

The Scampton Mystery

Rob Davis, Aerodromologist

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"Did you know," said the former air-gunner conspiratorially, after we had had the hangar doors open for about four hours, "that there was an RAF officer who was in league with a priest, who had a wireless transmitter in the steeple of his church, and they were sending secrets to the Germans?"

I was immediately interested. "Tell me more," I said, eagerly.

The air-gunner looked into his pint pot as if realising that he had drunk a little, and said a lot, too much. He shook his head slowly. "I shouldn't tell you really. It was a long time ago, just after the war began....."

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"But did you know," went on the WAAF, "that the Squadron Leader was arrested and executed on a charge of treason?"

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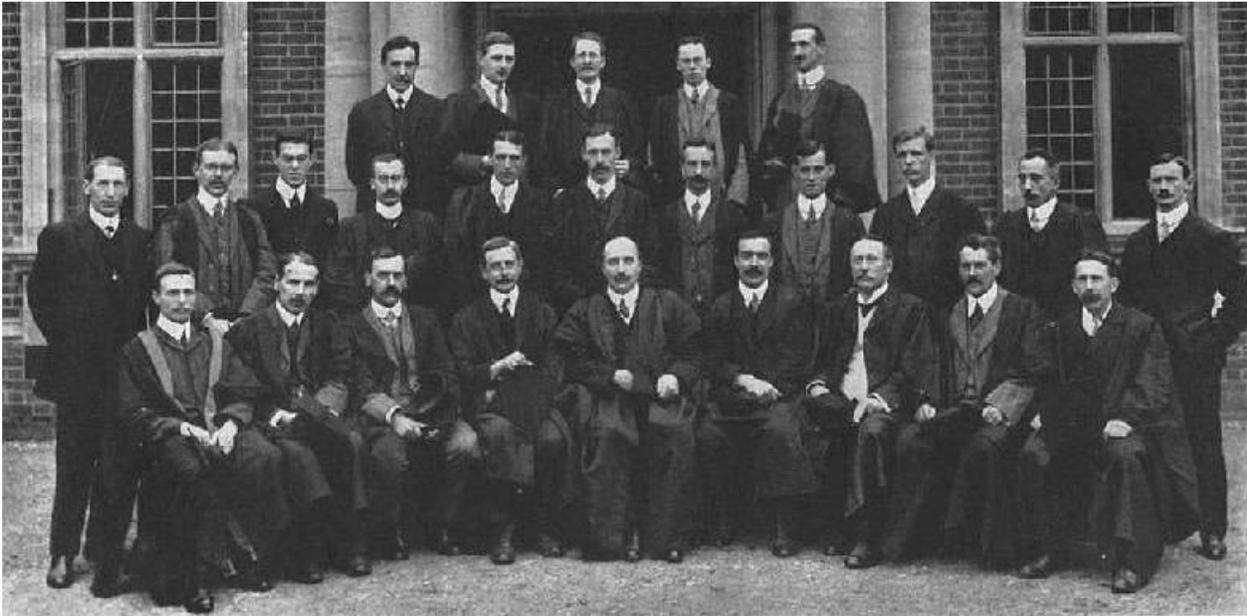
Legend is a curious thing. It grows stealthily around true stories, bending the core of their veracity, adding and discarding where it will. Like most legends, it has its roots in truth, and like most legends, it is eighty percent folklore. Did Robin Hood fight the Sheriff of Nottingham? Did King Arthur draw Excalibur from the stone? Could a parish priest and RAF officer be traitors, and transmit secrets to the enemy?

What I have come to think of as "The Scampton Mystery" is an intriguing series of events with its roots in the early days of British Fascism and the tips of its leaves permeating even into today's attitudes and happenings. The research for it took me far and wide over six years, and even today there are frustrating gaps in the story, some of which will not be filled until well into the next century.

It's beginnings lie in Sir Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts, the British Union of Fascists (BUF). I can remember my late father describing Mosley as "a blackguard and a traitor" and until I knew better, I had the same uninformed opinion. Whilst delving into the entire concept and beliefs of the Blackshirt organisation, I was ready to be convinced of the opposite.

One of Mosley's keen supporters from the early days was a cleric, Harold Eustace Bertram Nye. From a distinguished ecclesiastical background, Fr Nye was popular and highly regarded in Scampton as an old fashioned gentleman; kind, generous, warm hearted, who took local children on day trips and seaside holidays. Having taken his BA in 1912 at Dublin, he held ministerial positions at Heigham, Matlock and Chelmsford before becoming Rector of Scampton

in 1924. How he came to be a follower of Mosley is unknown, but he was a regular contributor to the BUF's newspaper "Action" which as late as July 1939 published his article entitled "Can Christians Seek Friendship With Atheistic Russia?"



In this photo, Nye is standing, back row, and very appropriately, on the far right.

Fr Nye's parishioners, perhaps with village clannishness, looked upon him as a harmless political eccentric. Scampton was a backwater in those days and, on reflection, it is doubtful that any of the inhabitants actually read "Action" but Fr Nye's political leanings were not taken seriously in the parish until after the outbreak of war.

For months after hostilities were declared, chaos reigned. Everyone was on their toes, keeping guard against enemy paratroopers and supposed fifth columnists, and there was general high feeling, naturally enough against Hitler and the Germans, but also against the British Union members. Mosley was the lightning-rod for adverse public opinion and he and his supporters suffered in the tremendous jingoistic spirit of the time, during which there was little direct wartime action. This period, known as the "Phony War," was anything but that for the Blackshirts.

As the situation in France worsened during the early summer of 1940 and the Germans closed on Dunkirk, on May 23rd the Government overnight passed the notorious Section 18b amendment to the Defence of the Realm Act. This gave them the power to arrest and imprison virtually anyone they wished, without trial or appeal. Englishmen and -women loyal to King and Country were unfairly hustled away to internment camps, where many languished for years, unable to secure either fair trial or release until the tide of the war had turned and they were no longer considered to be security risks.

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Just a few hundred yards up the road from the Rectory is Scampton Aerodrome, where as soon as war was declared, George Lerwill, Johnnie Chick, Oscar Bridgeman, Jamie Pitcairn-Hill and other stalwarts of 49 and 83 Squadrons were flying their twin-engined Handley Page Hampden bombers and feeling their way into bomber operations. (Fellow Bomber Command devotees will know that Guy Gibson cut his operational teeth flying Hampdens with them from Scampton in

these early pioneering days.) At that time, the Bomber Barons were often dropping nothing more offensive than leaflets, although one ex-gunner I spoke to had the interesting habit of removing well-appointed bricks from the airmen's urinal wall and pushing them out over German towns! Nicknamed the "Flying Tadpole" on account of its narrow fuselage and general spindly appearance, the Hampden was a popular, reliable and sturdy aeroplane, then approaching the height of its success.

At Scampton at this time and working on the Intelligence and Operations (Int/Ops) staff was a Squadron Leader John Wallace Thomson, a Scot, from his rank presumably a career officer. Active on the General Duties staff from early September 1939, he had been posted in from Cranwell in mid September and was on the staff of Squadron Leader Pitt, the head of Int/Ops at the time. One witness told me that Thomson wore the Military Cross ribbon, but I have found no evidence of such being awarded, although he was Mentioned in Despatches on April 4th 1917, then a Second Lieutenant with 11 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps.

From the London Gazette, 18th August 1931:-

The undermentioned Flying Officers are promoted to the rank of Flight Lieutenant.

12th Aug. 1931 :—

John Wallace THOMSON.

Thomson is described as "a greying figure in the Anthony Eden mould" and was also a well known BUF member, although there is nothing to suggest that he submitted articles for "Action." He had no connection with the Lincoln Branch of the BUF, so it seems certain that he belonged to another Branch.

It is highly likely that Thomson knew Nye. As an active BUF member, he would read "Action" and as Nye's writings were regularly included in that publication, it is almost certain that he knew of Nye, if not by sight, then by name. Whether or not the two met whilst Thomson was posted to Scampton is no more than a guess, and I leave the reader to form his own opinion. It seems likely that they did, as the Rectory and the Aerodrome are very close and the two men were ardent BUF members. It would be natural for them to meet, if only on an informal, private basis.

In his autobiography "The Last Escaper" (Duckworth Overlook, 2016, ISBN 9-780715-650219), Peter Tunstall, a Hampden pilot serving with 61 Squadron at Scampton in September / October 1939, states that whilst playing a prank on his Station-Commander – with a view to being posted to a different unit to alleviate the boredom of the phoney war period : *"Taking my father's ancient Colt .45 revolver, with two other rascals sniggering in the background, I made my way down to the Officers' Married Quarters. Outside the Station-Commander's house, I banged off two shots safely down into a flowerbed and shouted that I had just chased a pair of intruders away. This excuse was all part of the fun because of crazy rumours going around about local Fascist sympathisers (including an inoffensive parish parson) who were supposedly using kids' fireworks to identify our airfield at night for the benefit of enemy bombers. Even my flight-commander, George Lerwill, was, at one stage, caught up in all that crazy nonsense."*

(In the course of my research, I heard of an incident whereby a visiting General, an American - then a neutral country - attempted to steal an RAF target map. As the rule concerning the bombing of privately owned factories had just been rescinded, this action was taken very seriously, and the General had to be forcibly restrained from removing the map.)

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In late October 1939, 49 Squadron raided enemy territory and as weather prevented them from landing back at Scampton, the squadron spent the night away from base. A day or so later, in early November 1939, Flight Lieutenant George Lerwill was in his office catching up on paperwork when word was sent that a couple of plain clothes men would like to see him.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

The two men showed no credentials, but as they had passed through the Main Gate - especially vigilant in the present conditions - F/Lt Lerwill assumed that they were Secret Servicemen.

"Do you own a Hillman car, registration no DT9419?"

F/Lt Lerwill nodded. "Yes, and I'm sorry that the tax has run out, but I've been busy flying. I promise I'll do it tomorrow."

"It's not the tax," replied one of the men. "Who was using your car a couple of nights ago?"

"Nobody. It's kept locked up in my garage."

"Where were you?"

"Flying operations. We all landed away, so nobody had the car."

The man went on, "We have reason to believe that a tall RAF officer used your car to visit the Scampton Rectory. Do you know who that officer might be?"

"Not the least idea, sorry; it certainly wasn't me. Now what's this about, anyway?"

"Never mind. And forget that we ever spoke to you."

F/Lt Lerwill's operational flying soon put the visit out of his mind. I have discovered no evidence to suggest that at the time, any more came of the matter.

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Once the 18b amendment to the Defence of the Realm Act had been passed some seven months later, the Government made a rapid swoop on known Blackshirts and anyone else considered to be a security risk, real, potential, or imagined. In the weeks immediately following, some 700 or 800 BUF members were arrested and detained.

In the first days of July 1940, the newly-formed Scampton Local Defence Volunteers (at the end of July, to be renamed the Home Guard) were called out by more men in plain clothes. The corporal in charge of the LDV unit, a brisk, tough-but-fair type, and a former boy soldier from the First World War, was instructed to escort the plain clothes men to the Rectory, where his platoon was present when Fr Nye was arrested.

Nye, branded guilty without trial, was sent to several internment camps, ending up at Peel Camp in the Isle of Man. For a man of his nature, a scholarly ecclesiastical gentleman, it must all have been a terrific shock.

The Secret Service pounced on Thomson, but what happened to him is less clear. I suggest that the RAF's own internal security people took control of him, because on June 19th 1940 he was posted to Uxbridge - a bad sign - under a Judiciary notice, where he was Court Martialled.

The nature of his offence and the outcome are still regarded as classified, but he finished up at Huyton Camp near Liverpool, a newly built Council estate which was turned into an Internment Camp by the simple expedient of throwing a barbed wire fence around it. Here conditions were strict and sometimes harsh.

Many BUF members both here and elsewhere, loyal to King and Country, were cruelly treated by unsympathetic Army guards and interrogators, and their willingness to volunteer for military, medical or non-combatant duties was often ignored. Nevertheless, many Blackshirts served actively in the Services and no small number distinguished themselves, especially in the RAF. In fact the very first casualties of the War included two BUF members, AC2s Kenneth Day and George Brocking, killed in action in a 9 Squadron Vickers Wellington bomber on a daylight raid over Brunsbuttel, September 4th, 1939.

After diligent research, I traced Frank Towndrow, the Scampton RAF padre from this period. He was happy to chat about the old days, and I gradually steered the conversation onto the Scampton Mystery. "What, old Nye?" said the voice on the other end of the line. "He was always regarded as suspicious, you know. Lights flashing, supposed messages, that sort of thing." Then there was a longish pause. "I don't want to talk about it," he went on, and hung up.

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F/Lt Lerwill survived Operational flying and years later was posted to Upper Heyford, where he chanced to meet a WAAF officer who he knew from the Scampton days. They talked of "do you remember so-and-so" and for many names there was only a mention of a final raid, or a flying accident. Suddenly the WAAF officer asked if he remembered S/Ldr Thomson.

"Yes, of course. He was on the Intelligence staff."

"But did you know that he was arrested and executed, on a charge of treason?"

It was only then that the penny dropped, and he recalled the visit by the two Secret Servicemen. For many years thereafter, he wondered if there had been any connection between the two events.

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Fifty years later I visited Scampton, determined to discover the truth of the matter and to perhaps clear Fr Nye's name if he had been so unfairly treated, or indeed, to see if anyone there remembered anything of the matter.

The vergier, who had not long moved to the area, told me that there was no Rector at present, the post being temporarily vacant, and he showed me a list of previous incumbents. There was a definite gap between 1939 and 1941, during which time services were held by the RAF padre from Scampton. Fr Nye's period of service was clearly identified either side of the gap, and the vergier somewhat cautiously informed me that there was something odd about Nye's disappearance, and that he had returned from somewhere on the Isle of Man in mid 1941.

It was better not to enquire too closely, he told me, as there was still ill feeling in the village and relations were still alive. I left him with a minor donation, and seeking further enlightenment, asked if there were any parishioners old enough to help me further.

In the light of his warning I ought to have known better, but in best Bomber Command tradition, I pressed on. The first man I called on was bucolic and, at first, friendly. I revealed my interest in the aerodrome, and we chatted amiably for ten minutes about flying and crashes. When I steered the conversation around to Nye, I was surprised at the strength of his reaction.

"Don't want to hear a word against him. He was a gentleman. Now get off my property."

A neat bungalow at the other end of the village turned up John Willars, another man who had lived in the village at the time, and had been an active parishioner during the war years. "Nye was all right really," he told me when I managed to convince him that I was a bona fide researcher, and not a sensationalist. "He was very shabbily treated by the Government, and nobody thought the worse of him when he came back. He just picked up where he left off. That story about a wireless transmitter is ridiculous! Nye would never have done that."

I described Nye's involvement with the BUF and his contributions to their newsletter. "Bah!" he said. "Nobody read that thing. All traitors, weren't they, the Mosley lot? They didn't want to fight. Still, Nye was all right."

Next I travelled to the former Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) corporal's house, in the next village. This man, Tom Foreman, had been present at Nye's arrest. A true old soldier, still stiff and correct in his late 70s, he clammed up as soon as I mentioned my inquiry. Standing on his doorstep for almost two hours, I gradually chipped away at his guarded reserve, learning of Nye's arrest and the fact that the LDV had been asked to watch the house, on suspicion of the Rector signalling. This 'signalling' was probably caused by a poor blackout, but all the same, suspicion was there from the first days of the war.

"It seemed odd to us. Nye was harmless. I won't hear a word against him. He did sometimes let his politics come through into his sermons, and I suppose someone blew the gaff."

Bearing in mind the nationwide fear of fifth columnists, "blowing the gaff" seems the most likely explanation; but remember that Nye was well known as a BUF member, and would have been on a list of those likely to be detained under any Governmental restrictions, such as the hurriedly-passed catch-all Section 18b amendment.

Fifty years on, the old soldier wouldn't really unbend; Careless Talk *still* Cost Lives. We parted on fairly friendly terms, but I am sure that he hadn't told me the half of it.

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After this, I turned my attentions back to S/Ldr Thomson, and now that I was starting to delve into official records, curiously enough they began to disappear. Certain documents at the Public Records Office, Kew, were mysteriously unavailable. It was at this time that I began to think that maybe there had in fact been something untoward going on between Nye and Thomson, and the authorities were still sensitive about it.

Having written to my MP, some wheels turned and I had a letter from the RAF telling me that Thomson had been Court Martialled and interned, but also that he had been released in 1941

after successful appeal. He had then left the Air Force. His confidential file was of course closed, and the Court Martial file was closed for 75 years, that is, until 2014.

Other letters to official bodies went missing, were replied to six months later, or not at all. The RAF legal branch and MOD library had "never heard of the Defence of the Realm Act" and referred me to non-existent extension numbers. I never did find a print of Section 18b.

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Next I re-investigated Nye through the former members of the British Union of Fascists. This organisation was proscribed by the Government in June 1940, and therefore no longer exists. You may be surprised to learn, however, that "The Friends Of O.M." is alive, if politically inactive. Their purpose is to bind together all those who have supported Sir Oswald Mosley's policies and ideals, and to expose what they regard as falsehoods laid at Mosley's door.

They are a grand bunch of chaps whose feelings still rankle over their treatment, and to whom Sir Oswald - to whom they refer reverently as O.M. - is something like a God. They are helpful, informative, and keen.

I was quite mesmerised by a recording of one of Mosley's speeches. He was, incidentally, trained as a First World War Royal Flying Corps pilot having transferred to the RFC from the 16th Queen's Light Dragoons. A flying crash in May 1915 worsened a previous ankle injury and although he was recalled to his Army unit, he was later medically discharged.

He spoke a lot of sense, and his presence was very powerful. I suppose all such orators are the same. From attending some of their meetings, I became convinced that the "Friends of O.M." are still looking for a Messiah. Many former BUF members remembered both Nye and Thomson, and I had accounts from eyewitnesses at Huyton and Peel Camps.

Whilst in the lavatory at one of their events to which I had been invited, I was approached by two well-built men who advised me not to ask around of the people present on the subject of Nye and Thomson. They were not unfriendly, but the message was perfectly clear.

Enquiries with various official ecclesiastical bodies turned up no useful information. It was likely that the local Bishop would deal with such matters in private and without correspondence, and so that avenue was a dead end. Like many official organisations, they tell you only what they want to tell you; you must accept it, for there is little recourse.

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What did actually happen at Scampton in those dark days? The reader must consider the facts and make up his own mind. There is no concrete evidence to suggest that F/Lt Lerwill's car was actually borrowed by S/Ldr Thomson, and this part of the Mystery is unresolved.

I put forward the theory that Nye urgently needed to contact Thomson, perhaps to pass on an vital BUF message. In those days the Rectory was one of the few Scampton households with a telephone. Nye rang Scampton Aerodrome to speak to Thomson, and unable to openly discuss the crux of the reason for his call, arranged a meeting with him. Thomson, being involved with Operational planning, would know that F/Lt Lerwill was away, and stealthily borrowed the Hillman car to call at the Rectory, replacing the vehicle afterwards.

Word reached upwards of the tall officer's visit to the Rectory, along with the car's registration number. The Germans were poised to invade, and fervour and vigilance ran high. Once the necessary legislation was in force, down come the Secret Service on Nye, knowing that he was a fervent Blackshirt, and perhaps tipped off by a parishioner or villager with a grudge. In the days of manually operated telephone exchanges, it is even possible that a telephone call from the Rectory was overheard at the local exchange. The RAF switchboard was naturally monitored by Service telephonists, with a log kept of calls in and out. So the balloon went up on Thomson as well.

Once things had cooled down, the two of them were released, Nye sooner, Thomson much later. Thomson's son was an officer in a Scottish Regiment which by sheer coincidence happened to be on garrison duty at Huyton when his father was released. He walked through the Huyton Camp security gate and straight into the Jocks' Officers' Mess and was given a meal, as the guest of his son! He then retired to Barnet, where he lived in a healthy financial state. I haven't been able to trace either him or his son, but my research certainly proves that he was not executed.

Shortly after Thomson left Huyton, the Camp was closed and the entire contingent transferred to the more stringent confinement at Peel Camp on the Isle of Man.

According to official records, Nye was released on August 25th, 1940. However, he did not return to Scampton until Spring 1941, and what he was doing in the meanwhile is unknown. It is likely that he was convalescing after his detention. He continued as Rector until he left in 1947. Thereafter he lived in Lytham St Anne's until his death in the late 1970s. I believe that this was his birthplace, as many of his relatives still live in the area.

I traced his daughter Beryl, assuring her that I wasn't passing judgement on anyone and wished only to know the truth of the matter, but she wouldn't talk. It is certainly possible that she was also detained at the time, but this is not confirmed. No response was received from any of his other relatives, some of whom denied any association with him.

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A curious postscript to F/Lt Lerwill's story follows, years after the war ended. He was serving in the Pacific as a Wing Commander in Intelligence by then and remembering the Thomson incident, asked around, to be told that it didn't happen and that he had better forget it. The RAF, it seems, would prefer to forget it, too, although F/Lt Lerwill retired as a well decorated Group Captain.

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In conclusion, I can't believe that Nye and Thomson were in league with anyone, other than their mutual involvement with the Blackshirts. Nye's character is otherwise unimpeachable and if Thomson had been seriously implicated, he would have been detained immediately on arrival at Uxbridge; yet he is rostered for quite normal and ordinary duties there.

I have heard that after the war's end, Nye related his story in a newspaper article, but unfortunately I have not been able to trace a copy of this.

I am quite satisfied that the story of the Rector and the Squadron Leader being in league and passing secrets to the enemy is just that - pure fiction, and runaway local legend. All the

evidence I have unearthed points towards a scaremongering effect and general public and governmental feelings against the BUF, with many innocuous political eccentrics caught in the furore of those days when England stood alone against Nazi oppression.

Thomson was definitely Court Martialled, but I suggest that this was for an offence unconnected with his BUF membership. Nye, however, never faced a British Court and was never granted a hearing, contrary to the basic tenets of British Justice. One can understand the resultant ill feeling on the part of his family and former parishioners only too well.

Even today, the aftermath lingers. I doubt that we will ever know the full facts of the Scampton Mystery, and I welcome any further information.

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Group Captain George Lerwill DFC RAF (Ret'd)

Nigel Lawson (at the time, the Rt Hon, MP)

Sources of Information:-

Personal interviews with those concerned

Public Records Office, Kew

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"We Marched With Mosley" an unpublished manuscript by Richard Reynell Bellamy

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Crockfords Clerical Directory, 1939 onwards