



# Smoke Signal

Affiliated to Cheltenham Arts Council

Leckhampton Local History Society's Newsletter

## Special Commemoration for Black Watch Lieutenant

*George Frederick Delmar-Williamson*

On the afternoon of Sunday 17 November a special commemoration service was held in Leckhampton churchyard beside the grave of George Frederick Delmar-Williamson, who died aged only 19 in July 1918 when the aircraft he was testing broke up in mid-air. He had been a lieutenant in the Black Watch, attached to the Royal Air Force.

His father was Frederick Delmar-Williamson, a noted musician of his day, who composed and performed as a baritone singer. (He later composed the music for the pantomime performed in the Parish Hall – see *Smoke Signal* 87.) The family had moved from London to Cheltenham by 1909, living first in Lansdown Place and later in Leckhampton, at Firs Lodge, 26 Moorend Road.

George was educated at Glyngarth School and Cheltenham College and entered Sandhurst in 1917. Commissioned into the Black Watch – his family possesses a full-length portrait of him looking resplendent in his Tartan kilt – he was attached to the Royal Flying Corps at a time when the average life of a front-line pilot was only eleven days. He was injured in a crash while carrying out photographic reconnaissance on the Western Front. After recovering he was put on anti-air raid duties over England, including missions against Zeppelins.

In March 1918 he was appointed as a flying instructor in the newly formed Royal Air Force and was then selected as a test pilot.



*Photo: George Delmar-Williamson's decorated grave, flanked by two men in WWI pilots' uniforms (RFC and RNAS respectively)*

He was flight-testing an R.E.8 biplane – an aircraft with a poor safety record – when the wings collapsed in mid-air. Both he and his co-pilot Captain Douglas Gabell were killed in the crash. Captain Gabell was also an Old Cheltonian (the Gabell Wing of Delancey Hospital was named after his father, who was Vicar of St Lawrence's, Swindon Village, where Douglas was buried). Of the 675 Old Cheltonians who lost their lives in the First World War, George Delmar-Williamson must have been among the youngest.

*continued on next page*

### Dates for your Diary

**Wednesday 8 January, 7.30pm Glebe Cottages:**  
Nicholas Herbert 'Road Travel and Transport in Georgian Gloucestershire'

**Wednesday 12 February, 7.30pm Glebe Cottages:**  
Members' Evening

**Wednesday 11 March, 7.30pm Glebe Cottages:**  
John Putley 'History of Farming in Gloucestershire'

**Wednesday 28 April, 7.30pm Glebe Cottages:** Geoff North 'Exploring Cheltenham's Ironwork'

*Continued from front page*

As boys they might have had a sight of some early flying machines one day in October 1913 if they had happened to be at the so-called 'Aviation Ground' which then existed beside Old Bath Road. On that occasion three Old Cheltonians of the Royal Flying Corps piloting aircraft from the Netheravon Flying School landed there – 'daring young men in their flying machines'.

The first part of the funeral service in July 1918 took place at Christ Church, where boys from Glyngarth School made up the choir and members of its Scout troop formed a guard of honour. The bearers of the coffin, draped in the union jack, were fellow airmen. A contingent of Volunteers from the Gloucestershire Regiment followed the cortège on its way to the churchyard at Leckhampton for the last rites and there fired three volleys over the open grave.

The commemoration in 2019 honoured one of Cheltenham's heroes, who is now no longer forgotten. A similar service for Douglas Gabell took place the previous Sunday at Swindon Village.

Footnote: Glyngarth School closed in the 1930s and the building is now a Ladies' College boarding house, Farnley Lodge. When working as a volunteer at the Wilson Museum recently, Chris Woodham happened by chance to see among the memorabilia from Glyngarth School a silver cup, the Delmar-Williamson Cup for Swimming. No doubt George's parents donated it in gratitude for their son's time at Glyngarth and probably also to mark his prowess at swimming! It was first awarded in 1913, the year in which he left to enter Cheltenham College as a day-boy.

*Eric Miller, Co-ordinator of Research*



Photo: Newspaper report of 'Funeral of a Cheltenham Flying Officer' 1918.

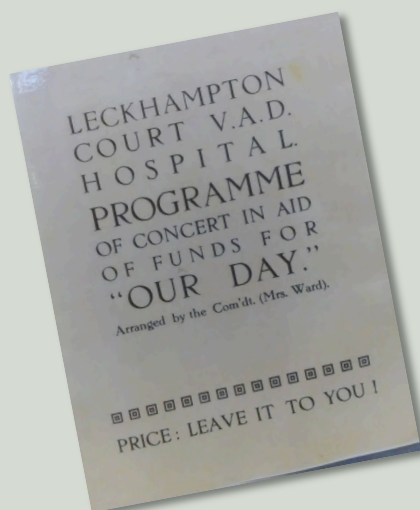


## *LLHS in the news*

In November, the Echo published a column by Kirstie Hartsiotis of the Wilson museum. It showed three photos on bonfires on Leckhampton Hill. Credit is given to LLHS "who have put together a superb collection of images of their area". This presumably refers to the Society's book *'Leckhampton in Old Photos'* but there are also some images on our website, such as the photo (left) of the bonfire lit for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee on top of Leckhampton Hill in June 1887. The bonfire was 15 meters high!



# Leckhampton Court Red Cross Hospital Visitors' Book



Geoff North, who is researching Gloucestershire's First World War Red Cross Hospitals, has acquired at auction the Visitors' Book for the establishment at Leckhampton Court. It covers the period from March 1915 to February 1919, shortly before the hospital closed.

Over 800 names were recorded. Most were local, but some came from other parts of the United Kingdom and a few from countries of the Empire – Australia, Canada, India and New Zealand. A mother and daughter visited from Antwerp in April 1915 when a number of Belgian soldiers were patients at the hospital, and another lady came from Liège during the following year.

It might be expected that the visitors would include at least some relatives of patients, but a reasonably careful check has identified only one signature that matches a name among the 1700-odd men who are listed in the Souvenir Handbook produced after the hospital had closed. This case involves a Mrs Willis and her daughter who visited on 30 March 1915, while Private E Willis of the 2<sup>nd</sup> East Kent Regiment was a patient from 14 March to 18 June.

The address they gave was Selby House Hotel, most likely the building in Hall Road named Selby that served at that time as a boarding house; it now known as Trigg House, which perpetuates a name given to it in the 1970s when it was a retirement home. Several other visitors also stayed at Selby House, though without any evident family connection with patients at the hospital.

In July 1915 the visitors included Private J Pearce of 261 Motor Transport Company, Army Service Corps – the only non-commissioned soldier to feature. But there is more to the story than this. He, or at least a private with the same name and initial, actually became a patient from 28 December 1918 to 4 February 1919 – after the war was over, of course. Perplexingly, his regiment is given in the Souvenir Handbook as 7<sup>th</sup> London, while on the other hand a Private A Pearce, allegedly of a Motor Transport Company, was listed as a patient in May 1917. It is quite possible that the compiler of the list in the Souvenir Handbook transposed the initials in error and that what happened was that Private J Pearce – probably from a local family, since a score of people with that surname were living in Cheltenham at that time – originally looked in while on leave having learned that some of his comrades were inmates (six Motor Transport Company men were there at the time, including a corporal), and that when he returned home after the end of hostilities he was in need of medical attention, which – since he had not yet been demobilised – was arranged for him at the Court. (It should be possible to solve at least part of this conundrum: if anyone would like to follow this up, please let me know.)

Another local person, Surgeon-General Quill, visited in April 1915, and left a few books for the men to read. Two of his own sons were at that time serving in the war but sadly one of them would meet an accidental death in England in 1918.

During the last few months of the hospital's existence many visits of inspection were made by senior officers. Most were of the Royal Army Medical Corps but one was an education officer. Two were Americans, one of them representing the American YMCA. The proudest entry, however, was in June 1915, when a royal courtier (Sir Frederick Milner) came to convey messages from the King and Queen, pronouncing himself 'delighted with the splendid arrangements'.

As a bonus, sandwiched between the pages of the book was a programme for a concert to entertain the troops given in July 1917, one of the performers being an 'ex-Corporal'. There were songs, recitations, monologues and piano solos, and as a finale the singing of 'God Save the King'.

*Eric Miller, Co-ordinator of Research*



*Photo: Wounded soldier's bed from the WWI Museum exhibition held in Cheltenham in 2013*



*Photo: Funerary monuments at St Peter's Leckhampton*

## Chairmans Message

*December 2019*

Eric got us off to a flying start this year. Thank you for stepping in for us at such short notice. I found the talk on funerary monuments very interesting too and it has made me look more carefully when I go into a church or cathedral, especially St Peter's. I was fascinated by the history of GCHQ. I feel so many of you had memories of working there.

Do come to the December meeting where we will be serving mince pies and juice for the festive season. Have a look in your attics and other hiding places at home over the holiday for an item for the Members' Evening in February. Do let Anne or me know if you would like a spot!

All it remains for me to do is wish you all a Happy and Peaceful Christmas.

*Sue Marlow, Chairman*

## GCHQ Oral History Project

As part of his fascinating talk at the November meeting, Dave Abrutat discussed an oral history project he is carrying out with former GCHQ staff who would like to reminisce about their time working there. Many of the Society's members are former GCHQ employees and several of the people at the meeting made contact with Dave there and then. However, we thought it would be a good idea to promote this project to the wider membership so please do contact us (details below) if you are ex-GCHQ and would like to contribute to the oral history project. We would be pleased to put you in touch with Dave.



*Photo: Signalmen using Morse code equipment in a Signal Exchange Station*

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