

Newsletter No 10
Summer 2014

Robert Thompson's[®] Craftsmen Ltd

Welcome!

Visitors to the Catholic church in Ampleforth village cannot fail to be impressed by the monumental, oak crucifix, dated 1919, which stands in the cemetery. It holds a special place in the Mouseman history as it was this piece that started the famous working relationship between my Great Grandfather and Ampleforth College. The cross is also significant as it was one

of the first of many war memorials produced in the Thompson workshop in Kilburn to commemorate those lost in the Great War and, later, in the 1939–1945 conflict. In this, the centenary year of the start of World War One and the 75th anniversary of the start of World War Two, I thought it fitting to focus this newsletter on some of those memorials and, by so doing, to pay tribute to the people and the acts of bravery - on land, at sea and in the sky - that they commemorate.

Ian Thompson Cartwright



Kilburn Craftsmen Remembered

Perhaps the most poignant war memorials created by Robert Thompson are two oak crosses, which stand today in the churchyard of St Mary's in Kilburn village, overlooking the Mouseman workshop. The creation of these crosses was Thompson's personal tribute to two of his own craftsmen, Thomas Henry Robinson and Norman William Smith, both of whom lost their lives in World War Two.



Thomas Robinson was the son of the village blacksmith and worked at Robert Thompson's along with his younger brother Charlie. A member of the Royal Pioneer Corps, Thomas was recorded 'lost at sea' off Dunkirk on 17 June 1942 aged 42 years.

The brief life of Sapper Norman Smith bridges the two great conflicts of the first half of the 20th century. Born a few weeks before the armistice of World War One, he died during World War Two: killed in action in Egypt in 1942, aged 24. Many years after his death, Norman Smith's sister presented to Ian Thompson Cartwright the first wooden mouse that her brother had carved as a young apprentice at Robert Thompson's. A memento of happier, simple times before the War changed everything.



Brothers Reunited

On an early autumn day, 74 years ago, teenager Hubert Hill attended RAF Dishforth with his parents on the occasion of the dedication of a wooden plaque commemorating the first No 10 Squadron crew to give their lives during World War Two.

The crew, which included Hubert's brother Alfred Frank Hill, an Air Gunner, was part of a reconnaissance and leaflet-drop mission over Berlin on the night of 1/2 October 1939, the first overflight of Berlin since the outbreak of war. Four aircraft left the base that night; only three returned. The fourth, with its crew of five men, was presumed lost over the North Sea after radio contact ceased.

To commemorate this loss, the Squadron commissioned a memorial from Robert Thompson's, which was dedicated in the station church at RAF Dishforth on 29 September 1940 in the presence of Squadron personnel and family members.

The Mouseman plaque commemorating his brother's death was to be a constant presence throughout Hubert Hill's life as his mother kept a framed photograph of it on display at her home. However, at some point in the ensuing years, the memorial was removed from RAF Dishforth and the Hill family was unaware of its new location. As he entered old age, Hubert became increasingly anxious to find and revisit the plaque, but it was not until August 2013 that this mission was accomplished by a fortuitous series of events.

Some years previously, Hubert's daughter, Rita Davie, had written to Robert Thompson's to enquire if the firm had any knowledge of the current location of the RAF Dishforth plaque. Unfortunately, at that time, the company was unable to answer the question. However, in 2013 the company received a letter from retired Wing Commander Ian Macmillan of the 10 Squadron Association requesting any information relating to the provenance of a wooden plaque bearing a distinctive mouse carving. Chris Scaife, archivist at Robert Thompson's, put two and two together and was delighted to be able to contact Rita Davie to give her the good news that the memorial commemorating her late uncle had been located, and was in the safe hands of No 10 Squadron, based at RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire.

Rita contacted the Squadron Commander at Brize Norton and arranged for her father, then aged 90, to travel to the base to be part of the 10 Squadron commemorative event. It

was a successful conclusion to one man's determined quest to find the memorial and pay tribute to his brother and colleagues who bravely gave their lives on that ill-fated flight from RAF Dishforth.

Hubert Hill revisiting, after many years, the oak memorial that carries the name of his late brother alongside those of the other four crew members lost in action in 1939.

The oak plaque (2ft x 4ft) incorporates a 10 Squadron metal badge taken from the missing aircraft on the outbreak of war.



In Memory of HMS Barham

Earlier this year, Robert Thompson's received a photograph of a painted sign standing on the village green at Barham in Kent.

The local historical society had noticed a carving of a mouse on one of the posts of the sign and wondered if this indicated that it had come from the Thompson workshop in Kilburn or whether it was a later addition and an attempt to provide a false accreditation. Following a perusal of the company's ledgers, Ian Thompson Cartwright was able to confirm that the sign had indeed been created in Kilburn in 1955. But the question then remained, why would a small village in Kent commission a name board from a company 300 miles away in Yorkshire?

Their interest piqued by this mystery, Ian Thompson Cartwright and company archivist, Chris Scaife, set out to discover more. The trail led back to World War Two and the battleship, HMS Barham. The ship, built on Clydebank in 1914, was named in honour of Admiral Charles Middleton (1726-1813) who became Lord Barham of Barham Court and Teston in Kent and was First Lord of the Admiralty at the time of the Battle of Trafalgar. At the outbreak of war in 1939, HMS Barham was adopted by the village of the same name in Kent. Once the connection between the village and the battleship was established, the Mouseman link began to fall into place.

In November 1941, HMS Barham was sunk in the Mediterranean by a German U-boat with the loss of 841 lives. The widow of the Barham's Commanding Officer, Captain GC Cooke, commissioned two pairs of



candlesticks from Robert Thompson as a memorial to her husband and the men who perished with him when the ship went down.

The first set of large standing candlesticks, produced in 1942, are unusual examples of Thompson work as the detail is picked out in blue, red and gold. Generally, Robert Thompson did not favour the use of colour in his work, believing instead that the natural hue of the wood should be enough to carry the design. However, on this occasion, he bowed to the request of his client, perhaps also swayed by the fact that the candlesticks were to be located within the grandeur of Westminster Abbey. The candlesticks were duly installed on the Nave Altar and dedicated at a memorial service in February 1943. A second pair of two-foot candlesticks was also commissioned by Mrs Cooke. Every year since, the candlesticks have been decorated with floral tributes at a memorial service organised by the survivors of HMS Barham.

In the 1950s, when the design for the village green sign at Barham was being considered, it is likely that the HMS Barham memorial candlesticks in Westminster Abbey was recalled and the people of the village decided that it would be appropriate to ask the same master craftsman, Robert Thompson, to create the sign, so keeping alive the connection between the village and the battleship.



D-Day Daring



In February this year, at the age of 93, the death of Major-General Logan Scott-

Bowden was reported. Scott-Bowden was a member of the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties (COPP) which carried out secret reconnaissance missions to the Normandy beaches and played a major role in the success of the D-Day landings, the 70th anniversary of which is being commemorated this year. Using X-Craft midget submarines to approach the beaches, members of COPP swam ashore to collect sand and rock samples, which were analysed to ascertain whether the Normandy beaches could withstand the arrival of tanks and armour.

The men who risked their lives to undertake this and similar missions in HMS X20 and HMS X23 midget subs are commemorated in the plaque, pictured here, produced by Robert Thompson's, which is now in the Royal Navy Submarine Museum at Gosport. The only remaining example of a British X-Craft that saw service in World War Two, HMS X24, is also preserved at the museum. At just 51 feet long with a beam of five feet nine inches, conditions on board were cramped and primitive, with enough food and water to sustain the crew of four men for ten days.



George Malcolmson, Archivist at the Gosport Submarine Museum, drew our attention to an interesting mouse-related fact. One of the earliest problems faced by submariners was the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning from engine fumes. As a warning device, a trio of white mice was always carried on board early submarines. Being extremely sensitive to fumes, the mice's squeaking would alert the crew to the danger and the submarine would then surface. As reward for their important contribution, the mice were well-fed and were even recorded in the payroll of their craft.

Little is known about the background to the HMS X20 and X23 wooden memorial but perhaps it is not too fanciful to imagine that the submariners' traditional fondness for these small rodents may have played some part in the decision to commission the famous 'Mouseman of Kilburn' to produce the plaque.

X-Craft Midget Submarine used to reconnaissance the Normandy coast prior to the D-Day landing.



Industry in Quiet Places – The Creation of a Yorkshire War Memorial Chapel

Along an unmade track, on the edge of the North York Moors National Park, close to Oldstead village, stands a simple, stone-built, war memorial chapel. The chapel is perhaps the most striking monument created by sculptor, John Bunting (1927 – 2002). Bunting was a renowned artist, whose powerful work in stone, bronze and hard woods was inspired by deeply-held religious beliefs and whose skill was first recognised and nurtured by Robert Thompson.

The son of a London tea-broker, Bunting was sent to Ampleforth College in 1941. There, intrigued by the adzed, oak furniture with the distinctive mouse signature, he sought out the Thompson workshop in nearby Kilburn, undertaking the ten mile journey on foot. At the end of his first year at the school, his parents allowed him to spend a week's holiday working at the Thompson workshop. He later recalled, "In this one week, I discovered my vocation – although it took me 40 years to work it out." Robert Thompson recognised the boy's latent talent and gave him a piece of oak and a chisel with

which to practise at home during the school holidays. Young Bunting set up a makeshift workshop in his parents' home in London and started selling carved bookends to local shops. On leaving school, Bunting worked for three months at the Thompson workshop in Kilburn, honing his skills under the eye of the master craftsman. In 1948, after National Service, he returned to Yorkshire to work with Thompson. Around this time, Bunting visited Henry Moore, who, on seeing photographs of the young man's work, advised him to go to art school. He went on to study at St Martin's and the Royal College of Art.

In 1955, Bunting returned to Ampleforth as Art and Drawing Master and was to continue to work for the school for the next forty years. One of his pupils, Anthony Gormley later recalled him as an inspirational teacher.

Before returning to Ampleforth, Bunting had been greatly moved by a visit to a remote missionary chapel at Benni-Abbes in the Sahara Desert. He was determined to create something similar in Yorkshire and, in 1957, acquired a derelict farm building, high on Sutton Bank, not far from Kilburn. There he commenced work on restoring

the building into what is perhaps his most significant creation, a non-denominational, war memorial chapel sacred to the memory of all lost soldiers and, commemorating in particular, four old Amplefordians, three of whom were killed during World War Two, a fourth, whose name was added later, died in Northern Ireland in 1997.

Writing about his early artistic influences in *The Tablet*, Bunting described Robert Thompson's approach, "He had only to be true to what lay close at hand – English oak;

solid workmanship; reverence and love for the craft he practiced; greater joy in what he did than in the money he gained from it." High on the North York Moors, John Bunting's memorial chapel is a lasting legacy to those who gave their lives for their country and, in its design, remains true to the spirit of craftsmanship that he first witnessed in the Thompson workshop in Kilburn.



Mouseman on Film

Fascinating colour film footage of the craftsmen and workshop at Robert Thompson's in 1948 is now available to view online at the Yorkshire Film Archive's website.

The footage is one of a collection of more than 40 films, discovered in 2006, which were made during a twenty year period after the second world war by husband and wife amateur film makers, Betty and Cyril Ramsden of Leeds. The Ramsden's series of short films are a vibrant and charming social record of life in the north of England in the post-war years. Mouseman aficionados will be particularly interested in the footage of Robert Thompson and his colleagues at work, which provides a unique and detailed record of his furniture making process.

Coxwold was a popular cycling destination for the Ramsdens and it is likely that they met Robert Thompson (or 'Bob' as they called him) during one of their visits to the

village. The YFA records that Betty took some still photos for Thompson for which she didn't charge, saying they were "only paper". Robert Thompson later returned the compliment, presenting her with a small, hand-crafted 'mouseman' piece. When Betty explained that she couldn't afford it, he replied, "No charge. It's only wood." The Ramsdens persuaded Robert Thompson to allow them to film in his workshop, he agreed on the understanding that he would not be in the film. Nonetheless, he does make a brief cameo appearance at the start of the piece. The finished film, which is just over 20 minutes long, was shown, along with other films made locally, at a special evening event in Kilburn village hall for which the Ramsdens received donations totalling £5, a bowl of brown eggs and a home cured ham.

To view the film *A Craftsman of Kilburn* and others made by the Ramsdens, go to www.yorkshirefilmarchive.com



Classic Mouseman – Restored Items for Sale

Robert Thompson's Craftsmen offers items of classic Mouseman furniture for sale. All items have been verified as genuine, they are fully dated and professionally restored by the company's craftsmen using traditional methods and materials. Here is just a small selection. Other examples may be viewed on the company's website.



*Oak Monks Bench from the
1950s (ref: CM10)*

.....
www.robertthompsons.co.uk/classic.php



T Café and Visitor Centre Opening Hours

The T Café and Visitor Centre are open daily from 10am to 5pm until October 2014. During November and the first week of December, opening hours are 11am to 4pm Wednesday to Sunday. Please note, The T Café and Visitor Centre will close on Sunday 7th December and re-open 1st April 2015.

The Office and Showroom are open Monday to Thursday 9am to 5pm; Friday 9am to 3.45pm; Saturday 10am to 12 noon. The Office and Showroom will close for Christmas at 12 noon on Saturday 20th December and will reopen at 9am on Monday 5th January 2015.

Robert Thompson's Craftsmen Ltd,
Kilburn, York, YO61 4AH
t. +44 (0)1347 869100
f. +44 (0)1347 869103
info@robertthompsons.co.uk
www.robertthompsons.co.uk

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