

## THE BETHELL FAMILY AND WADEFORD HOUSE

### Admiral the Honourable Sir Alexander Edward Bethell, GCMG, KCB

Admiral the Honourable Sir Alexander Edward Bethell, known to his close friends as "Ted", moved to Wadeford House with his wife and daughter when he retired from the Navy at the end of the Great War. This was not a happy time for them, as both their sons had been killed in the War (the younger son heroically but in circumstances which distressed his father), and Admiral Bethell himself, after a long and successful career, had been pressured into giving up his post as Commander in Chief at Plymouth prematurely for reasons of internal naval politics. It seems, however, that Admiral and Lady Bethell found contentment at Wadeford House, where they both took a very active part in the local community. They may also have had their minds taken off past sadness by their daughter Agatha's wedding to an eligible naval officer, Lieutenant Commander Marsden-Smedley, in 1922.



The Bethell family (with some genealogical complications) has produced a line of eminent people and substantial landowners since the sixteenth century. The family arms feature three boar's heads and a star, and the crest has the motto "Ap Ithell", the original Welsh form of Bethell. The particular branch of the family to which Admiral Bethell belonged centred on Rise Park in the East Riding of Yorkshire. He was the grandson of Richard Bethell (1800-1873), first Baron Westbury, who was Attorney General, Lord Chancellor and a member of the Privy Council, Baron Westbury is said to have had "extraordinary power of sarcastic speech and unequalled mastery of luminous expression". In 1865 he annoyed the House of Commons so much that they passed a vote of censure on him and he had to retire temporarily to Italy.

His son, Richard Augustus, the second Baron Westbury (1830-75), was a barrister and his wife Mary Florence, nee Fownes Luttrell (died 1901) had five sons and three daughters, Admiral Bethell being the second son. Incidentally, the current (6th) Baron Westbury was also in the Forces (as a Major in the Scots Guards), and also has an heir who is the Honourable Alexander Bethell, evidently keeping up family tradition.



Sir Alexander Edward was born in London (N4) on August 28th 1855, although christened at the family seat at Westbury in Wiltshire. His career spanned a time of great technological and professional change in the Royal Navy to which he made a significant contribution, from a time when battleships still had rigging like Nelson's Victory through to the early days of aircraft carriers. Robert Massie in his recent book "Dreadnought" wrote that about the time Alexander joined the Navy as a 13 year-old Midshipman:

"The brightest boys in England did not instinctively become navy midshipmen. Nepotism was the rule as fathers steered their sons, and uncles their nephews, into the navy: the result was a 'self-perpetuating... semi-aristocratic yacht club'."

Bethell became an example of the new breed of more Edwardian naval officer, rather than the Victorian aristocratic amateur. While not quite the kind of "Ruler of the Queen's Navy" who "rose to the top of the tree" though a policy of "stick close to your desk and never go to sea", as recommended in Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore* (1878), it is fair to say that his career tended to be as much academic and administrative as salty and sea going.

In the 1881 census, when he was a Lieutenant, he was serving at HMS Vernon (not a ship, but the new torpedo school at Portsmouth). In 1903 he was at sea, commanding the cruiser *Naiad* involved in landing the Somaliland Field Force in East Africa, but soon returned as Assistant Director of Torpedoes (1903-7), and was then in command of the battleship *Hindustan* (1908). He became Director of Naval Intelligence (1909-12), by which time he was a Rear Admiral, living ashore at Ormonde Gate, Chelsea. He won the profound respect of both Winston Churchill and Admiral Fisher. In 1909 the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) ordered the formation of a Secret Service Bureau. A War Office appointee was to head the Home Section of the Bureau while Rear-Admiral Bethell, a member of the CID, was responsible for finding a suitable naval candidate to head the Foreign Section, later to become the Secret Intelligence Service (often known as MI6). He wrote to Commander Mansfield Cumming who was appointed to head the Foreign Section. After another spell at sea in 1912 as Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, Bethell was a Vice-Admiral, commanding the Naval War College at Portsmouth in 1913-14. He may have revealed his own sense of whether being on deck or behind a desk was more demanding (and perhaps a touch of his grandfather's sarcasm) when he reported of a certain Captain Fox:

"31.7.18 . As a Staff Officer lacks powers of organization and initiative. Would do better in command of a ship" Admiral Sir A.E. Bethell.

The most Nelsonian phase of his own career was probably early in the Great War when, aged about 60, he commanded a force of a few big pre Dreadnought battleships based in Plymouth (His Majesty's Ships *Goliath*, *Vengeance*, *Prince George* and *Caesar*). In late August 1914 they provided cover for the Marine Brigade hastily landed at Ostend, which briefly held up the German advance to the coast. It was also under his command (as Chief of Staff at Plymouth from December 1916) that the first long-distance convoys were organised to counteract the German submarine threat.

After he was moved sideways from this job to make room for Jellicoe, Bethell ended the War as Admiral commanding Coast Guards and Reserves in 1918. After his retirement, during his Wadeford House years, Bethell was a church warden and a J.P. His obituary in the *Times* adds that he "did much work for the British Legion, becoming president of the county branch. After his wife's death he spent many months of every year on the Continent. He was also a member of the Naval and Military Club. Admiral Bethell died at a London nursing home in 1932, aged 77.

### **Lady Hilda May Bethell 1853-1928**

Lady Hilda was about a year older than her husband. She came from a similar social background, having been born Hilda Huntsman, daughter of Baron Benjamin Huntsman, in September 1853 at her family's seat, West Retford Hall in

Nottinghamshire, She married Sir Alexander in March 1890, at East Retford, when she was 36 and he was 35. They started a family fairly soon, the oldest son, Edward, being born in 1891, Maurice in 1894 and their daughter Agatha in 1895.

At the time of the 1901 census, her husband was a Captain and they were in lodgings at 17 Landport Terrace, Portsmouth. Edward, aged 9, was with them, but not the younger children Maurice and Agatha, who do not appear to be listed in the census, so they may have been abroad. A fellow boarder, however, was Captain George R Bethell, RN, aged 52, from Rise Park in Yorkshire (one of the family seats). Probably he was a cousin of Alexander.

After they moved to Wadeford House, Lady Hilda entered, even more than the Admiral, into the life of the parish and the county. She was President of the Combe Women's Institute and associated with such diverse organisations as the Chard and District Tuberculosis After-Care Committee, the Combe St Nicholas Tennis Club, the Girls' Friendly Society, The Parish Sports Association, Parish Council, Church School and Comrades Club. The account of her funeral in the East Somerset News, ten years after they moved to Wadeford House, is sub-headed "Parish's Great Loss". It continues:

"Her passing removes one who took a sincere and kindly interest, and a real practical interest, in the lives of those with whom she came into contact, and one who had done much charitable work since she came reside in the neighbourhood."

We know from the list of mourners that at that time Wadeford House had four servants, two gardeners and a chauffeur (evidently the Bethells were modern enough to



have a motor car). The servants were Mrs. Warren, Miss A Hill, Miss E Bishop and Miss P. Rideout, the gardeners were Mr. C Dinham and Mr. W. Rodber; the chauffeur was Mr. Norton. Lady Bethell's grave was lined with moss, ivy, lilies and chrysanthemums by the Wadeford House gardeners (who were also pall bearers, along with two men from the British Legion), so presumably lilies and chrysanthemums

were among the flowers grown at Wadeford House in 1928. Lady Bethell was buried with her husband beside the south porch of Combe St. Nicholas church.

### **Agatha Hilda Bethell (1895-1985)**

Agatha (known to her brothers as "Baby") would have been about 23 when her parents moved to Combe St Nicholas, and about 27 when she married in 1922. Like her father, younger brother, husband (and uncle?) she was in the Royal Navy, or rather the WRNS, (in 1918-19, when she was based at the office of the Commander-in Chief, Devonport). She later worked with the British Red Cross Society (1928-35), the ATS (1938-45) and the Women's Royal Army Corps. Her husband, retired Lieutenant Commander John Bertram Aubrey Marsden-Smedley (1893-1959), served on HMS Minotaur, Lydiard Hardy and Vega. They had at least three children, Penelope, who married the late Sir David Meyrick, Susan (b.1931), a barrister and Edward. Agatha died in 1985 at the age of 90. It was shortly after her death that a substantial collection of the family papers was deposited in the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at Kings College London.

## **Captain Edward Walter Bethell 1891-1918**



Having lost their younger son in 1916, it must have been a cruel blow to the Bethell's that his older brother Edward, who had been seriously wounded at Ypres in 1914, was then killed in one of the final battles on the Somme, having survived to within two months of the end of the War. Edward (known as "Teddy") had been born in 1891. He went to Winchester and Sandhurst, and was commissioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment in 1911. Before the Great War he had served abroad, in Gibraltar, Bermuda and South Africa.

When war broke out, Britain's small regular army had to try to stem the northern wing of the German advance towards Paris and the Channel Ports, and had they failed the strategic position on the Western Front would have been very precarious. Hence a few months after his father's battleships had tried to help save Ostend, and a little further south, Edward's battalion was holding the line in the First Battle of Ypres.

Edward's battalion sustained terrible casualties, and of 998 officers and men before the battle, only 32 were left by the first week of November. Edward himself was badly wounded, but after convalescence and a spell as an Army Instructor and doing a number of Staff Courses, he returned to active service as a company commander with his old regiment in 1918, A letter which he wrote to Agatha early in September is full of optimism, but a fortnight later he was killed by machine gun fire leading his company in a dawn attack.

On 21st September 1918 the Queen's Regiment (Royal West Surreys), in which Edward Bethell was a company commander, was taking part in the great assault on the German Hindenburg Line south west of Cambrai and together with the London and Eastern Counties Battalions, fought their way into the enemy's outposts and defensive system between the villages of Epehy and Ronssoy. By mid-day on the 21st, they had established a line of some three miles in length, but during the afternoon, in rain and oncoming darkness, the Germans launched fierce counter attacks and recaptured much of their lost territory. The British put in a new attack and by early dawn on 22nd September they had succeeded in retaking about a mile of the German trenches. It was during this savage fighting that Captain Edward Bethell fell leading his men.

Edward's commanding officer wrote in a condolence letter that he had been "immensely popular with men, even more so with the officers, and the keenest soldier I have ever known."

## **First Lieutenant Maurice John Bethell (1894-1916)**



Maurice had joined the Royal Navy like his father at the age of 13. He served on the battleships HMS Britannia and Dreadnought, the cruisers HMS Drake and Aurora and the destroyers HMS Bonetta and Nestor. He died heroically at the Battle of Jutland at the age of 22 (31 May 1916).

Maurice seems to have possessed sang froid and a way with words worthy of his great grandfather. The day before his death he had

gone ashore, almost like Drake playing bowls before the Armada, with the Honourable "Barry" (Edward) Bingham (son of Lord Clanmorris), who commanded HMS Nestor and its destroyer Division, for a "thoroughly enjoyable game" of golf.

Next afternoon, towards the end of the first phase of the Battle of Jutland, Nestor and a couple of her sister ships fought a desperate and confused skirmish successively against enemy torpedo boats (sinking two), a light cruiser, and battle cruisers. And then, badly battle damaged, she suddenly found herself confronting "a long line of grey ships". The main force of German battleships had arrived on the scene and Nestor was quickly sunk.

Most of the crew (but not Bethell) were picked up and made prisoners by the Germans. Commander Bingham received a VC and later became a Rear Admiral. Lieutenant Bethell received a posthumous Mention in Despatches. What upset his father was that this was largely based on Bingham's rather tailored version of what happened, as printed in his book Falklands, Jutland and the Bight, which has become the established version, being repeated for example in the recent Jutland 1916 by Steel and Hart. According to this version, when Nestor was sinking, and most of her boats were either full of smashed by German shellfire:

"... Bethell was standing beside me and I turned to him with the question, 'Now where shall we go?' His answer was only characteristic of that gallant spirit, "To Heaven, I trust, Sir" A moment later, as he stooped to assist a wounded signaller, he disappeared in the detonation of a bursting shell."

However, in an earlier version, which Bingham himself had written to Lady Bethell from a prisoner of war camp in Mainz, only a week after the battle, Maurice's heroic words were slightly different ('We'll go to Heaven, Sir'). Those exact words may scarcely matter, but then, in this version, Maurice did jump from the sinking ship (after Bingham). His sister Agatha added a hand-written comment to a typed copy of the original letter saying: "My father felt strongly that Captain Bingham (later awarded the VC) should have been the last to leave the ship and should



have ordered Maurice to have leave before him." The Bethell collection at Kings College contains nine letters from Admiral Bethell to the Admiralty (dated January to February 1919) over whether Maurice's heroism was worthy of a VC and a copy of Hansard from March of that year containing questions asked in Parliament on the matter.

There is a memorial to Maurice Bethell and his brother, Edward, in Combe St. Nicholas church.

(Research into the Bethell family started as a result of the inclusion in the church history section of the website of a photograph of the memorial to the Bethell brothers situated in the church. During 2007 it was noted that the Admiral and Lady Bethell's tombstone (it is possible that they were buried in a tomb rather than a grave) had sunk slightly. Research into the Admiral's background was being undertaken using the web. However, we were very fortunate in being provided with most of the material in this article by Carolyn Butler of Wadeford House who had commissioned research into the history of the house.)

David Lamb  
Combe St. Nicholas  
[lamb65@btinternet.com](mailto:lamb65@btinternet.com)  
July, 2007