

Two Families and Two World Wars by Simon Wilson

If you head out of Newark and go past the rugby club, you will get to the river at Kelham. On your right you may be lucky enough to see the vague outline of a Civil War star fort that once defended the bridge from rascally Roundheads. On your left there is a large building that has been a monastery and council offices in its time, and is now a hotel. This is where the oil rig workers were billeted during WW2 (I'm still preparing that story). Follow the road round and you will come to Southwell.

In the Saracen's Head you can take a drink and imagine what it was like to be Charles I staying there on the night before the Scots handed him over to Parliament. Or you can look round the Minster. It is quite an impressive place, the Nottingham equivalent of Peterborough Cathedral, with a variety of memorials, including one to the 14,500 Poles massacred at Katyn and another to the men of 12 Group, Fighter Command. My favourite is outside, on the ivy-covered wall. It's a wooden cross, which has seen better days. One day I suppose it will finally fall apart. In the meantime, it is still there and it has a metal plate on it.



'In memory of Major J P Becher DSO (1/8th Sherwood Foresters) who died on 1.1.16 from wounds received in the attack on the Hohenzollern redoubt 16.10.15. Sans Peur. Sans Reproche.' (left).

The epigraph *Sans Peur et Sans Reproche* (*Without Fear and Beyond Reproach*) was first applied to the Chevalier Bayard, a French knight famous for his chivalry, leadership qualities and great personal courage. It seems incongruous to apply it to a country solicitor from Nottinghamshire, but he too proved to be without fear and beyond reproach. The fuller version appears on Becher's CWGC marker.

It is an original wooden grave marker (*right*), as used on military graves during and after the Great War. There were many styles of cross as they were often put up by comrades of the dead men and they made them out of whatever was available. When they were replaced by the neat white markers that we now find so familiar, the families were given the chance of having the wooden ones sent home. Many of the ones that were returned were put in local churches, but Major Becher's family put his up outside. So far it has lasted 100 years, but every time I return to look at it, I worry that it will have disintegrated.



This isn't the place to go into the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, but the logistical effort of returning the markers, at a time when they were still recovering bodies by the thousand, must have been tremendous. There were an estimated 10,000 crosses sent back to families so they could have something tangible to

link them to the graves of their loved ones. Many of them, of course, are now lost. Many families, of course, were not able to take up the offer as the cost of transport was too much for their fragile budget, or because their loved one had no known grave.

There's no reason why you should have heard of Becher. He was a country solicitor from Southwell. I assume he pursued the life of an English provincial gentleman in the years before 1914, possibly playing golf (maybe even chatting to the club professional John Egleshaw, who would die serving in the RNAS in 1917, when he walked into a moving seaplane propeller at Calshot) and probably frightening the local wildlife. His name is mentioned several times in the period before the war, in connection with his legal career and his attendance at various social functions. He entered the volunteers in 1906 when, on November 1st 1906 "John Pickard Becher, Gentleman," was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 4th (Nottinghamshire) Volunteer Battalion of the Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire) regiment. The Volunteers were the ancestors of the Territorial Army, which was formed in 1908. Becher's battalion became the 8th battalion of the Sherwood Foresters, based in Newark.

He was embodied with the battalion in 1914 and went overseas with them in February 1915. The battalion was quickly in action and in April 1915 he performed the first of several acts of gallantry that would lead to the award of the Distinguished Service Order. It was often given out for non-combat duties, but in Becher's case it was most definitely for gallantry in action.

This was his citation, published in the *London Gazette*.

'Conspicuous gallantry and good service on several occasions. On April 4th 1915 at Kemmel when part of his trench was blown in under heavy fire, he personally assisted in repairing the parapet and digging out buried men. On June 15th at Kemmel when part of his trench was blown in by mines, shells and trench mortars, he displayed great gallantry and coolness in reorganising the defences. On July 30th and subsequent days at Ypres he displayed great coolness, cheerfulness and resource under trying circumstances when in temporary command of his battalion.'

Of course, his military career didn't last long. There are old soldiers, and there are bold soldiers, as they say, but there are few old, bold soldiers. On 13th October 1915, the British attacked the Hohenzollern Redoubt as a follow up to the Battle of Loos. The 1/7th Notts and Derbys (the Robin Hood Rifles) were heavily engaged with Captain Vickers being awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions during the assault. The 1/8th were also heavily engaged, sending all their battalion bombers in to support the attack. Becher was seriously wounded and lay out in No Man's Land for 48 hours, only thirty yards to the German Lines. Lt Colonel G H Fowler, commanding the battalion, was killed in attempting to bring him back to safety. It would take him three months to die. Too badly wounded to be moved, he lay in hospital in France and eventually died of blood poisoning.

The battalion history recorded the events like this: 'the more or less fruitless battle of Hohenzollern Redoubt. Though we held a portion of the Redoubt as a result of the fighting, it was of no tactical value, and indeed later on was evacuated or blown up... we can only look back on the whole attack as, through no fault of our own, a dismal failure.'

In January 1916 the Newark Herald reported on the sermon of the Bishop of Southwell, detailing many of Becher's fine qualities as a man and a leader, and telling of him leading the attack in darkness with

a lantern strapped to his back to show the troops where to follow. The service concluded with the buglers of the 8th Battalion sounding the Last Post.

Both his brothers-in-law, Everard and Basil Hanford were killed in the attack, neither of them having a known grave. All three of them are commemorated on the War Memorial in the Minster and Becher is further commemorated with a stained-glass window. He was also commemorated on the Holy Trinity War Memorial in Southwell, Nottinghamshire Law Society Memorial and the memorial to Employees of Nottinghamshire County Council.



The family was not finished yet and further tragedy awaited Gertrude Becher. Having lost her husband and brothers to the war, she would, in the next war, lose her only son, Squadron Leader John Henry Becher, (*left*), killed in an Italian bombing raid on RAF HQ in Aden in 1940. He is commemorated in the Minster by a silver cross, and at the time I took the photographs, by his name written in biro on a poppy



cross. His mother really knew more tragedy in her life than anyone should have to endure.



On a more local note, there is a brass memorial plaque to Captain Herbert Selwyn Scorer, (*left*), in the church at Orton Longueville. He was killed in action with B Company 1/5 Lincolnshire Regiment, also at the Hohenzollern Redoubt on 13 October 1915. Born in Thorney in 1885, he attended Oundle School and was an all-round sportsman who was well known in hunting circles. He joined the Volunteers in 1904, was commissioned in 1906



and promoted to Captain in 1910. He was a farmer, living in Orton Longueville, and was named in the papers several times before the war, once for a prize-winning pig and twice when property was stolen from his farm. In 1916 his father sent the farm's stock off to auction. He is further commemorated on the East Kirkby memorial in Lincolnshire and the Barton School Memorial, which is now in the church of St Peter and St Paul in Wisbech.

His sister Eleanor, who was living with him at the time of the 1911 Census, married Alfred Lowe in 1913 and their first child, John Norton Lowe, Herbert Scorer's nephew, was born in the following year. He went into the legal profession and was commissioned into the Essex Regiment during the war, being attached to the Nigeria Regiment. He saw action in Burma, where he was taken prisoner and died in

1944, being commemorated on the Rangoon Memorial. The memorial records the names of 27,000 members of the armed forces “who gave their lives in Burma and Assam but to whom the fortune of war denied the customary rites accorded to their comrades in death”, as the memorial tactfully puts it.

And so, spread over two families and two World Wars, we see how each major action is made up of small family tragedies.

Herbert Selwyn Scorer's memorial plaque was sold in auction in 2013.