in the Royal Air Force, was one of our unsung heroes of WWII. She signed up in Chatham in February 1942. Once signed up she was sent to Innsworth for initiation, and kitting out.

Basic training was at carried out in Morecombe, and after basic training she was posted Cardington No. 1 BTU for an intensive few weeks learning how in inflate and fly a barrage balloon.



Promoted to LAC she was posted to Burton Court, in London, where a new crew of women would be taking over from the men to handle some of the balloons that helped protect London. Most of Jean's posting were in London, but she did help out in Coventry and Southampton.

Back in London those two props on her arm were replaced by three stripes, and was now responsible for the balloons around the Houses of Parliament. In 1944 Jean became redundant like the balloons she had been operating, and was due to re muster, when one of

those 'V' things hit the block of flats next to her billet.

Uxbridge and Harefield hospitals were the final postings for Jean, and she was invalided out in February 1945.

Jean told me that she found it hard to settle down in civvy street and was quite resentful that she had to leave the Air Force, as she really enjoyed her service life, albeit war time. Jean, you will be sadly missed.

Memories of an interview given by Jean to Ken Needham

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THE TWO ERICS'

Many, many years ago there were two very active Branch members call 'Eric'. Eric Fitton and Eric Micheal, and at the Letchworth Garden City Armed Forces Day they met once again. Their combined ages were just under 200 years.

We managed to get member Alan Millard to photograph the two together.

Eric Micheal on the left with his daughter and grand daughter, and Eric Fitton with his daughter, member Marie. (We borrowed her for a moment from the RAFA stall.)



Eric 'F' still attends our monthly branch meetings, but unfortunately Eric 'M' is unable to attend. Our befriending team does, however, visit him at his home for a chat occasionally. Anyone who remembers these two, and has a story they would like to share, there are still a couple of blank pages in the next issue.

'Roy's Golfing Excuses'

"A drop of sweat fell in my eye, and I missed the ball."

"I stubbed my toe on the base of my bed this morning, now I can't wear my golf shoes."

"I forgot to charge my golf trolley last night, and I can't concentrate and push my trolley"



Get your diaries out, because our R.A.F.A.L.O. W/O Shaun Griffin has been busy ensuring that our Branch Social evenings are entertaining.

Please note that speakers may change at short notice due to circumstances, especially those speakers who are serving members of the Armed Forces.

11 Oct 18 - Postponed

18 Oct 18 - **Branch visit to the Shuttleworth Collection**

8 Nov 18 - Hitchin ATC Sqn Update - FS Emily Campbell.

13 Dec 18 - **Branch Christmas Bash.**

10 Jan 19 - Letchworth Sqn ATC Update Sgt Sarah Ward.

14 Feb 19 - Martin Johnson - Hertfordshire wildlife.

14 Mar 19 - **AGM & Social Evening**

11 Apr 19 - Chris Balmforth - Letchworth Model Aeronautical Society

18 Apr 19 - Branch Visit - **Cosford Aircraft Museum or Bletchley Park**
(Which ever has the bigger support)

9 May 19 - Dr Rudi Newman R101 Imperial Airship scheme 1924-30.

13 Jun 19 - Paul Jiggins The History of measurement.

11 July 19 - Gary Fisher BA The History of Hatfield House.

8 Aug 19 - David Davis - Letchworth Garden City cottages TBC.

12 Sep 19 - **Battle of Britain dinner night.**

10 Oct 19 - Shaun Griffin - History of The RAF Armoured Car Companies in Transjordan and Mesopotamia.

17 Oct 19 - **Branch Visit - de Havilland museum**

14 Nov 19 - Ian Waller - Family history and genealogy.

12 Dec 19 - **Christmas Bash**



Letchworth Par 3 Family Golf Centre

- Enjoy a round of golf with family or friends
- Play the traditional French game of pétanque
- Cafe offering wide range of coffees, teas, cakes and hot / cold food
- Fully licensed bar with wide range of beers, ciders, spirits and soft drinks
- Ample parking and free wi-fi
- Everyone welcome



We support the R.A.F. Association and Wings Appeal

**Cafe open from 8:30 am to 6:00 pm
Late nights on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday**

**Letchworth Par 3 Family Golf Centre
Willian Way, Letchworth SG6 2HJ
01462 483863
www.letchworthfamilygolf.co.uk**

R.A.F. STEEPLE MORDEN



UNITS ASSIGNED OR ATTACHED	
AAF STATION F-122	
355 FG HQ	
354 FS	
357 FS	
358 FS	
2 SP	
104 MG	104 GM
14 SC	150 MP
14 SC	1447 DRD
18 WS	1754 DRD
128 GM	2002 EF
444 ASG	2029 EF
444 AMS	ABC
817 AAS	RAF
8046 SC	KCAF

Originally used from 1940 as a small, grass airfield, satellite for nearby RAF Bassingbourn, Steeple Morden was allocated to the American Eighth Air Force in August 1942 as a potential bomber base. It was used briefly by the 3rd Photographic Group during the Autumn of 1942.

It was then developed with three runways, 55 concrete hard standings, one T2 hangar and seven blister hangars, and re-allocated to the American Ninth Air Force in April 1943 as a fighter base.

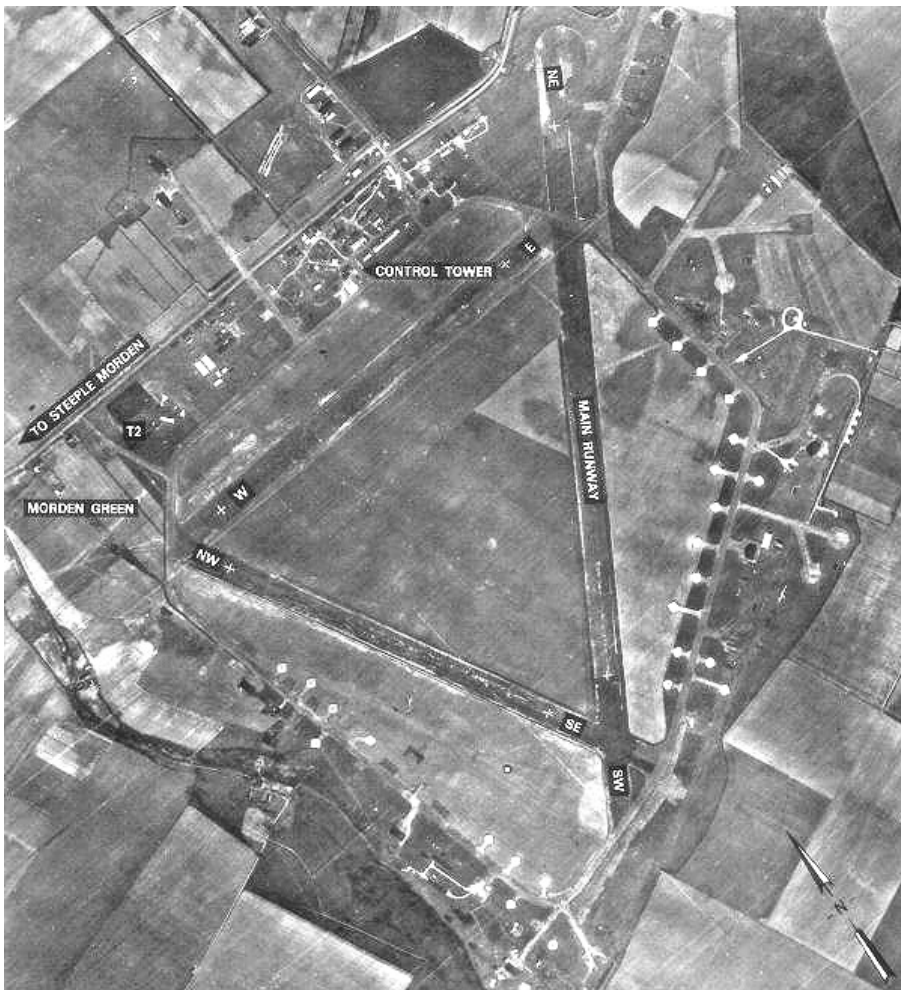
It was returned to the American Eighth Air Force and occupied by the 355th Fighter Group from July 1943 to July 1945.

The Americans moved out and it was returned to the RAF in 1945, and was finally closed in 1946 and was abandoned.

Most of the site was sold back to its original owners, George Jarman, George Smyth and Bert Parrish, and pert to the Cambridgeshire County Council, during 1960-61. It has largely returned to agriculture after after the difficult task of the

demolition three runways, a Control Tower and the majority of other wartime buildings.

A 355th Fighter Group Memorial wall now stands near the wartime station entrance off the Litlington Road. It was at that memorial that the people of the village gathered to remember those days gone by and the men and women from the base who were lost during WWII. A group of serving American Air force personnel came over from the States to join in the celebrations, along with our Vice Chairman, Roy Newbury, who lives in the village. Roy was in full regalia carrying the Standard of the Air Crew Association.





In a couple of months time it will be the Christmas party season, and time for our Social Secretary to organise something for us. I am now told that it is all in hand as you can see from the notice below I have just received



The Christmas Bash will be on 13th December 2018. The Broadway Hotel has been chosen again this year as the venue, due to the quality of the fare, also it's access for some of our more mobility challenged members. Price £17.50 per head.

All interested members please add your name to the list by contacting Shaun Griffin, Lisa Berry or Ken Needham.

The cover (Right) is from the December issue of one of the first issues of RAFAGEN. This copy along with others were found in the archives of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Museum. For interest, this Branch was formed in 1946, making the Branch 72 years old. I do not remember the opening as I was in my second year at the Spondon House School in Derby. If there are members who can remember those early days I would like to hear from you.

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RAFAGEN

DECEMBER

1952

FORCES' ASSN.
War Charities Act, 1949

BRANCH

ROYAL AIR
Registered under the



LETCHWORTH

AN INVISIBLE WORKPLACE

Norman Jasper describes some of his aviation experiences

Part Three

Our go-ahead C.O. had formed an embryo formation aerobatic team for the Rhodesia venture and upon return he concentrated more on this display flying. Tom Gribble was No. 2, flying to the right of the leader, I became No. 3 to the left and Peter McLeland No. 4 at the rear. We carried out displays at various European airfields. There are many other experiences on that squadron which I could recall. However, I trust this has given you a smattering of insight into those days.

Some Additional Early Venom Background Notes

We all thoroughly enjoyed these first Venoms and relished their performance capability as a jet fighter. However, certain problems did arise. A weakness in wing strength made itself known. This was in the form of a crack in the under skin between the cut-out for the undercarriage door and the square cut-out for the speed brakes, some 8 to 10 inches away.

This resulted in all Venoms being grounded whilst repairs in the form of special strong patches of aluminium were riveted over these weak areas under the wing. During this time we were re-equipped with some Vampires to keep us in flying practice and the Venoms came back into practice as and when they were repaired.



One experience associated with this will always remain poignantly with me. Repaired Venom WE318 had been returned to the squadron, and we took it in turns to fly it. On this day, 2nd May 1953, I was programmed to fly the second sortie on this aircraft. As I waited in the crew room, chatting with fellow pilots, we were told that another repaired Venom

WE271 had been returned to the squadron and was available to fly.

I was offered this aircraft but suggested I waited for the one I was programmed to fly (WE318) as it was about to land anyway. Accordingly 'Gregg' Gregory went out to fly WE271 and I took off about 20 minutes after him.

Returning to base after my exercises I noticed an aircraft in the distance with what appeared to be a small condensation trail behind it. I looked more closely for the aircraft was far too low to produce trails. I immediately headed for this aircraft with the thought that it must be Greg, for few other Venoms were able to fly.

As I approached it became clear that the trail was smoke coming from a small fire barely visible within the aircraft's engine area (starboard upper wing root). I had tried to call Greg, but with no radio response I joined him in close formation and signalled

urgently to him. He responded by nodding his head and giving the thumbs up suggesting that he had understood. He then pointed to the airfield just below to show he was planning to land as quickly as possible.

updates were relayed to ATC, who alerted fire crews and emergency services. Meanwhile I stayed with Greg all the way down the runway, but the fire gradually growing in intensity. Greg almost made a successful wheels up landing but at about 15 feet from the ground his aircraft suddenly pitched downwards and the whole thing tumbled along the ground breaking up in flaming bits. Presumably the elevator cables had burned through at this critical time as he was about to, or in the flare for touchdown. It was a tough experience to witness and I wonder to this day if I had done enough to help him. However in reality only a short time passed between first seeing Greg's aircraft and touchdown but strangely, in these situations every seconds seems to stretch out much longer than normal.

The Venoms were designed around the Vampire but the new Ghost engine proved to be a tight fit in an engine bay designed around the Goblin. It was not unusual to experience an unwanted engine to airframe touch point. This was recognised by a certain type of vibration which varied in intensity or pitch with changes in 'g' force applied. Each case was then investigated and rectified by our ground engineers. In Greg's case the fire had resulted from a split fuel pipe rather than an engine to airframe touch point.

These early Venoms had no ejection seats and the option of jumping out was not as simple as the expression appears to offer and the aircraft was then getting low. Once again a customary spontaneous gathering in the Officers' Mess bar took place to celebrate Greg's life and his untimely parting from us. It fell to me to gather his belongings to send home and also meet his family at the funeral. More than just a fellow pilot, each of us had lost a good friend. Some days earlier, on 20th April, Peter McLeland had experienced an engine flame-out in WE320 at 8,000 ft. He was unable to re-light the engine and carried out a wheels-up landing at base. Peter was unhurt but the aircraft suffered Cat 4 damage and was lost to us.

My first Venom FB1 flight had been in Greg's fateful WE271 on 16th April 1953. Later that same day I did close formation practice in WE320. Within 17 days these two aircraft were lost. A third Venom WE318 caught fire and was lost after a heavy landing on 11th August 1953, but fortunately the pilot escaped with minor injuries.

Whilst carrying out an exercise over Holland at high altitude in Venom FB1 WE449 on 24th June 1955 I experienced a main engine failure. By selecting a low but constant thrust setting I was able to return about 80 miles to Wunstrorf in a gentle glide with very little thrust. The engine ran on its back up phosphor bronze bearing all the way but seized immediately when I closed the fuel cock after landing. Too low a thrust setting in flight, such as idle, risked causing the engine to seize and a fixed lowish (I recall 7000 rpm) was chosen. My last Venom FB1 flight took place the next day 25th June 1955, in WE452.

Earlier I completed a wheels up landing in a Vampire T11 on the grass at Wunstorf, the backup undercarriage lowering drill having failed. Interestingly little damage was done and the Wing Commander Technical said glibly:- "Lift it up, lower the undercarriage and tow it in". He ignored our explanation for the wheels up landing so I waited to see what the engineers could make of it. They proved our version of events beyond doubt for only after physically forcing the undercarriage doors open did manage to get the wheels down!. The undercarriage door lock mechanism had failed in the doors closed and locked position.

Part 4 of the story continues in the next issue.

TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE DH VENOM TAKEN FROM INFORMATION ON THE WWW.

Role	Fighter-bomber
National origin	United Kingdom
Manufacturer	de Havilland Aircraft Company
First flight	2 September 1949
Introduction	1952
Status	Retired
Primary users	Royal Air Force Royal Swedish Air Force Swiss Air Force Venezuelan Air Force
Number built	1,431 (including Sea Venom/Aquilon)[1]
Developed from	de Havilland Vampire
Variants	de Havilland Sea Venom/Aquilon

New members of 2018

New names will be added each quarter. Let us see if we can fill the page by the end of the year

Miss S. Ward of Letchworth Garden City Mrs A. Millard of Hitchin
Mr G. Ward of Letchworth Garden City
Mr M. Sawyer of Thetford
Mr D. Briscoe of Henlow
Mr J. Coleman of Tamworth
Mrs L. Higham of Henlow
Mr G. Luxton of Henlow
Mr A. Millard of Hitchin
Mr A. Morgan of Henlow
Mr G. Spicer of Chicksands
Mr D. Watson of Chicksands

PRESENT BRANCH MEMBERSHIP STANDS AT

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Since January, the Branch and Head Office have lost contact with the following members. They are fully paid up members so we like to keep in touch. If you know of their present abode, please let us know so that we can get back in touch.

Mr Ashdown ex of Henlow	Mr Berrisford ex of Chicksands
Mr Bradley ex of Henlow	Mr Clarke ex of Henlow
Mr Cooper ex of Arlesey	Mr Costello ex of Stoke on Trent
Mr Curtis ex of Letchworth G.C.	Mr Davis ex of Kings Lynn
Miss Duncan ex of Carterton	Mr Dunthorn ex of Chippenden
Mr Hamilton ex of Henlow	Mr Howell ex of Letchwoprth G.C.
Mr Jackson ex of Meppershall	Mr Lewis ex of Bristol
Mr Lloyd-Jones ex of Poggio Renatico	Mr Longhurst ex of Hitchin
Mr MacFarlane ex of Henlow	Mr Malin ex of Biggleswade
Mr Marlow ex of Hitchin	Mr Nicholson ex of Henlow
Mr Rock ex of Baldock	Mr Ruffell ex of Chicksands
Mr Smyth ex of Henlow	Mr Speirs ex of Telford
Mr Stanbridge ex of Kings Lynn	Mr Varney ex of Lincoln
Mr Wiegand ex of Letchworth G.C.	Mr Wilshire ex of Baldock.

R.F.C. AIRCRAFT CRASH REMEMBERED



In 2012 the Branch remembered the two R.F.C. Pilots who lost their lives in what is thought to be the first military air crash when under military orders. The crash happened in Willian, and the memorial (left) was erected by public subscription on the Willian to Wymondley road. The accident happened in September 1912. To mark the 100 years we organised a service at the memorial to mark the occasion, and in attendance was the Colours of No. 3 Squadron from R.A.F. Conningsby, together with Squadron's Commanding Officer. The full story is too long to relate here, but Richard

Whitman (of BBC news fame) wrote and produced a 20 minute film giving the full story. Members who would like a copy of this DVD, please contact the Branch secretary.

Each year since 2012 Roy Newbury has laid a wreath at the memorial in memory of the two men. If you drive past the monument and notice the wreath you will now know why it is there.



The last shot in Richard Whitmore's film, showing three local standard returning home after the event.