Captain William Evelyn Wansbrough

During the Battle of the Somme, Delville Wood (see Figure 8) had been skirted in the battle for the Bazentine Ridge which fell to the British on 9th July 1916. As a result, it formed a salient in the British front line which exposed it to hostile fire from three directions. The wood continued to be fought over from July 15th until 3rd September 1916, at the cost of thousands of lives, including that of William who was killed by shell fire on 28th July 1916, aged 22 years.

William's great-grandfather was William Wansbrough, born c1803, in Minehead, Somerset.[i] His great-grandfather married Mary Counsel Shartman on 1st September 1824 at All Saints Church, Southampton.[ii] Their first born child, William John Wansbrough (William's grandfather) was born on 15th June 1825 in Barnwell, Somerset.[iii] In 1841, great-grandfather William, Mary and their nine children were living at Arlington House, 5 Richmond Street, Weston-Super-Mare, in Somerset. William was a painter and glazier by trade and, over several years, built up a business, which included gas fitting, employing 16 men and 3 boys.[iv] By 1881 he had retired and was living with his daughter, Ann, together with her husband Oliver Sheppey, and their two children in Bath, Somerset. Her husband is recorded in the census as a master tea trader and Turkish Baths proprietor. William died in 1888, aged 86 years.[v]

William John Wansbrough married Mary Ann Dyson in the autumn of 1849 in St Neots, Huntingdonshire.[vi] The 1861 census records the couple living at King Street, St Peter, Camarthen with their only child, William Dyson Wansbrough, born 19th December 1851.[vii] Like his father before him, William John Wansbrough ran a painting and glazing business employing 13 men.[viii] In the 1871 census, William John describes himself as a 'master plumber' and employer of 16 men and 3 boys in Lancashire. The family home was at 12 Capel Street, North Meols, Ormskirk. William Dyson Wansbrough, then 20 years old, was living away from home serving an apprenticeship as an engine fitter and boarding with the Kingston family in London Road, Spittlegate, Grantham, Lincolnshire.[ix] William John died six years later on 12th January 1878. Probate was granted to his son William Dyson Wansbrough, engineer, living at 17 Derby Road, Southport.

William Dyson Wansbrough married Margaret Ellen Davies on 21st February 1888 in London.[x] On completing his apprenticeship William went on to be a mechanical engineer and the works manager for Messrs Robey & Co.[xi] During his time there, William invented and patented many of his ideas for improving engines, including a way of raising and lowering funnels on portable steam engines and also a patent for a lawn mower.[xii]

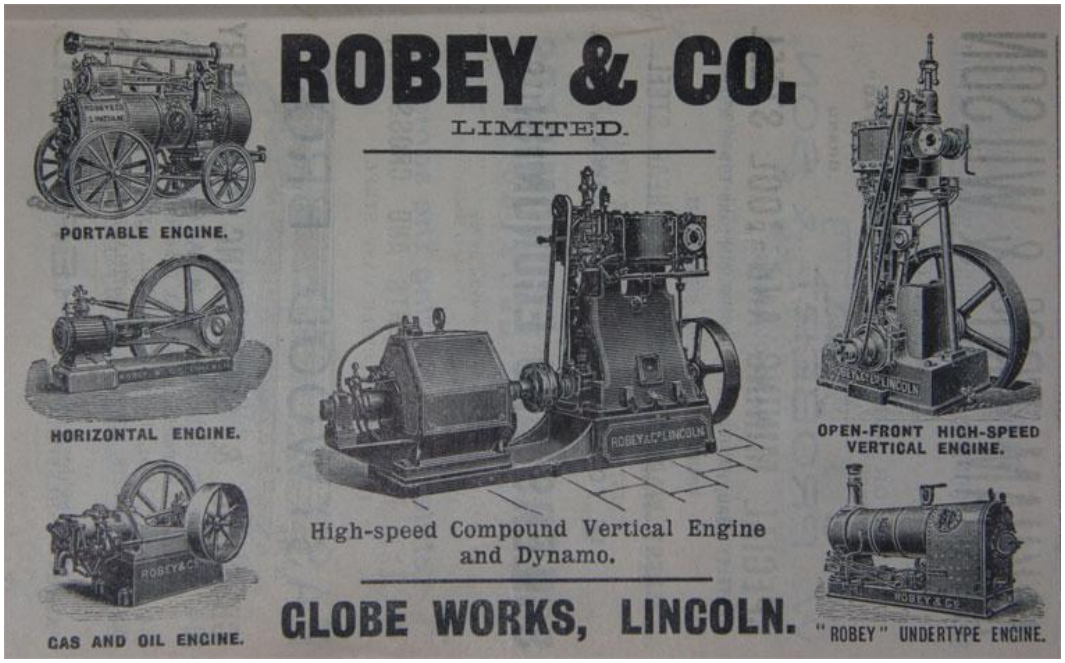


Figure 1: An advertisement for Robey & Co Ltd, 1899

He also wrote several books, including: 'The Portable Engine, its construction and management', a practical manual for owners and users of steam engines generally (1887), 'The Proportions and Movement of Slide Valves'.(1903), 'The A B C of the Differential Calculus' (1912) and 'Modern steam boilers (the Lancashire boiler): a practical manual for owners and users of steam boilers generally' (1913).

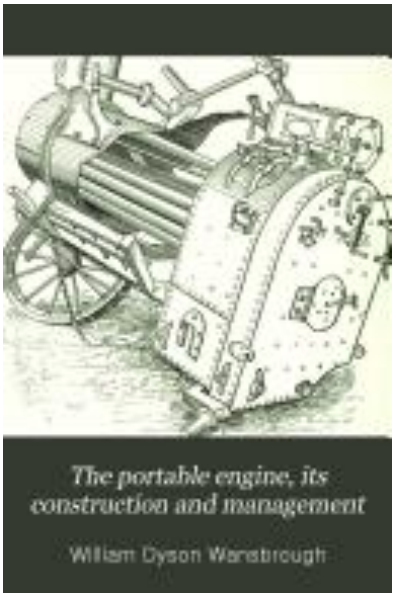
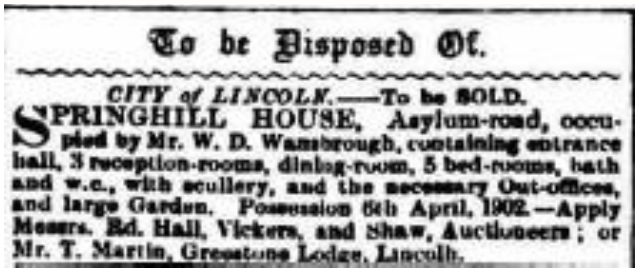


Figure 2: The first published book by William Dyson Wansbrough

William Dyson Wansbrough must have travelled widely because in 1895 he gave an illustrated lecture at St Bidolphs School in Bargate, Lincoln on 'Egypt and the Great Pyramid' and wrote a very candid chronicle of a visit to Russia via Poland he made by train in the local newspaper. [xiii]


To be Disposed Of.

CITY of LINCOLN.—To be SOLD.
SPRINGHILL HOUSE, Asylum-road, occupied by Mr. W. D. Wansbrough, containing entrance hall, 3 reception-rooms, dining-room, 5 bed-rooms, bath and w.c., with scullery, and the necessary Out-offices, and large Garden. Possession 6th April, 1902.—Apply Messrs. Ed. Hall, Vickers, and Shaw, Auctioneers; or Mr. T. Martin, Greestone Lodge, Lincoln.

Figure 3: Springhill House for sale, 15.11.1901

Although the family are registered as residing in Springhill House, Asylum Road in Lincoln in the 1901 census, by November the house was up for sale.

By December 1906, William and Margaret and their two children, including William Evelyn, known as Evelyn (their eldest child born 11th November 1893) had moved to Birmingham.[xiv] The family initially lived at 11 Edgbaston Road, Balsall Heath but, following several moves, eventually settled at 49 Blenheim Road, Moseley.[xv] In 1911, William set up a business as a consulting engineer with Harold Skelsey. The firm was called 'Wansbrough & Skelsey' of 73 Exchange Buildings, New Street, Birmingham.[xvi]

Evelyn studied primarily a scientific, rather than a classical curriculum. Although his performance lapsed in his penultimate year, he finished his school academic career winning the Laboratory Work prize in 1911, his final year.[xvii] While at school, Evelyn joined the Officer Training Corps (OTC) and was promoted to Cadet Corporal. On leaving school, Evelyn enlisted in the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment and on 4th May 1912 he was granted a probationary commission as a 2nd Lieutenant Regiment.[xviii] Later in that year, on 8th November, Evelyn was confirmed in the rank of Second Lieutenant.[xix] His promotion is listed in the London Gazette under 'Special Reserve of Officers'. Professionally, on leaving school in 1911, he followed the family interest in engineering and enrolled as an apprentice in the General Electric Company at their innovative Witton Works, opened in 1902 covering 45 acres, which included the Carbon works, the only such in the country which thereby avoided being dependent on German imports.[xx]

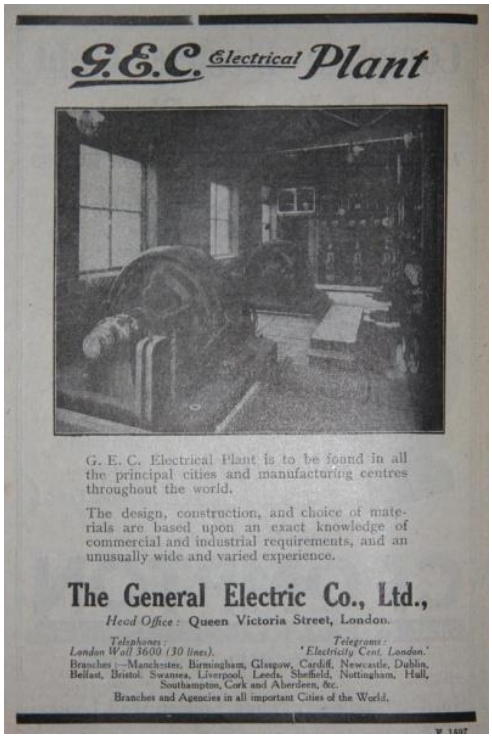
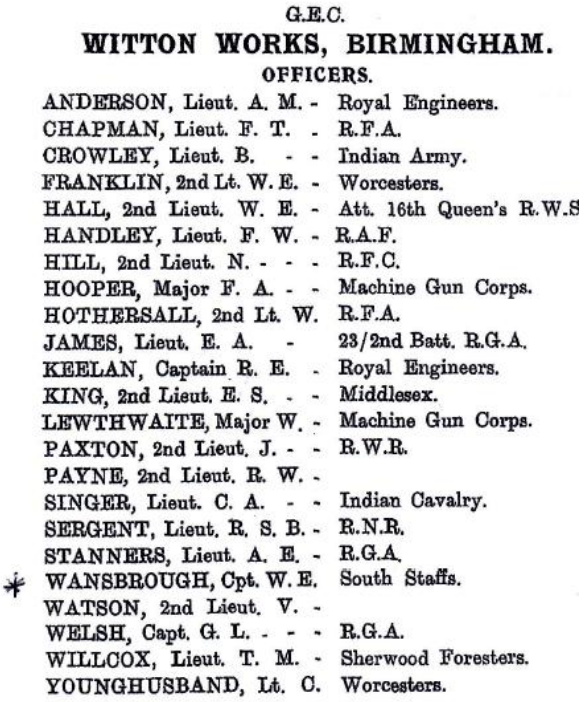


Figure 4: GEC, Witton works in 1918


G.E.C.

WITTON WORKS, BIRMINGHAM.

OFFICERS.

ANDERSON, Lieut. A. M. -	Royal Engineers.
CHAPMAN, Lieut. F. T. -	R.F.A.
CROWLEY, Lieut. B. - -	Indian Army.
FRANKLIN, 2nd Lt. W. E. -	Worcesters.
HALL, 2nd Lieut. W. E. -	Att. 16th Queen's R.W.S
HANDLEY, Lieut. F. W. -	R.A.F.
HILL, 2nd Lieut. N. - - -	R.F.C.
HOOPER, Major F. A. - -	Machine Gun Corps.
HOTHERSALL, 2nd Lt. W.	R.F.A.
JAMES, Lieut. E. A. -	23/2nd Batt. R.G.A.
KEELAN, Captain R. E. -	Royal Engineers.
KING, 2nd Lieut. E. S. - -	Middlesex.
LEWTHWAITE, Major W. -	Machine Gun Corps.
PAXTON, 2nd Lieut. J. - -	R.W.R.
PAYNE, 2nd Lieut. R. W. -	
SINGER, Lieut. C. A. - -	Indian Cavalry.
SERGENT, Lieut. R. S. B. -	R.N.R.
STANNERS, Lieut. A. E. -	R.G.A.
WANSBROUGH, Cpt. W. E.	South Staffs.
WATSON, 2nd Lieut. V. -	
WELSH, Capt. G. L. - - -	R.G.A.
WILLCOX, Lieut. T. M. -	Sherwood Foresters.
YOUNGHUSBAND, Lt. C.	Worcesters.

Figure 5: WW1 Roll of Honour, Witton works

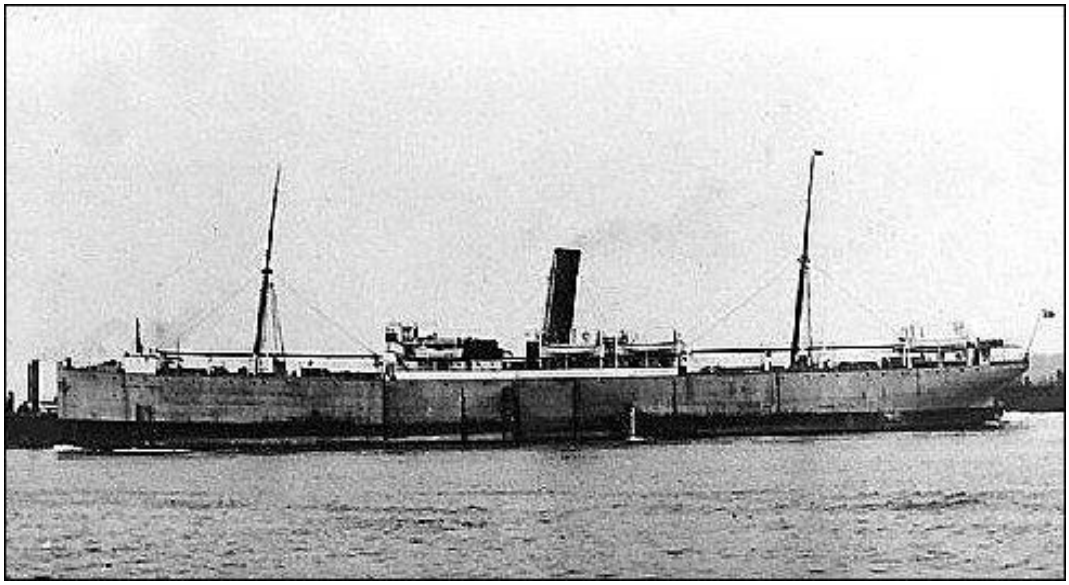


Figure 6: *SS Cawdor Castle*

At the outbreak of war, Lieutenant W E Wansbrough, attached to the 2nd Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment (2nd South Staffs),[xxi] assembled in Aldershot as part of the 6th Brigade and set sail for France on the *SS Cawdor Castle* from Southampton at 8 pm, on 12th August 1914, arriving at Le Havre the following day.[xxii]

As part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), better known as 'the Old Contemptibles', Evelyn took part in the retreat from Mons at the end of August. In the Battle of the Aisne in September he narrowly escaped with his life. This report of the incident appeared in the Birmingham Mail on 3rd October 1914:

He was standing in the trenches with five others, when a shell burst immediately over them. Four of his comrades were destroyed instantly, he was struck in the shoulder by a stone thrown up from the ground by the explosion and the fifth member of the party escaped entirely unhurt.[xxiii]

Figure 7: W E Wansbrough

Evelyn returned home to recover. During his convalescence he married Gladys Mabel Skelsey in a very quiet wedding on 31st December 1914 at St Agnes Church, Moseley officiated by the Reverend J W Pyddoke.[xxiv]

In early 1915, the 2nd South Staffs were based in Cuincy. This is where Evelyn received the news that he was to be promoted to Captain.[xxv] From the 15th to 20th May the 2nd South Staffs took part in the Battle of Festubert and later in the year, from the 25th September to 4th October, the Battle of Loos.[xxvi]

In the war diary of the 2nd South Staffs for the 24th April 1916, Captain W E Wansbrough is reported as having 'joined us the previous evening from England and took command of 'B' Coy'.[xxvii]

On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916, the Battalion were in trenches at Berthonval North, near Vimy Ridge where they held the line.

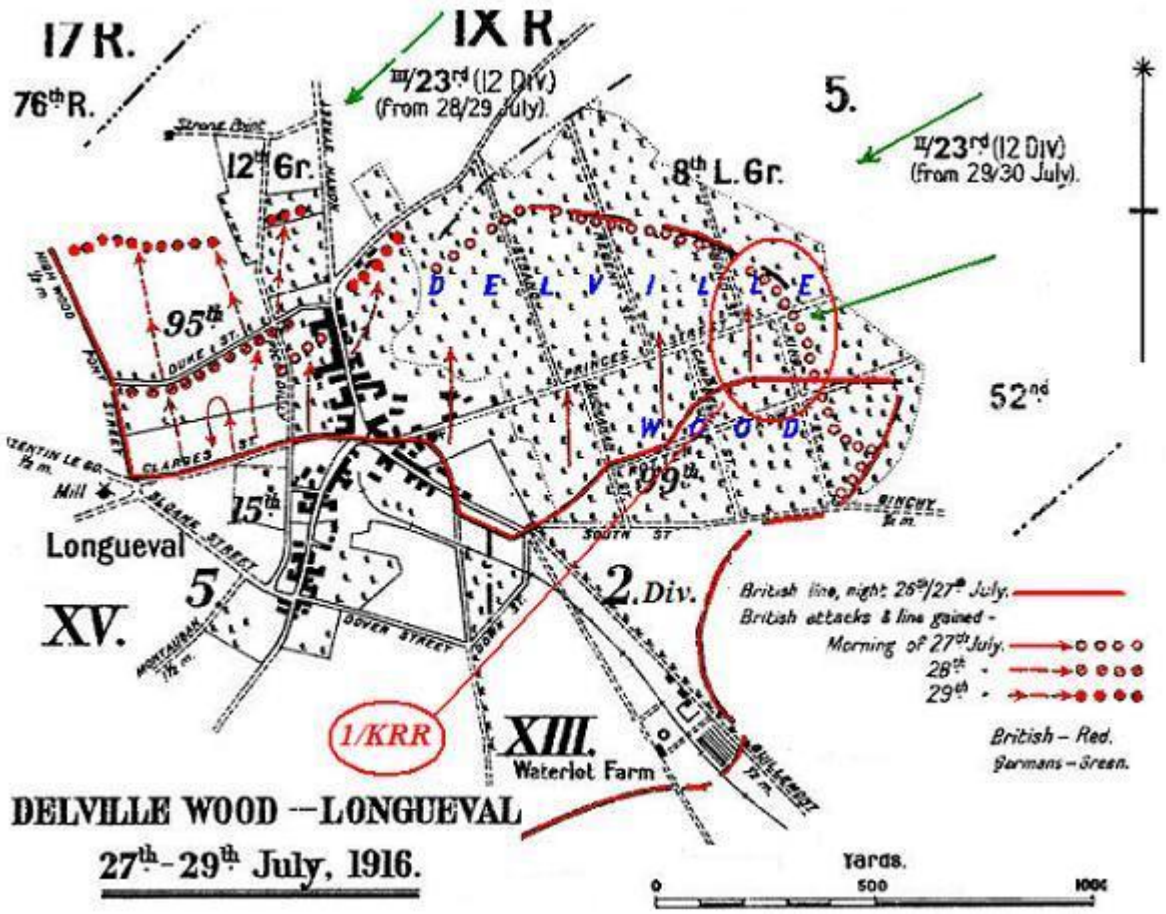


Figure 8: Map of Delville Wood from 27th to 29th July 1916

On the 18th July, the Battalion was moved to the Somme area to reinforce the strength of the fighting force, due to the heavy losses sustained since 1st July. They arrived by train at Longueval the following evening. After a two day rest, the 2nd South Staffs were moved into reserve positions. In the early hours of the morning of the 28th July 1916 the Battalion relieved the 99th Brigade in Delville Wood. 'A' Coy took up the front line near the north edge of the wood with Evelyn's 'B' Coy in support. At 9 pm that evening, a German counter-attack began accompanied by very heavy shelling. Although the attack was repulsed, the bombardment practically obliterated the 'B' Coy. All the officers were killed and most of the men buried. In spite of this the men stuck to their positions. When the Battalion were relieved the following day, 29th July the casualties

became apparent. Six officers had been killed and one had died from his wounds. Of the other ranks, 196 were wounded, 21 suffered from shell shock and 46 men were reported as missing. Evelyn, the officer in command of 'B' Coy was one of the officers killed in the action on the 28th July. His body was never recovered. He was only 22 years old.[xxviii]

Evelyn is commemorated on the Thiepval memorial. He is also commemorated on the WW1 memorial at St Mary's and St Anne's Church, Moseley, King Edward's School and the Hall of Memory, Birmingham.

Far left: Thiepval memorial
Near left: St Mary's Church WW1 memorial
Bottom left: St Agnes Church WW1 memorial
Bottom right: King Edward's School WW1 memorial

When Evelyn was killed, Gladys was in the last months of pregnancy. Their son, also named Evelyn William (Billy) was born on 11th October 1916. Gladys remarried on 17th April 1919 at Rock Ferry Parish Church, near to where her mother lived.[xxix] Her new husband was Julius Christian Hansen, a Danish engineer born in Hudslund Parish, Hads Hundred, Aarhus County in Jutland in 1885.

Two years later, on 11th May 1921, the couple with Billy, aged four year embarked for Melbourne, Australia. They travelled third class at their own expense on *SS Benalla*.[xxx] At midnight, not long after leaving Tilbury, the ship was in collision with the *SS Patella* in thick fog off the coast of Eastbourne[xxxi] The tanker belonged to the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co. Ltd. The *SS Benalla* was damaged on the port side and shaft of the bridge and was beached thirty minutes later at Pevensey Bay. There were no injuries to the 1100 passengers or crew who were lifted off the ship by tugs and taken to Newhaven. Number 4 hold was full of water and as a result the luggage in the hold was damaged or destroyed. Gladys, Julian and Billy were put up in a boarding house in London

before setting sail, nearly a month later, for the second time on 7th June 1921 aboard the P & O ship *SS Mantua*.[xxxii]

Figure 9: SS Benalla

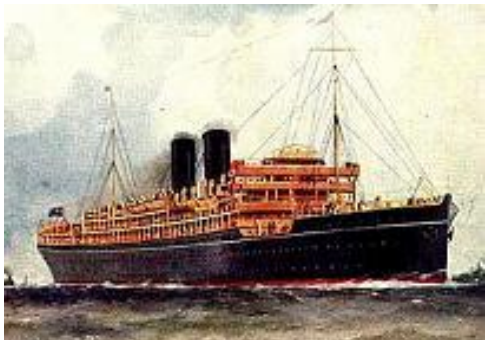


Figure 10: SS Mantua

Julius Hansen set up a small garage business in Mirboo, North Victoria which he ran until his death in 1947. A few letters from Gladys survive lamenting the crude and difficult life she had in the remote Victoria countryside, so different from her former comfortable home in Birkenhead and Moseley. Gladys died in 1937 and was buried Mirboo North Cemetery. There are living descendents of the Wansbrough family resident in Australia.[xxxiii]

After Evelyn's death in 1916, his mother, Margaret, suffered another loss the following year when her husband died. This, together with the remarriage of her daughter-in-law and the departure of her grandson to Australia must have affected her greatly, She died in reduced circumstances in a private hotel in Hove in 1931, aged 73. She is buried in an unmarked grave.[xxxiv]

Evelyn's younger brother Robert Cecil Wansbrough also served in WW1. After joining the 14th Royal Warwickshire Regiment (1st Birmingham Pals) he joined the 9th South Staffordshire (Pioneer) Battalion in December 1914 on commission. He served in Armentieres, Bouvigny and the Somme before transferring to 12th Squadron Royal Flying Corps (Observer), becoming a Captain on 18th August 1917.After the war, Robert obtained a Short Service Commission in the RAF in July 1921. Robert married Maud (nee Chapman), the widow of Hugh Ryan Bell in 1922.[xxxv] Maud had been married only nine months before her first husband died from wounds on 29th August 1917.[xxxvi] Just before WW2, in April 1937, Robert was promoted to Squadron Commander, No 1 (General Engineering) Home Aircraft Depot Wing. During WW2 he served in the Technical Branch becoming Chief Signals Officer, HQ RAF Mediterranean and Middle East in 1946 before finishing his career as an Air Commodore in 1948 and Director of Radio.[xxxvii]Robert and Maud had a son, Peter. He was killed while serving with the RAF in April 1945. There are no known UK Wansbrough descendents.

Written and researched by Edwina Rees, Moseley Society History Group. With thanks to Alison Wheatley, curator, King Edward School, Edgbaston and Geoffrey Skelsey, great nephew of Evelyn's mother, Gladys Wansbrough

Endnotes

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i a) Wansbrough family , Ancestry
http://www.ancestry.co.uk/genealogy/records/william-john-wansbrough_15785229
b) 1861 census

ii Hampshire Marriages
1871 census records Birth place as Southampton
See i (a)

iii Ancestry genealogy
http://www.ancestry.co.uk/geneology/records/william-john-wansbrough_15785229

iv 1871 census

v England & Wales deaths 1837-2007. Bath, 1888, 2/4, 5C, 415

vi England & Wales marriages 1837-2008, St Neots, 1849, 3/4, 14, 303

vii Ancestry genealogy
http://www.ancestry.co.uk/genealogy/records/william-dyson-wansbrough_15785784

viii 1871 census

ix 1871 census for Grantham

x England marriages 1538-1973

xi 1891, 1901 census
Lincolnshire Chronicle, 25th August 1894
Graces Guide (under the name of 'Skelsey')
http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/1939_Who's_Who_In_Engineering:_Name_S

xii W D Wansbrough lawn mower patent
http://www.google.ch/patents/US503509 lawnmower
Stamford Mercury, 27th November 1885, p 3

xiii *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 22 March 1895
Lincolnshire Echo, 24th September 1895

xiv Registration record of William Evelyn Wansbrough, King Edward's School, Edgbaston. Courtesy of Alison Wheatley archivist

xv See xiv

xvi *Graces Guide* (under the name of 'Skelsey')
http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/1939_Who's_Who_In_Engineering:_Name_S

xvii From the archive of King Edward's School, Edgbaston. Courtesy of Alison Wheatley
Service Record of King Edward School 1914-1919

xviii *London Gazette*, 3rd May 1912, Issue 28604, p 3181

xix *London Gazette*, 8th November, 1912, Issue 28661, p 8205

xx See xvii

xxi Soldiers who died in the Great War 1914-1919

xxii The Long, Long Trail
http://www.1914-1918.net/sstaffs.htm
The British Army WW1 Medal Index
2nd Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment
http://www.wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar/allied/battalion.php?pid=7279

xxiii *Birmingham Mail*, 3rd October 1914

xxiv *Chester Chronicle*, 9th January 1915

xxv London Gazette, 25th February 1915, Issue 29083, p 1969

xxvi The 2nd Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment
http://www.vickersmachinegun.org.uk/units-sstaffs.htm

xxvii National Archives war diary for the 2nd South Staffordshire Regiment Ref W0 95/1362, p 33

xxviii See xxvii, pp 68-75

xxix WW1 Army Medal Roll Index
1911 census

xxx It is interesting to note that, as the law then stood, not only was Julius not entitled to seek naturalisation as a British subject on his marriage, but that Gladys in fact ***lost*** her British nationality on marriage to a foreign man. (Julius could have applied later had he resided for longer either in Great Britain or elsewhere in the Empire, but it has not been possible to discover if he did). His and Gladys' status on departure is confirmed by the emigration details recorded in London in May 1921 where they are shown as 'aliens'. Billy is also described there as an 'alien', but this cannot be right in law as Section 1 of the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914, which came into effect before Billy's birth, explicitly defined the status of a British subject as, inter alia, acquired by birth 'within His Majesty's dominions' (sic), which Billy clearly had been. It

is likely that both Billy and Gladys had been added to Julius' Danish passport and the officials were thereby misled
Geoffrey Skelsey

xxxi 1914-18 invision Zone
http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/65213-ss-patella/

xxxii a) See xvii
b) Passenger Lists leaving UK 1890-1960
c) *Hawera and Normandy Star*,14th May 1921
d) Geoffrey Skelsey, Great-nephew of Gladys Wansbrough (nee Skelsey)

xxxiii See xxxii (d)

xxxiv England & Wales death 1837-2007, Kings Norton, 1917, 4/4, 6D, 20
See xxxi (d)
England & Wales deaths 1837-2007, Steyning, 1931, 4/4, 2B, 378

xxxv England & Wales marriages, 1837-2008, 1922, Meriden, 4/4, 6D, 1079

xxxvi England & Wales marriages 1837-2008, 1916, Aston, 4/4, 6D,788

xxxvii A History of the RAF Organisation
http://www.rafweb.org/Biographies/Wansborough_RC.htm

Illustrations

Figure 1 Grace's Guide to British Industrial History
http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Robey_and_Co

Figure 2 Google Books

Figure 3 *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 15th November 1901

Figure 4 GEC, Witton Works
http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/File:1918GeneralElectricalCoA.jpg

Figure 5 Birmingham City Battalions Book of Honour, 1920, p 265

Figure 6 *SS Cawdor Castle*
http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/bat_9_1915.php

Figure 7 Photograph of W E Wansbrough. Courtesy of Alison Wheatley, archivist for King Edward's School, Edgbaston

Figure 8 Map of Deville Wood
http://answers.net.nz/Other/1914-16.htm

Figure 9 Flotilla Australia
https://www.flotilla-australia.com/hmat.htm

Figure 10 Naval History Net
http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-08-HMS_Mantua.ht