



**GEORGE MORLEY FIDLER
1912-1940**

**The life and death of a
brave airman from Great
Ayton**



The War Memorial at Christ Church records seventeen Great Ayton men who lost their lives in the Second World War. Among them is the name of G M Fidler.

In 2005, the Great Ayton Parish Council received a letter from the Mayor of Bachy, a small village near Lille in Northern France. He wondered if there was any information about Squadron Leader G M Fidler, who is the only British serviceman to be buried in their village cemetery.

Subsequent research in Great Ayton, and a visit to Bachy, brought to light the tragic story of George Morley Fidler.

Morley Fidler was born at Roseberry House, on Guisborough Road, Great Ayton, in 1912. His father was a builder and property developer who had bought land in the village; he built their family house “Canobie” (now 45 Addison Road) at the top of the Chapel Steps.

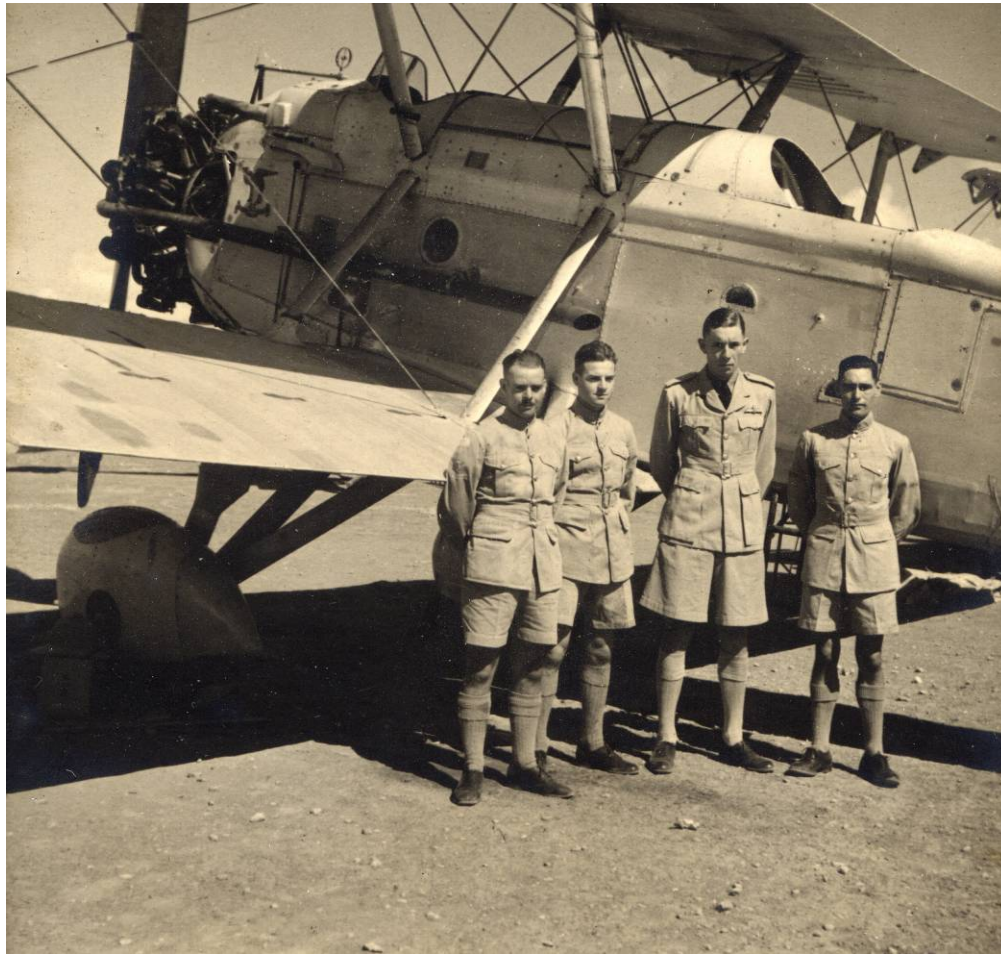




Morley had an elder brother and sister, the twins Harold and Joan. Joan became a radiographer and worked at Kepwick Hall, which was in use as a military hospital. Joan contracted a serious illness there and died in April 1940, just a month before her younger brother's death.

Harold survived the war, but passed away while sleeping in front of the kitchen range at 45 Addison Road in 1973.

George Morley was known as Morley, probably to distinguish him from his father, George. Morley was educated at the British School and then at the Friends' School. As a young man (pictured left) he joined the family business for a few years, but his real passion was for flying, and in 1934 he joined the Royal Air Force.



After two week's basic training at Uxbridge, he was posted to Egypt, where he learned to fly in an Avro 504K. He gained his wings (Morley's wings are shown above) in June 1935 "a sound and reliable pilot, excellent on ground subjects". He joined 45(B) Squadron at their base just outside Cairo.

In the main picture, Morley, easily recognised by his height, stands in front of a Vickers Vincent in Egypt. Morley remained in Egypt for almost three years, with brief spells in Cyprus and India, where he was promoted to Flying Officer. Now he was flying Vickers Wellesleys.

Morley would visit Great Ayton on leave, sometimes arriving by aircraft, looping-the-loop over “The Grange” and landing in a field behind Yarm Lane.

In 1938, Morley was assessed as “exceptional” and promoted Acting Flight Lieutenant. He returned to England in 1938, posted at Louth in Lincolnshire, and was promoted to Flight Lieutenant in February 1939.

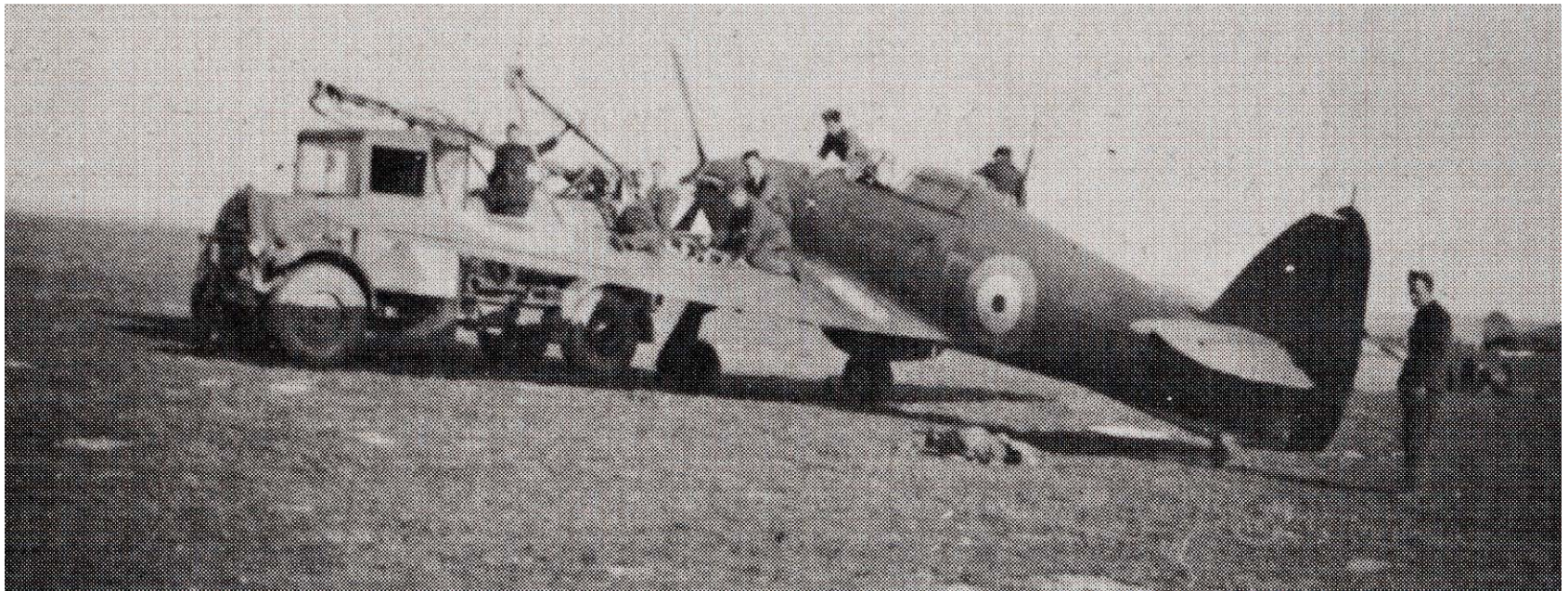
Morley’s career was about to change dramatically. War was declared in September 1939 and Morley found himself in France, part of the Air Component of the British Expeditionary Force, sent to assist France resist the German threat. He was flying Tiger Moths well behind the front line, on administrative duties.

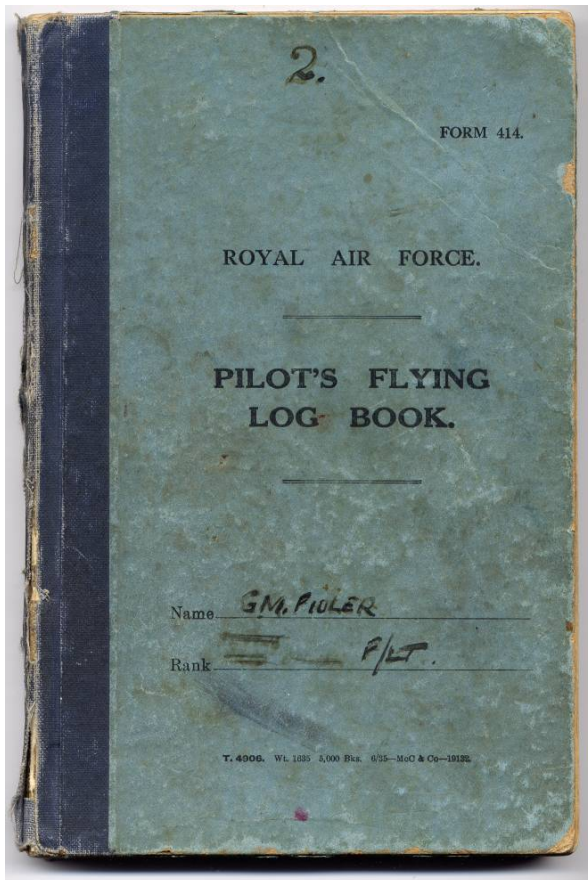


In February 1940, he joined 607(F) Squadron, a volunteer squadron from Sunderland, on operational duties. They were initially equipped with the elderly Gloster Gladiator aircraft. The picture on the left shows Morley and colleagues in front of a Gloster Gladiator in France.



By March, the new Hawker Hurricane fighters were coming into service with the RAF in France. They were operating from grass airstrips across in Northern France in 1940.





MARCH, 1940

Time carried forward:- 1104.55

Date and Hour	Aeroplane Type and No.	Pilot	Passenger(s)	Time	Height	Course	REMARKS
23rd	Tiger Moth	SELF	-	20	-	VITRY-SECLIN	- Amusement Duties
14.25	Hurricane	do	-	45	-	SECLIN to MERVILLE & return	- Auto Ground (application) at MERVILLE
15.40	do	do	-	25	-	SECLIN-ARRAS	- Return to unit
23rd	Tiger Moth	do	-	20	-	ARRAS-SECLIN	- Amusement Duties
17.10	Tiger Moth	do	FLOBERGTON	20	-	SECLIN-VITRY	- do.
24th	Tiger Moth	do	do.	20	-	VITRY-ARRAS	- Return flight
18.00	Tiger Moth	do.	do.	15	-	VITRY, local	Gun functioning Test. Aerobatics
24th	do	do.	do.	55	29000	SECLIN - local	- Affiliation exercise
18.25	Gladiator	do.	-	30	-		
31st	Blenheim	NO SAUNDERS	SELF & 2 OTHERS	30	-		
16.30	do						
24th							
15.30							

WING COMMANDER
IN GROUP CAPTAIN.
COMMANDING 146 GROUP
RAF, BEP.

AIRCRAFT	TIME/MONTH	TIME TO DATE
HURRICANE	1.15	1.55
GLADIATOR	2.20	12.25
TIGER MOTH	8.45	35.05
OTHER TYPES	✓	846.15
TOTALS	12.20	925.40

Passenger flying in limit = 2.25

TOTAL TIME:- 1104.55

Morley Fidler's Log Book showing his flying hours in France.

The German blitzkrieg into Belgium, the Netherlands and France began on 10 May 1940. 607 Squadron suddenly found themselves in the middle of the aerial combat. During their first day of action, 607 Squadron claimed eighteen enemy aircraft for the loss of three Hurricanes, but this early success was not to last for long. The German advance was unstoppable, and in the air the Messerschmitt 109 fighters, with pilots experienced in the Spanish Civil War, soon gained the upper hand. The British Expeditionary Force was soon on its retreat to Dunkirk.



Four momentous days in the life of George Morley Fidler

Thursday 16 May 1940. The Netherlands surrendered. The War Cabinet agreed to send additional Hurricanes to France. Squadron Leader Lance Smith, Commanding Officer of 607 Squadron, was shot down over Dinant and killed. He was replaced by Morley Fidler, newly promoted to Squadron Leader.

Friday 17 May 1940. Brussels and Reims were occupied. Morley Fidler arrived at Vitry, the airstrip used by 607 Squadron, in one of the additional Hurricanes. The aircraft were engaged in several attacks on Dornier bombers. enemy , where 607 Squadron was based.

Saturday 18 May 1940. The rapid German advance continued. More Hurricanes arrived at Vitry. As the aircraft were being refuelled, the airstrip was attacked by nine Heinkel bombers and about forty Messerschmitts fighters. Vitry was in chaos and 607 Squadron hurriedly moved to Norrent-Fontès.

Sunday 19 May 1940. Hurricanes from 17 and 607 Squadrons, including that of Morley Fidler, were patrolling the skies above Cambrai. At 1600 hours they encountered a Dornier bomber with an escort of Messerschmitts. In the ensuing air battle, Morley Fidler was shot in the head and baled out.

Unable to open his parachute, Morley Fidler fell into a field on the outskirts of Bachy. His body was hastily buried where he fell, by a party of passing British soldiers. His Hurricane aircraft crashed some distance away.



A year or so later, Morley Fidler's body was lifted from the field and placed in the village cemetery at Bachy. At the service (shown below) the priest was concerned that he did not know the religion of the deceased airman, Catholic, Protestant, or something else.



News of her son's death reaches Mrs Fidler in Great Ayton

Ivy Hynes was doing domestic work for Mrs Fidler back in Great Ayton. She was already mourning the death of her daughter the previous month. Ivy remembers:

“One morning the doorbell rang quite early and I went to answer it. It was a lady with a yellow telegram. You knew it wasn't good news. I took the telegram and wondered what to do with it. Mrs Fidler was still very sad from Joan's death.

Then I remembered that Nurse Norton lived just along the road. She went to the Fidler's home regularly and knew them well. So I took the telegram to her house and told her what had happened. She came back to Mrs Fidler's with me and broke the news of Morley's death to Mrs Fidler. She was distraught.”

In 2006, a group of Franco-Belgian amateur historians excavated the site at Bachy where a Hurricane, believed to be Morley Fidler's, had crashed. It turned out that this aircraft was the Hurricane of Flying Officer Strickland of 87 Squadron, who had been shot down at 1000 hours on Sunday 19 May, six hours before Fidler. Strickland had been able to open his parachute and survived, in spite of being shot at as he descended by French soldiers, who thought he was a German.

This raised the question, where was Morley Fidler's aircraft?

About the same time that the Bachy site was being excavated, pieces of another Hurricane were found at Oisy-le-Verger, some twenty miles from Bachy. Parts carried the serial number of Fidler's aircraft, and local people who saw the plane crash said that it carried a yellow star on its tail, denoting the Squadron Leader.



It is difficult to be absolutely certain of the exact events at the time, but the following statements can be made:

- 1) Operations Record Books are a reliable source of evidence, but the original 607 ORBs were destroyed when they left France on 21-22 May. Patchy records were written later, in England, and there may be confusion over aircraft serial numbers.
- 2) The pilot buried at Bachy must be Morley Fidler. He must have carried sufficient identification for the soldiers and villagers to know his name and record it on the grave.
- 3) It is virtually impossible for an unmanned Hurricane to continue in the air for twenty miles after its pilot had baled out.
- 4) There is another Hurricane crash site not far from Bachy, in a former anti-tank ditch. This site has never been excavated.



There are four memorials mentioning Morley Fidler in and around Great Ayton:

The Christ Church War Memorial

A carved bench in the Friends' Meeting House on High Green

The stained glass window in Christ Church

The Middlesbrough High School Memorial Plaque

In France, his Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone is inscribed, at the request of Mrs Fidler, with the words "So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side". Later, the inhabitants of Bachy added another headstone with the words "Hommage ému de la population de Bachy au vaillant aviateur".



This scroll commemorates
Squadron Leader G. M. Fidler
Royal Air Force

held in honour as one who
served King and Country in
the world war of 1939-1945
and gave his life to save
mankind from tyranny. May
his sacrifice help to bring
the peace and freedom for
which he died.

This has been a brief summary of researches carried out by Ian Pearce and David Taylor in 2005-6.

Acknowledgements are due to the following :

Monsieur Henri Werbrouck, Bachy
Bob Walters and Ivy Hynes of Great Ayton
Members of the 607 Squadron Association
RAF Personnel Management Agency, Innsworth
National Archives, Kew

Two books provide excellent background to the events in the skies over Bachy in the early part of 1940:

Twelve days in May, the air battle for Northern France and the Low Countries, Brian Cull, Bruce Lander and Heinrich Weiss, Grub Street, 1999

Twenty-one Squadrons, the history of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force 1925-1957, Leslie Hunt, Garnstone Press Ltd, 1972