

## “Jack the war hero and Dora his widow who became a Lady ... A Moseley Tale of Love”

Since 2014, the Moseley Society History Group has been researching how the First World War affected Moseley and its residents. Many individual soldiers' records and lives have been discovered and reported. In particular, we have looked at those brave men who gave their lives “For King & Country.” We originally sought to research those men remembered on Moseley's various memorials around the area, but, in addition, we have also identified many others with a Moseley connection who are not mentioned on memorials.

This story involves one of these “unrecognised” soldiers whose life could be described as being in the best “Boys Own” tradition. His link to Moseley was that he met, courted and eventually married the beautiful young daughter of a local entrepreneur and gentleman. The story involves death and sadness, but it also underlines duty, devotion and hope for the future.

The main characters of this story are John Henry Stephen Dimmer (Jack) and Gladys Dora May Bayley-Parker (Dora). How, when and where they met are not known.

Jack was born on October 9<sup>th</sup> 1883 in Lambeth, the son of an ex-Navy man. He was educated at Rutlish Secondary School, Merton, Surrey where it was reported that he showed “military tendencies”. He joined the Boys' Brigade and eventually initiated a BB company in Wimbledon.



**Figure 1: Rutlish Secondary School Merton, Surrey**

After leaving school, he started work in the Civil Engineering Department of Morden Council, Surrey. This however was but a short interlude, for in 1902 Jack joined the Army as a Private in the King's Rifle Regiment and was soon sent to serve in South Africa.

Dora was born in the summer of 1895 to William Parker and his second wife Mary. William was something of an entrepreneur and apparently made a great deal of money from his activity in "soaps and soda". This was just as well as he had fathered ten children in total! The family maintained a very large home in Oakland Road, Moseley and William, as time progressed, began to describe himself as a "Gentleman". In line with this, Dora adopted a hyphen in her name and thus became a Bayley-Parker (Bailey being William's second name).

We do not know much of Dora's childhood and early adulthood other than that she had become well-known in the Moseley area for doing a great deal of nursing and visiting in military hospitals. It is possible that this was where Dora and Jack first met but we cannot be sure.

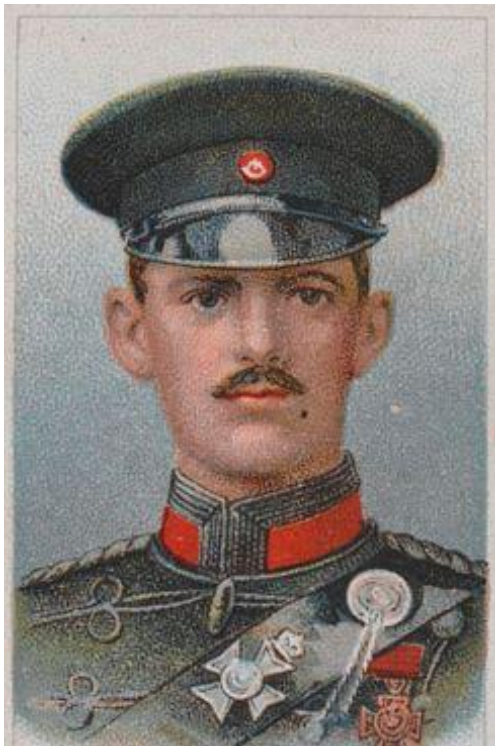
Initially, Jack was a Regular soldier involved in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Boer War. He was obviously an exceptional soldier whose talents and abilities were recognised and rewarded. Promotions followed regularly in recognition of his fine service in areas of tracking, mapping and signalling. His service was predominantly in Africa where he was seconded to various units. Eventually he was recommended for a Commission by some well-known and influential figures such as General Lyttleton and Sir Ian Hamilton. This was duly granted in January 1908 and thereafter he was attached to a number of different units doing "special work" in Africa. This could very well have been Intelligence work on behalf of the Foreign Office. Certainly, though, there is evidence of his being with the West African Regiment.

**King's Royal Rifles (60th).—Capt. Johnstone, 3rd Batn., adjutant of the 9th Batn. County of London Regiment, and 2nd Lieut. (local Lieutenant) Dimmer, now serving with the West African Regiment, have been elected Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society.**

**Figure 2: Newspaper reference to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Dimmer, West African Regiment, 1908**

He was still based in Africa in early 1914 and came back to England on extended leave in early summer that year. So it was that he was still here when the political situation that developed after the Sarajevo assassination exploded into war. Rather than return to Africa, Jack returned to his parent regiment, the King's Royal Rifle Corps, but this time as an officer! The KRRC

were amongst the very first units mobilised for war and they formed part of the original British Expeditionary Force (BEF) that landed in Le Havre and Rouen around August 14<sup>th</sup> 1914.



**Figure 3: Lt J H S Dimmer**



**Figure 4: A shell wrecks a machine gun Lt J H S Dimmer was firing when attacked by the Prussian Guard**

The BEF was composed of the bulk of the British Army's professional trained soldiers. They faced the daunting task of facing a formidable enemy who had an overwhelming superiority in numbers, training and weapons. The Germans also had their well-documented Schlieffen Plan which laid out their strategy, long prepared, to overcome their main threat – France. Jack and his contemporaries were destined to become involved in desperate fighting in a number of well-known engagements including at Mons and the retreat, the Aisne and at Ypres, where Jack first made his name.

On 13<sup>th</sup> November, Jack and his battalion (2KRRC) found themselves holding a line near Klein Zillebeke in Belgium during what became known as the First Battle of Ypres. Jack was in charge of a machine gun unit when the battalion was suddenly attacked by the Prussian Guard and a crushing artillery barrage. Before long, there was only one gun left in operation. Jack then took over firing at the approaching enemy. A shell burst nearby causing severe wounds to his face and neck, but he remained at his post until his gun was finally put out of action. The enemy was repulsed and Jack survived despite being wounded five times. In the words of his Commanding Officer, Jack's action not only "saved the Regiment but also the line itself." Interestingly, the official War Diary entry for that day simply reports that Lt Dimmer was among the wounded. Nevertheless, that action by Jack won him the Victoria Cross and a lot of national recognition as one of the first recipients of our highest military decoration.





**Figure 5: Painting of Lt J H S Dimmer repairing a machine gun, while exposed to fire**



**Figure 6:**  
**(Left) Victoria Cross (Right) Military Cross**

Subsequently, Jack in a letter to his mother mentioned nothing of his actions but reassured her that he was “a bit knocked about but generally not too bad”. Shortly after that, he was promoted to Captain whilst convalescing in England. At the turn of the year, in that year's New Year's Honours List, a new award was instituted - the Military

Cross (MC) for officers and warrant officers below the rank of Captain. (The equivalent award Military Medal for other ranks was not introduced until March 1916!).

The initial batch of 100 names included Jack in their number. His action at Zillebeke also featured in the press which often printed artists' impressions of famous incidents. These were inevitably rather fanciful, romantic pieces far removed from the grim reality of men fighting for their lives in desperate situations.



The London Gazette in early 1915 records his appointment as Brigade Major, attached to the HQ unit of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion. This was a Staff appointment as it was obviously felt that Jack was a candidate for high command. There is little record of his service there but by April 1915 he had moved on to the 4<sup>th</sup> Reserve Infantry Brigade (Rifles) based at Westcliffe-on-Sea. This was basically a training unit that was charged with training the various “Pals” regiments. Jack's service would have made him very suitable for this work, but probably he would have preferred to have been in an active unit.

However, the circumstances of war would give Jack what he may have wanted. In November 1915, he was returned to his parent Regiment (KRRC)

and went with their 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment to Salonika to support the Serbian Army in the fight against the Bulgarians. This campaign was something of a sideshow to the Western front, as the Allied expedition was late arriving and the Bulgarians had already been routed by the Serbians. The British force together with French forces were more or less a policing force with little fighting taking place initially. However, in 1916 there was more action as the Bulgarians recovered and the KRRC was involved in the capture of Karajakoi and the capture of Yenikoi. Jack is recorded as being attached to the Royal Flying Corps whilst in Salonika but we have few details of his activities there. Probably, he assisted in liaison between the RFC and the Army.

The Army in Salonika suffered many losses during the campaign which lasted until the 1918 Armistice. However, the majority of these losses were due to illness and disease. Unfortunately, Jack was one of them. On October 11<sup>th</sup> 1916, he was admitted to hospital with suspected severe jaundice, and the following day was assigned to a sick convoy to Casualty Clearing Station 31 in Egypt.

Following a spell of convalescence, Jack returned to England and was seconded to the Machine Gun Corps as a Staff Officer in December 1916. We then lose sight of him as his service continued with the MGC until October 1917 when he is promoted to Lt. Colonel and seconded to command the 2/4 Princess Charlotte of Wales' Regiment (aka The Royal Berkshire Regiment). At this time, they were serving in a "quiet zone", as compared with the Flanders area where the Third Battle of Ypres was raging.

Returning to Dora, we only know that she was very active locally in Moseley, nursing the sick and visiting local hospitals. Perhaps she and Jack met after his VC award, when he was very much in the public's and society's eye. What is known is that they became engaged and set the date for their wedding three times!



On each occasion, however, Jack was recalled for duty in France and Salonika. However, at their fourth attempt the wedding took place on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1918. They were married at St Mary's Church, Moseley by Canon Hopton, the then Archdeacon of Birmingham. The event was of great interest both locally and nationally and was widely reported in the Press. The couple had no honeymoon and Jack returned to France on the following Tuesday. Almost certainly, Dora never saw Jack again!



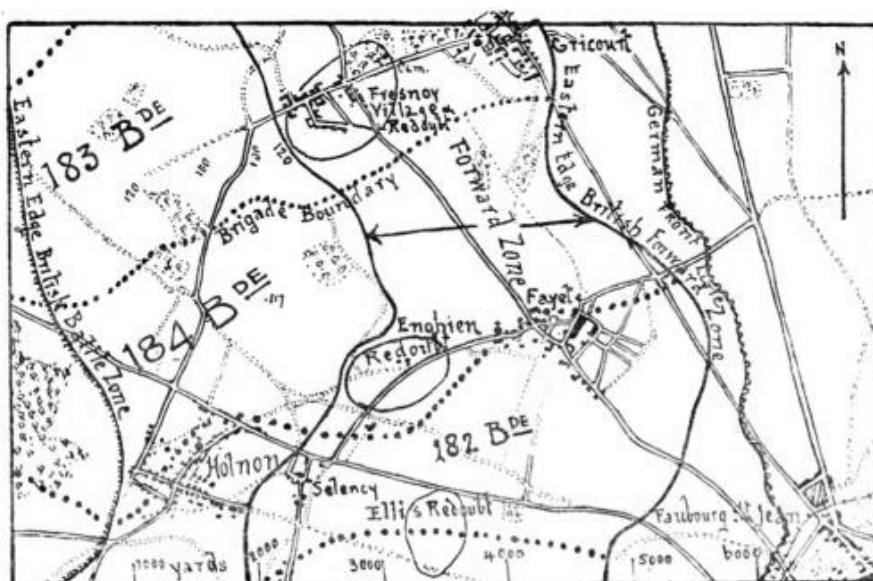
Figure 7: A photograph and a newspaper picture of the marriage of Jack and Dora

Back in France, the war dragged on. Passchendaele was taken by the Canadians and for a time the attritional slaughter on the Western Front relented a little whilst the opposing forces recovered and regrouped after the Third Battle of Ypres. It soon became apparent that the Germans were building up for a major offensive. The Russian Revolution of November 1917 and the subsequent release of German forces on the Eastern Front meant that enormous numbers of experienced troops could be deployed against an Allied Army still licking its wounds after the last major battle.

So it was then that Jack's regiment found itself in a relatively quiet part of the Front with the 2/4 Royal Berkshire Regiment, part of the 184<sup>th</sup> Brigade. There were still small actions with consequent, but "normal" losses. Patrols were being sent out to try and glean intelligence of German activity - in other words, normal line of duty. The High Command were certain that a German attack was imminent but did not know where it would strike. The relevant War Diaries show the depth of detailed orders that were being drawn up to try and prepare for any possibility.

What the High Command did not know was that the enemy had introduced a new attack strategy which had never been attempted before. The Allies were to be the target of what was really a forerunner of the "Blitzkrieg" attack used to such effect in the Second World War.

On March 21<sup>st</sup> the Germans launched their Spring Offensive (aka Operation Michael or the Kaiser's Battle) from the Hindenburg Line, in the very area where Jack and his Regiment were stationed at Marteville, near St Quentin. Initially, they were held in reserve but as the enemy offensive made terrific inroads, aided by the element of surprise and effective artillery fire, the Berkshires were pushed forward in order to attempt a counter-attack.



**Figure 8: Map showing the position of the 2/4 Berkshire Regiment, 184<sup>th</sup> Brigade near St Quentin on 21st March 1918**



One can only imagine the feelings of these men as they faced thousands of battle-hardened troops, outnumbered, outgunned and almost overrun. Two companies of the Regiment were sent forward. Jack as Officer Commanding was mounted on his faithful charger leading his men on with the same gallantry and disregard for his own personal safety that marked his whole military career. The operation was heroic, but inevitably disastrous. The attackers were slaughtered and there were few survivors. An eye witness reported that Jack refused to dismount his horse and was seen to be shot in the head a few yards from the enemy line and died immediately.

Jack is buried at Vadencourt British Cemetery in Maissemy. He is remembered in many places (but not Moseley!) These include Kingston Vale Memorial, Wimbledon, the Regimental Memorial in Winchester Cathedral and a memorial paving stone for VC holders in Silver Jubilee Gardens, Southbank, London. He also has a road named after him, Jack Dimmer Close in SW16.

This is a sad story, but one of so many similar ones from that time. Jack died a gallant death, which left his very young wife of a few weeks with nothing more than memories of a lengthy courtship and a very short marriage.

They say that time is a great healer, and that life must go on. It was particularly true for Dora.



**Figure 9: (Right) Kings Royal Rifle Corps memorial at Winchester Cathedral, (contributed by Peter Trimming)**  
**(Middle) Jack's tombstone at Vadencourt Cemetery**  
**(Left) Commemorative paving stone in Jubilee Gardens, South Bank, London**

We know very little detail about Dora's immediate life after the death of Jack, but as she had been well-known in the Moseley area for her work with the wounded in the local hospitals, it is likely that this work continued despite her bereavement. Her life, however, was destined to take a turn for the better. Later that year, she met a very distinguished gentleman, Leopold Canning, the 4<sup>th</sup> Baron Garvagh. How and where they met is unclear but he and Jack had



been in Salonika at the same time, Leopold having served as an infantry officer before transferring to the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). Jack was known to have been on liaison work between the army and the RFC. This might have resulted in a friendship that bore unexpected fruit in later years.

Leopold, who, at age 40, was 18 years older than Dora, had previously been married in 1904 at Westminster Abbey to the heiress Caroline Grace Elizabeth Rube. Their marriage was dissolved five years later in 1909 on the grounds that it had not been consummated. At a time when divorce was rare and considered a scandal, it was confined by expense to the rich, and by legal restrictions requiring proof of adultery and additional faults or permanent impotence at the time of marriage to the truly desperate.

Caroline remarried two years later in 1911. Her second husband was General Sir Webb Gillman KCB KCMG DSO with whom she had a son and two daughters.



**Figure 10: Leopold and his first wife Caroline from 'The Graphic' on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1904**



After what appeared to be a whirlwind romance, Leopold and Dora were married quietly at St Matthew's Church in Bayswater on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1919. The ceremony was described as modest as Dora was 'in mourning' for Jack.

**Figure 11: St Matthews Church, Bayswater**



**Figure 12: Dora and Leopold on their wedding day at St Matthew's Church, Bayswater.  
Leopold, 4<sup>th</sup> Baron Garvagh, was a lieutenant in the RAF**

Just weeks after her marriage to Leopold, Dora's father, William died on 30<sup>th</sup> January aged 73. He had been the patriarch of a very large family of 10 children from two marriages. He would surely have been delighted to have seen one of his daughters marry into the aristocracy, as he had tried so hard himself to be recognised as a 'gentleman' rather than a tradesman who made his money from soap and soda.



In 1922 Dora is photographed on a whole glass plate negative (see left) in what appears to be a wedding dress. In the same year Leopold is painted in his lieutenant's uniform (see right) perhaps to recreate an image of their wedding ceremony that at the time had to be necessarily modest.

After the wedding, Dora was whisked away by her new husband to live with him in his family home, Garvagh House in Coleraine, Co Londonderry, an estate of 15,000 acres.

At the time of Dora's marriage, there was continuing major unrest in Ireland. Leopold (familiarily known as George) was faced with a dilemma. Should he remain at Garvagh House, his ancestral home which had been in the Canning family for many generations or leave Ireland?

The son born to Lord Garvagh will cause considerable rejoicing, for the little stranger is heir to the title, and estates exceeding 15,000 acres. Lady Garvagh was a widow when she married Lord Garvagh in 1919, her first husband being the late Lieut.-Col. Dimmer, V.C.

Figure 13: Newspaper report announcing the arrival of a son and heir for George in 1920

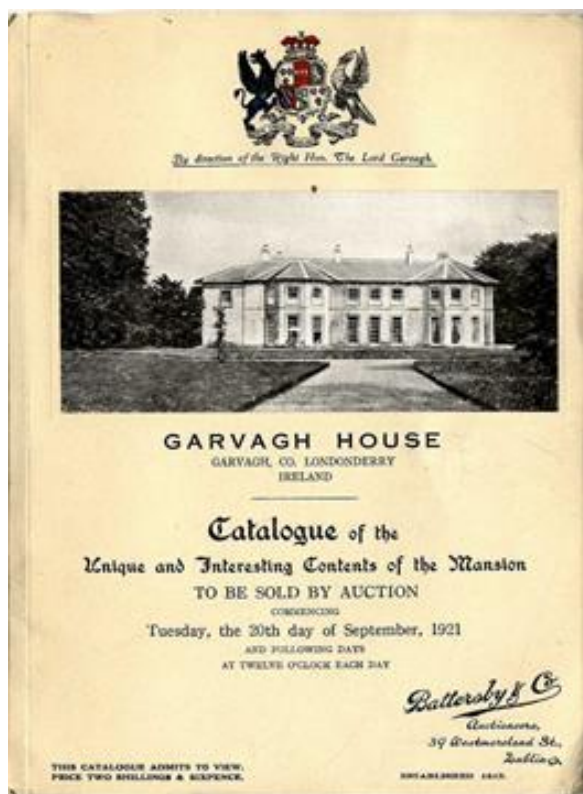


Figure 14: Garvagh House in a 1921 auction catalogue

By 1921 Dora had given birth to two children, Dora **Valerie** Patricia (born 31<sup>st</sup> October 1919) and Alexander Leopold Ivor **George** (born 6<sup>th</sup> October 1920). With their safety in mind, George decided to leave his ancestral home in Ireland. He relocated Dora and his two children to Wales where they set up home in Ffestiniog, Merionethshire. During their time there, two further children, Daphne Rose and Victor Stratford de Redcliffe were born on the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1922 and 7<sup>th</sup> February 1924 respectively. The Garvagh estate went on the market and was eventually sold to Edward Stronge.





**Figure 15: Ashby Hall, Lincolnshire**

In 1925, George set up home at Ashby Hall in Lincolnshire with Dora and their four children. George, as 'Lord of the Manor', employed a large number of local people to assist in the running of the large estate. Evidence shows that he was a generous and caring employer and the current Village Hall was originally built to provide an area for entertainment and sporting activity for his estate workers during the Great Depression of the 20s. George also made major improvements and extensions to Ashby Hall itself which brought the building into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 16: From left to right – Daphne, Valerie, George and Victor with Dora in 1931**

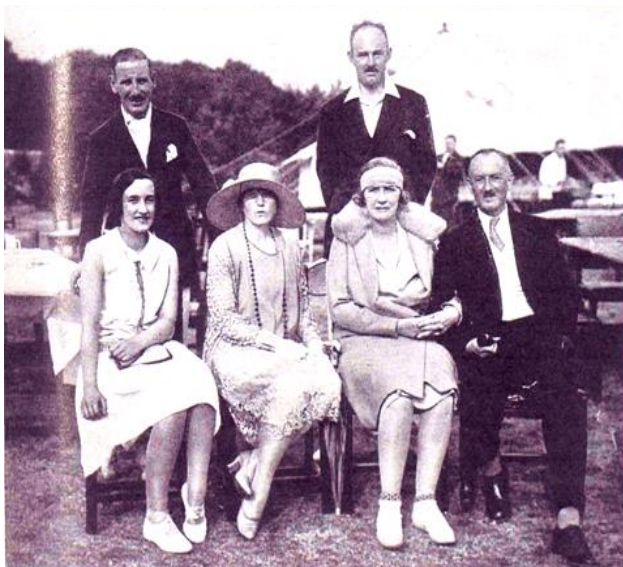


From 1925, Dora was able to enjoy the social benefits that came with being the wife of a Baron.



**From the 'Sketch', July 15<sup>th</sup> 1925**

**Lady Waverley's Lawn Tennis Party: Mrs Burrell, Lady Garvagh and Miss Burrell**



**From the *Tatler* in 1928**

**Sitting: Miss Grinal, Lady Garvagh, Mrs Greenish and Lord Garvagh  
Standing: Flight Lieutenant Dickson and Flight Lieutenant Darvell**



**From the *Tatler* in 1934**

**The Hon Ivor Canning and his parents Lord and Lady Garvagh**

George and Dora were destined to become well rooted in the community of Ashby De La Launde. Their children were raised there and this remained the family's base until just before the Second World War, when George (who was a passionate fan of speed generally and motoring and flying in particular) moved the family to Keswick and presented Ashby Hall to the RAF who occupied it throughout the war.

Dora's children must have had an almost idyllic childhood at Ashby Hall, although most of them were educated elsewhere. The boys, Alexander and Victor went to Eton and Valerie (the eldest child) went to a finishing school in Italy. One very interesting feature of the Canning children is that three of them served in the Forces during WW2, and the fourth (Valerie) was married to an Army officer.

Valerie spent quite a time in Europe in the late 1930s, but in April 1938 she was seriously injured in a car accident near Marseille. Nevertheless she was soon restored to full health in time to be "Presented at Court" as one of the Debutantes of 1939. She was very interested in dressmaking and designed her own gown for her Presentation.

Dora's eldest daughter, Valerie, aged 19 as a Debutante  
in 1939 and on her engagement in 1940



Valerie eventually met and married Lieutenant Philip Anthony Wellesley-Colley in January 1942. He was in the Royal Horse Artillery and came from a well-known military family. The couple had a daughter, Angela on December 5<sup>th</sup> 1942. She was Dora's first grandchild. And there were many more to come in the following years.

Dora's second child, Alexander (yet another George!) was his father's heir and



was due to become the 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Garvagh in the fullness of time. He was educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford and joined the Indian Army where he progressed to the rank of Captain. He fought in the Burma campaign, survived and was mentioned in dispatches. After the war, he met and married Edith Cooper and they had three children, Christine (born 20<sup>th</sup> September 1949), Louise (born 14<sup>th</sup> May 1951), and Spencer (born 12<sup>th</sup> February 1953). George had an outstanding business career as Chairman and Managing Director of the family business, Lord Garvagh & Associates Ltd., amongst other appointments. George and Edith were divorced in 1974 and George married Cynthia Pretty on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1974. In later life, he lived in Deal, Kent.

Dora's third child was Daphne Rose. She was born in December 1922. Nothing is known of her education, but she followed the family tradition and served in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force during the war. She obviously shared her father's passion for flying and all things related to it. After the war, she married a Canadian gentleman, Bancroft Svenningson of Montreal and lived for many years in Ontario. The couple had three children. Victor Bancroft (31<sup>st</sup> March 1954), Jennifer Anne (24<sup>th</sup> November 1955) and second son Andrea (27<sup>th</sup> December 1960)

#### Dora's second daughter, Daphne in 1945



*The Hon. Daphne Canning, Lord Garvagh's younger daughter, who is in the W.A.A.F., sat by Lt. M. F. Turner Bridger*

George and Dora's youngest child was Victor (born 7<sup>th</sup> February 1924). Like his brother, Victor was educated at Eton College and thereafter joined the Army. He joined the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Grenadier Guards as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. Tragically, though, Victor was killed at Monte Cassino, Italy on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1944 aged 20.

This was a very difficult time for Dora and her family. Not only did she lose her younger son, Victor, but four weeks later on D Day, her son-in-law Philip, who was serving with the Royal Artillery attached to the Royal Marine Commandos,

was also killed. This was particularly sad as Valerie was pregnant at that time with her second daughter, Elizabeth Jane who was born on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1945 and who never knew her father. However, Valerie later met and married her second husband, Peter Stocks Sutcliffe. They wed on August 28<sup>th</sup> 1950 and had a son James on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1953.

The Garvagh family continued to thrive and develop as families do and suffered the usual setbacks and losses. Dora's husband George who had been very active in the family business passed away in Keswick on July 16<sup>th</sup> 1956 aged 77, leaving Dora as the Dowager Baroness Garvagh.

Thus Alexander, Dora's remaining son, became the 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Garvagh. This was a title he was to hold for 57 years until his death on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2013 at the age of 93, when his only son Spencer George Stratford de Redcliffe became the 6<sup>th</sup> Baron. He has trained as a surveyor and is the Principal of Asset Plus One Ltd which is involved in property development and investment. The Garvagh family's line is secured by Spencer's son Stratford George Edward de Redcliffe who was born in 1990 and is destined to be the 7<sup>th</sup> Baron.



**Lord Garvagh (6<sup>th</sup> Baron), Dora's grandson**

As for Dora, she spent the rest of her life at the family home, Lyzzick Gate, Milbeck, Keswick where she died on January 27<sup>th</sup> 1982 at the age of 86. Her life was indeed one of love and loss, but in later life she had the love and support of a large family. Her family is indeed a dynasty. She had four children, nine grandchildren and at least seven great- grandchildren, most if not all of whom were born in her lifetime. She would surely have been quietly proud of how successful her descendants have become.

**Written and researched by Jim Hone.  
Illustrations by Edwina Rees.  
Moseley Society History Group**

## **Permission to copy subject to acknowledgement**

The Moseley Society History Group carries out its own research and publishes the results on its website and in booklets, posters and written reports. It also responds to individual enquiries as far as it is able. The History Group grants permission to quote from any of its published research material and any responses to individual enquiries for non-commercial and educational purposes, but only on condition that the History Group is acknowledged as the source of the information used, together with the author where specified, and on the understanding that the History Group cannot guarantee or accept liability for the accuracy of its material. Use for commercial purposes is not permitted unless terms have previously been agreed with the History Group.