

An Unknown Airman; No longer

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A Guest Post by Mitch Peeke.

At 10:30 on the morning of Tuesday 3rd September, over the Kent village of Chart Sutton, near Maidstone, the then usual sounds of cannon and machine gun fire, from yet another dogfight high in the heavens, were heard. Then came the other sound; a high-pitched screaming, as a blazing Hurricane plunged toward the earth out of the summer sky, with a long plume of black smoke marking its descent. Farm workers and others watched in horror; the stricken fighter looked set to crash onto the village school, where classes of local children were in attendance. But at almost the last moment, the doomed fighter was seen to veer sharply away to Port and to then crash in flames on the edge of the apple orchard at nearby Parkhouse Farm. The unfortunate pilot was obviously still at the controls.

The force of the crash was so great that identification of the pilot and aircraft seemed virtually impossible at the time, though in typically British fashion, a sharp-eyed local Police Officer watching the events unfold, had managed to note the aircraft's serial number and the crash was reported to the Hollingbourne district ARP office. Despite this, it would be another forty-five years before the identity of this self-sacrificing pilot would even be guessed at, and a further five years before it was even remotely confirmed. Until then, he would simply be one of the increasing number of unsung heroes; young pilots who were simply posted as "Missing, presumed Killed In Action" as the Weald of Kent continued to be both a witness to, and a graveyard of, the great aerial struggle that was known as The Battle Of Britain.

Yet what this tiny piece of the huge Battle of Britain jigsaw vividly illustrates, is precisely the reason that this period of our island's history is so dear to us.

As I said; the identity of the gallant pilot, who had stayed with his blazing aircraft and steered it away from the village school, remained a mystery for years. In 1989, I'd just moved to that area and was intrigued when one Sunday afternoon, I saw a Hurricane and a Spitfire, obviously from the RAF's Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, performing a display over a nearby farm. My curiosity was of course aroused, as I knew the BBMF do not spare the engine hours of their aircraft lightly; so I asked around locally the following day and started to piece together the story, which ultimately turned into a full page article for the local newspaper, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the battle.

During the course of my research in 1989, I came across the following reports in the Kent County Archive at Maidstone:

Tuesday 3rd September 1940, Hollingbourne District A.R.P. Office:

10:42. *A British Fighter has crashed in flames on Parkhouse Farm, Chart Sutton. Map reference 21/73.*

11:12. *The aircraft is still burning fiercely and its ammunition is now exploding. There is no news of the pilot yet.*

I also found out, thanks to the helpful locals, that even then, 49 years on from the crash, there is in fact a memorial to this unknown pilot, very close to where the aircraft crashed. It is a peaceful, beautifully kept garden, with a simple wooden cross bearing the inscription "RAF PILOT 3rd September 1940". It was above this little memorial garden that the RAF had been performing their display.

The memorial lies hidden in a shady copse beside an apple orchard, on a south-facing slope that overlooks the one of the most beautiful parts of the county: the Weald of Kent. It is only open to the public once a year, and few people outside of the local Royal Air Force Association's Headcorn branch and the people of Chart Sutton village, know its location. The whole thing, even now, is still a rather private affair between the local people, the RAF and the memory of the fallen pilot.

In 1970, the overgrown crash site was cleared and a formal garden constructed. There has been a memorial service every year at Chart Sutton Church ever since, which is usually followed by a display from either a lone fighter, or a pair of fighters, from the RAF's Battle of Britain Memorial Flight. Tuesday, 3rd September 1940, is a date that Chart Sutton, and the RAF, have never forgotten.

Despite the fact that a local Police Officer had actually witnessed the crash and managed to log the involved aircraft's number, confusion arose at the time because two more British fighters crashed in close proximity to the first very soon afterwards; one the next day in fact, at neighbouring Amberfield Farm and one ten days later on 14th September, almost unbelievably at Parkhouse Farm again.

The RAF sent a recovery squad to Chart Sutton on September 26th 1940, to clear the wreckage from all three crash sites. Although a local constabulary report to the RAF cited Hurricane P3782 as having been cleared from Parkhouse Farm, along with the fragmented remains of its pilot, plus the remains of the other pilot who'd crashed there on the 14th, that single piece of seemingly unimportant paper then got buried, lost in the general Police

archives for years. It didn't come to light again till the early to mid-nineteen eighties, probably during a clearout. It was then reproduced in that epic book, "*The Battle of Britain Then & Now*".

Meanwhile, the removed remains of both pilots were interred at Sittingbourne & Milton Cemetery, in graves marked "unknown British airman". The fighter that crashed at Amberfield Farm had left very little in its wake, having gone straight into the ground, so it is easy to see now, how the confusion over the identification of the three pilots subsequently arose, as aircraft crashes in Kent were of course quite commonplace during that long hot summer of 1940.

That was pretty much how things remained, till in 1980 a museum group excavated the site of the *second* Parkhouse Farm crash. Forty years to the very day since he'd crashed, Sergeant Pilot J.J. Brimble of 73 Squadron and his Hurricane, were exhumed from the Kent soil and positively identified. Also excavated at sometime soon afterwards, was the site of the Amberfield Farm crash, which was then positively identified as being that of Flying Officer Cutts of 222 Squadron, and his Spitfire. This left the last of the three "unknown airmen" and Hurricane P3782, the number from the now rediscovered police report.

Hurricane P3782 belonged to No. 1 Squadron, whose records show that on 3rd September 1940, it was allocated to Pilot Officer R.H. Shaw. The squadron log posts both Shaw and Hurricane P3782 as: "*Missing, failed to return from a standing patrol*" on the morning of Tuesday September 3rd 1940.

There can be little doubt now as to whom the Chart Sutton memorial belongs, but as the engine and cockpit of Shaw's Hurricane are still deeply buried where they fell, there is nothing to base any *official* identification upon. Despite this, and the fact that the RAF removed what human remains they could find at the time, it has always been regarded locally as the last resting place of this gallant young airman.



Pilot Officer Robert Henry Shaw of 1 Squadron. By kind permission of Winston G. Ramsay, via Mitch Peeke.

Robert Henry Shaw was born on 28th July 1916, in Bolton to a family in the textile Business. He was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in the RAF on February 1st 1940 and posted to 11 Group, Fighter Command. On March 11th, he joined No.1 Squadron in France, as part of the force attempting to stem the German advance. The squadron was withdrawn to Tangmere, in Hampshire just before Dunkerque. It was at this time that Robert was inadvertently shot down by the pilot of another British fighter, who had evidently mistaken Robert's Hurricane for a Messerschmitt 109. However, Robert managed to land his damaged Hurricane back at Tangmere and was himself unhurt.

I had the pleasure of meeting Robert's brother when we were introduced to each other at the annual memorial service the year after the local newspaper ran my original story. Unbeknown to me, the paper had traced and contacted Robert's family. His brother, who was completely unaware that Robert's memory had been honoured annually in Chart Sutton for the previous nineteen years, travelled down for the 1991 service. At our meeting, he told me that Robert, in connection with the family's textile business, had been a frequent visitor to Germany before the war and was at first mightily impressed by Hitler's regime. However, during what turned out to be his final visit in 1937, Robert was witness to a public incident that dispelled any illusions he had formed of Hitler's new Germany. Robert never did say exactly what it was that he'd witnessed, but though obviously tight of lip, he was

decidedly firm of jaw. Robert came straight home and joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve, immediately.

The exact circumstances of Robert's death have never been established, but it seems likely that he and his flight commander, Flight Lieutenant Hillcoat, probably encountered a pack of "Free hunting" Messerschmitt 109's; ironically, one of the last such hunting pack operations before Goring unwisely tied his fighters to the bomber formations as a close escort. Robert was by then a seasoned and experienced fighter pilot, but the ensuing dogfight would have been anything but equal. Despite the odds being heavily against them, the pair did not shrink from the fight. Flight Lieutenant Hillcoat was also killed.



Pilot Officer Robert Henry Shaw of 1 Squadron Chart Sutton, Maidstone
(photo Mitch Peeke)

The Chart Sutton memorial is the village's way of honouring that last great courageous deed of Robert's in steering his blazing and doomed Hurricane away from the village school. It was his final, desperate act of pure self-sacrifice that has justly made twenty-four year-old Pilot Officer Robert H. Shaw an immortal part of that Kent village.

Since I first penned this, some evidence has now emerged in the form of an engine plate that was apparently dug up at the site as long ago as 1987, which

has now at last been brought out into the light of day. One is left to wonder just how many such artefacts, souvenired at some point in the past, still lie undiscovered in people's houses!

My thanks go to Mitch for bringing this story to us.