

# Quorn's once unknown airman

## Introduction

In the front part of the Baptist Church graveyard on Meeting Street, on the right towards the back, (looking from the road), there is a gravestone inscribed:

*"Arthur Henry Payne died November 17th 1923 aged 55 years. Clara wife of the above died December 22nd 1971 aged 100 years. Sergt Alfred Hubert Payne RAF son of the above, Killed in action May 1940 aged 30 years."*

Placed immediately in front of this memorial stone from the early 1970s until 2015 was a Commonwealth War Graves Commission gravestone saying:

*"An Airman of the 1939-1945 War. Royal Air Force 27th May 1940 Known to God"*



In 2015 it was replaced with the current stone:

*"902167 Sergeant D M Payne, Air Observer, Royal Air Force, 9th September 1940, Age 19."*

## The Death of Alfred Payne

Alfred Hubert Payne was born in Huddersfield in 1910, but his mother Clara Payne (nee Mee) spent most of her childhood and early married life in Quorn. The family were devout Baptists and when Alfred's father, Arthur, died in Loughborough aged 55 in 1923, he was buried in Quorn Baptist Churchyard. Their eldest children were then aged 26 and 24, but Alfred was only 13 years old.

Sergeant Pilot Alfred Payne was killed in action May 1940, aged 30. He was with RAF 57 Squadron based in Andover and was a member of a three man crew on a reconnaissance mission, shot down near Lille in France at the time of the Dunkirk evacuation. Around October of that same year a body was found floating in the Channel, wearing a scarf marked Sergeant Payne. It was assumed to be the body of Alfred Payne and he was brought to Quorn to be buried in the Baptist Churchyard with Arthur Henry Payne, Alfred's father.



Sergeant Alfred Hubert Payne

## Mistaken Identity

After the war the family received notification from the War Office that Sergeant Alfred Payne was buried twelve miles south-east of Lille, in a village called Faumont,



Alfred's grave in Faumont

alongside his two crew members. The plane had been shot down by the Luftwaffe over Dunkirk on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1940 with no survivors. All three bodies had been identified from personal effects and their formal ID tags. Alfred's mother, Clara, refused to accept this, and out of respect and consideration for her, the matter was left in abeyance. It was only after Mrs Payne died in 1971 at the age of 100, that the issue was again revisited. Ralph Cochrane, a senior deacon at the Baptist Church, arranged with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for the erection of a stone to this unknown airman, in front of the main gravestone.



Clara Payne (left) on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday

## Identifying Donald Payne

Moving on nearly 40 years; in 2008, local historian Mike Speight from Quorn, who is distantly related to Alfred (first cousins, twice removed), undertook the task of trying to identify the unknown airman. All he had to go on was when and where the body was found, and that a scarf was found with the airman, marked with the name 'Payne'. Referring to records on the internet and libraries, by hard work, persistence and a process of elimination, he eventually succeeded.

The young airman was 19 year old Sergeant Donald M Payne who was a member of a Wellington bomber crew with RAF Squadron 149 based in Mildenhall. On 9th September 1940 they had been on a bombing mission over Channel Port of Boulogne, where the Germans were preparing for their invasion. The plane was struck by lightning, disabling both engines and the six crew members had to jump from the plummeting aircraft. Only the pilot survived, having swum an incredible seven miles to shore. The other five were reported missing in action, presumed drowned.

Donald was born in Banstead, Surrey in September 1920 and was the only child of Henry Gilbert Douglas Macfarlane Payne and his wife Daisy (nee Mayston). Daisy died in 1929 when Donald was only 8 years old.

Flying must have been in the blood, Donald's half-brother, Brian tells us that Henry Payne (Donald's father) joined the Royal Flying Corps as a Sergeant Pilot, was commissioned to 1st Lieutenant and then Flight Commander on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1918. Before demobilisation he flew as one of the pathfinders to Egypt in a twin engined Vickers Vimy; many of the flyers who set out never made it.



Sergeant Donald Mayston Payne

After WW1 he was a member of the RAF reserve and then in WW2, he went into the full RAF in 1941; firstly as a pilot officer, then graduating to Flight Lieutenant in a Squadron training flight crew (radio operators etc), ending up as a Squadron Leader. Brian has a continuing interest in aviation.

### A New Gravestone

Due to a 'shortage of resources', it took until 2015 before Mike's results were finally accepted and ratified by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

During the summer of 2015 a new gravestone was erected and a rededication service took place.



Photographs from the dedication ceremony in Summer 2015.

Bottom left: Jo Healey from BBC East Midlands today talking to Donald's childhood friend, Bill.  
Bottom right: Jo Healey talking to Mike Speight.

At that time it had not been possible to trace any members of Donald's family, but a childhood friend (Bill) attended and provided a photograph of Donald. By a remarkable coincidence, Bill lived in Loughborough, and his daughter lived in Quorn, in one of the flats above the Post Office on Station Road! Also in attendance were members of the RAF, members of the church, people

from Quorn, representatives of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the press, and television.

### **Donald's Family**

In September 2020, on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Britain, and coincidentally Donald's birthday, a wreath was laid on Donald's grave. It transpired that Donald's father had remarried in the 1940s and had had a son, Brian, who was Donald's half-brother. It was this brother who had laid the wreath.

Brian had found out about Donald's grave though a very convoluted route. He had received a telephone call from a Lieutenant Colonel Dave Reynega of the Royal Canadian Airforce. Dave Reynega had a relative who had a connection to Donald and Brian's father, Squadron Leader Henry G D Payne, prior to his second marriage. This relative had done a lot of research, found out about Donald's identification and passed the information on.

### **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to Mike Speight who carried out the research and Kev Porter for the photographs of the dedication ceremony.

In memory of Alfred Payne and Donald Payne, two of the many to whom we owe our freedom.

