

An Appreciation: Herbert Cecil Mowthorpe (1928-2008)

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Mr. Mowthorpe pictured in 1970. Just visible to his right is Cllr. Bob Stephenson.

In any village the undertaker is peculiarly well-placed to monitor and record all aspects of the community. Herbert Cecil Mowthorpe, or ‘Ces’ as he preferred to be known, was no exception. For the last two decades of his life he was the acknowledged authority on the history of Hunmanby and the owner of a vast photographic archive. He also latterly gained recognition as a historian of British aviation and produced articles on both of these subjects.

Ces was born in Hunmanby in February 1928 into a family which ran an array of interconnected businesses. Past generations of Mowthorpes had acted as carriers before the advent of the motor car and had sold newsheets

prior to the invention of the wireless. His father, Herbert Copley Mowthorpe was by training a joiner, but became an undertaker and general contractor for clients, including successive owners of Hunmanby Hall.

The last private inhabitant of the manor house after the Great War was the Hull shipping magnate Lord Nunburnholme (1873-1924). Mr. Mowthorpe senior helped him in a touching private matter. The baron's young son dreamt of becoming a sailor, though as a 'blue baby' with a terminal heart condition, he could not be expected to survive to adulthood. Rather like Prince John, the epileptic son of George V, he was allowed to live in a private fantasy world cosseted by his parents. Mr. Mowthorpe constructed for him a ships deck complete with ropes and steering wheel. The boy would spend hours acting as captain of his 'vessel'.

Such stories created a strong impression upon Ces, as did World War II, which dominated his later childhood. Shortly after the start of the conflict, he started his secondary education at the grammar school in Bridlington. The motto of that establishment *Vitae lampada tradunt* ("they that pass on the torch") was printed in his recent death notice.

It was at this time that he developed an interest in aviation, gaining his cherished flying license almost as soon as he was old enough. His own personal history "archive" probably began at this point when he gathered anecdotes from neighbours with sons or brothers fighting overseas and jotted down snippets of information gleaned from relatives living in bomb-torn Hull. In 1986 he published a fifty-page long book, entitled *Village at War*, which presented a year-by-year digest of events in Hunmanby in the period 1939-45.

The study came about as a result of a challenge thrown down by Henry Thomas "Nobby" Clarke, who died a few years beforehand. Both had grown

up during the War and Mr. Clarke was convinced that nobody could give a better account of life on the Home Front than people who had been teenagers back then. Ces recalls with enthusiasm his response to the propaganda broadcasts by the traitor “Lord Haw Haw” (William Joyce), and tells the personal stories of some of the men from the village who sadly lost their lives in the conflict.

With the death of his father in 1953, Ces took over the family businesses. He became head funeral director. For a long time his widowed mother assisted with “Mowthorpe’s Taxis”, another branch of the firm. However, her driving skills or lack thereof soon became the stuff of local legend. Behind the wheel of her taxi, she would on occasion perform three point turns in the middle of Bridlington Street. Into the 1960s and 1970s teenagers, who called for a ride home from nights out in nearby Filey, would be bemused when the elderly woman arrived as their chauffeur.

Bill Peacock, now of Gnosall, Staffordshire, and his wife Peggy (nee Belt) have vivid memories of Louie Mowthorpe’s driving. When Peggy’s younger sister Joyce was getting married, Ces’s mother was hired as their driver. Throughout the journey of several miles, she seemed to glance at the road only about a dozen times whilst asking the bride endless questions about her wedding dress.

On another, occasion my uncle Colin (later the owner of ‘Hunmanby Mowers’ on Bridlington Road) was been transported by Mrs. Mowthorpe late at night. She was puzzled at why she received so many angry looks from oncoming motorists. Colin told her “Press the dipper! Press the dipper, love! You’re glaring everybody with your headlights”. After he had given her directions, Louie managed to find the button located by the clutch. “Oh,” she said, “I’ve always wondered what that was there for”.

In spite of such narrow brushes with disaster, Mrs. Mowthorpe kept her license until she retired. She outlived her husband by nearly thirty years.

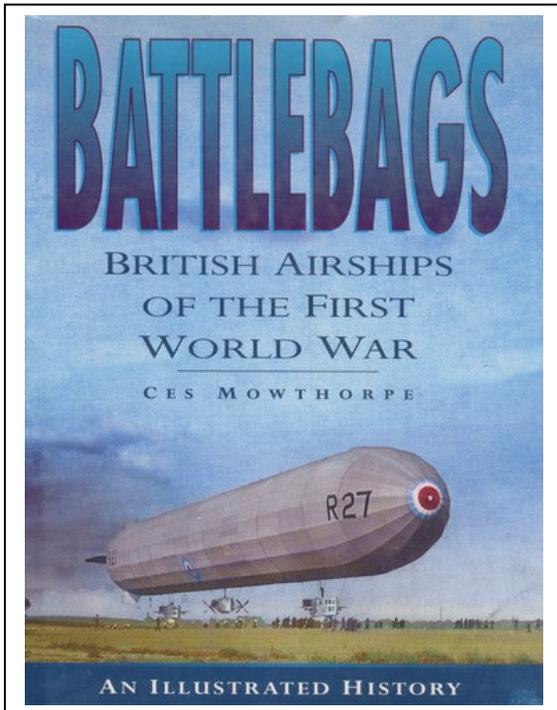
Outside of work, Ces demonstrated enormous enthusiasm for his various interests. He was a member of the Hunmanby Local History Group from its inception in 1951, becoming the Chairman and then Life President. In 1957 he married his wife Yolande, who supported him in his numerous interests. Together they had a daughter, Mandy, and a son, Christopher.

From his home in the village, he was never short of letters and phone calls from people asking him to settle disputes about when a particular event had occurred in the past or from amateur genealogists wanting to know what had become of their family who had once lived in the village. He was renowned for his generosity to total strangers who called upon him. In the last six years of his life, he made full use of the Internet, writing articles on Hunmanby for the village website and contributing to online genealogy forums.

Encouraged by Lucy Mary Owston, the author of *Hunmanby, East Yorkshire: A Story of Ten Centuries* (1948), Ces was drawn into local politics. He was a longtime member of Hunmanby Parish Council and then for a while the Bridlington Rural District Council. When Hunmanby was moved into the borough of Scarborough, he unsuccessfully stood for election to the new local authority. Finishing joint second in a two-member ward, four recounts could not separate his tally from that of Ernest Cherry, the bursar at Hunmanby Hall School. Still with 549 votes apiece, the vicar, Reverend Couper, was called upon to draw one of the candidate's names from a hat. Cherry was the victor.

Miss. Owston continued to be a close friend as well as a mentor. A portion of her orchard was to become the site of his home "Glendene" at the corner of Stonegate and Outgait Lane.

My own earliest memories of Ces date from after this time. My grandparents' home ("Woodhouse Cottage" on Stonegate) backed onto Mowthorpe's stack-yard and as a child of four or five Granddad Barnes would stand me on a pile of old clay tiles by the fence in the hope that we could spy "them moving the dead bodies". Ces himself approached being a funeral director with a mixture of old world sensitivity and mordant humour. Upon being shown an ancient photo of one of my mother's uncles, he remarked "Ah, yes, old Harry. He stood by the clock in our hall for days". Sensing our bemusement, he went on "died in the great freeze of '47 – not even a pick-axe would break the earth then!"



For all his great energy, Mr. Mowthorpe was not blessed with great health. Still flying in his sixties, he broke his wrist in a microlite crash. When talking to children in school assembly afterwards, he sported the injured limb in a Lord Nelson-like sling and shared with them the details of how the accident had happened. Permanently grounded, he finished his two most substantial volumes *Battlebags: British Airships of the First World War* (1995) and *Sky Sailors: The Story of the World's Airshipmen* (1998).

Each was issued by Tempus Publishing and contained dozens of rare, even unique photographs preserved by the author. In between these, another slim, self-published history book, *Hunmanby Remembered* (1996), looked at his home village in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



Ces photographed in May 2007 at his last local history exhibition. Picture courtesy of Laura Collier-Woods.

Ces's final public appearance came early in 2008 at a meeting of the Hunmanby Local History Group. Seated in the front row and smartly dressed as ever in a steel grey suit (he seemed to always avoid black outside of work) he offered his own series of probing interjections into a lecture on the wreck of the *Bonhommie Richard*, which lies in Filey Bay. Few who were present knew that this would be the last time they would see him. Not long afterwards, having recently celebrated his Golden Wedding Anniversary with Yolande and attained the age of eighty, he chose to end the dialysis which had kept him alive for a number of years. It was entirely typical of him that he passed away leaving scrupulous plans for his funeral and the manuscript of a last book on aviation history. He always knew this would be a posthumous publication.

At his memorial service in late April 2008, Ces's personality was very much in evidence. Reverend Jeff Hattan recalled his expressed inability to refer to any clergyman informally by his first name. Deacon Cedric May described how his upbringing as a Methodist became more important to him in his later years and so he attended both All Saints and Cross Hill on alternate

Sundays. One last request from the pen of the “director” was that the congregation at the service should depart as they sang the old spiritual *In the Sweet by and by*.

Selected Bibliography

Books and pamphlets

Hunmanby at War (Pindar: 1986).

Battlebags: British Airships of the First World War (Tempus: 1995).

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Sky Sailors: The Story of the World's Airshipmen (Tempus: 1998).

(As proprietor of Cesmo he also published Joan White's pamphlet *Osbaldeston Hunmanby*).

Articles and Chapters

One of Ces's earliest essays was a chapter on local business in the pamphlet entitled *Hunmanby*, published in the 1970s.

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'Flight Lieutenant Herbert George Cook, *Cross and Cockade*, issue unknown, p. 39.

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