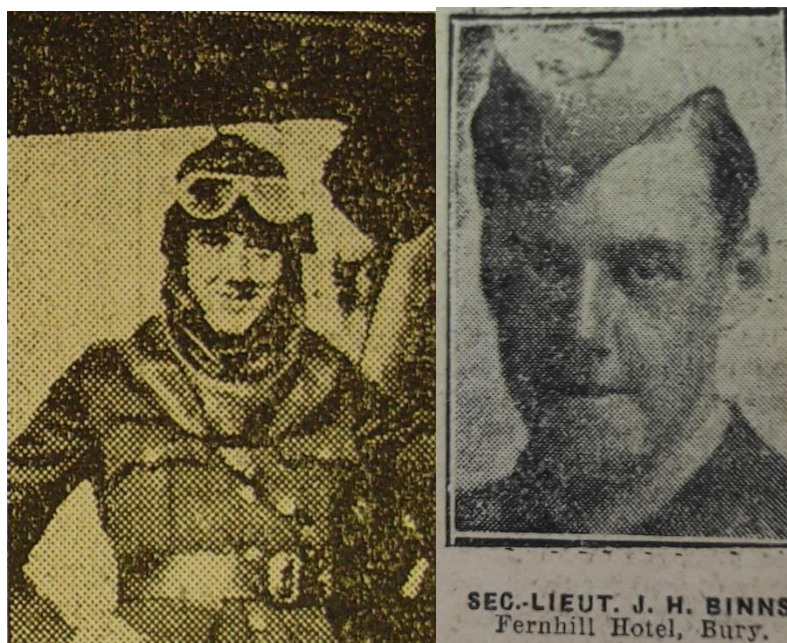


Bury Grammar School Centenary Roll of Honour

Second Lieutenant John Houghton Binns, 29th Squadron Royal Flying Corps, died 4th September 1917 aged 19



Jack Binns was born in Bury on 20th December 1897, the only son of James Binns and his wife Mary, nee Houghton. At the time of the 1901 Census the family was living at 51 Vernon Street, Bury and James Binns was working as a fitter in an iron works. However, he moved into the licensing trade and by 1910 James was the landlord of the Freeman's Inn in Heywood. Later he and his wife ran the Fernhill Hotel in Hornby Street, Bury. Jack Binns had interesting artistic relatives. His maternal uncle Will Houghton, who also attended Bury Grammar School, was a noted newspaper and magazine cartoonist before the Great War. His uncle John Binns was a musician and comedian who performed in Britain, the USA and Australia and became a naturalized American citizen in 1886. He often performed as part of a musical comedy duo called 'Binns and Binns' with his son Joe. He eventually retired to Bury, where he died in 1921. After early education at St John's Elementary School in Bury, Jack Binns joined Form Lower VB of Bury Grammar School on 30th April 1910. The school records are not completely clear on this but it appears that he originally left BGS on 27th July 1911 only to return and stay on until 24th July 1915 when he was in the Lower Sixth. He was a member of Hulme House and a cadet in the school's Officers' Training Corps. Jack gained 3rd Class Honours in the Oxford Senior Local Examinations in 1915 and a 1st Class in the Lancashire and Cheshire Institutes Examination in French. The school register records that he left for the College of Music in Manchester.

In March 1916 Jack's mother Mary died, only a few weeks before her brother, BGS old boy Will Houghton, was killed fighting in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). On 5th June 1916 Jack enlisted as a Private in the Public Schools' Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, a unit in which a number of other BGS old boys served. He was sent to Edinburgh for training where he was promoted to Corporal.

Right: Jack's uncle and fellow BGS old boy, 2nd Lieutenant Will Houghton, who was killed in April 1916.



Jack later attended the Royal Flying Corps' Cadet Schools at Denham and Oxford. The RFC was at this time part of the army, combining with the Royal Naval Air Service to form the independent Royal Air Force on 1st April 1918. Jack was commissioned as a second Lieutenant on 3rd May 1917 and obtained his pilot's wings on 25th June. Meanwhile, in March 1917, twelve months after his wife's death, his father James had married a 30 year-old widow called Polly Oates.

Jack was posted to No. 29 Squadron Royal Flying Corps, stationed at an airfield near Poperinge in Belgium. At this period of the war the squadron was equipped with French-built Nieuport 17 fighter aircraft. The Nieuport 17, introduced in 1916, was popular with RFC pilots and was the aircraft flown by some of the top British aces such as Captain Albert Ball VC. However, by mid-1917 it was losing its advantage against new German aircraft such as the Albatros DIII.



Single seater Nieuport 17 fighter aircraft A6788, in the colours of 29 Squadron RFC, similar to that flown by 2nd Lieutenant Jack Binns.

29 Squadron was heavily involved in supporting the British Passchendaele offensive, which began on 31st July 1917. In the early morning of Tuesday 4th September 1917, Jack Binns took off from Poperinge on an offensive patrol, looking for enemy aircraft. At about 7-05am he was last seen 'in combat' at 3,000 feet over the village of Zonnebeke. He was shot down by an Albatros DIII flown by German air ace Leutnant Kurt Wusthoff of *Jagdstaffel* (Hunter Squadron) 4, part of Baron Manfred Von Richthofen's famous 'Flying Circus.' This was the 10th of 27 victories credited to the 20 year-old Kurt Wusthoff.



Left: A postcard showing Leutnant Kurt Wusthoff, who shot down Jack Binns and another RFC pilot on 4th September 1917. In Germany air aces became popular celebrities. Above: Kurt Wusthoff standing beside an Albatros DIII fighter, the type of plane in which he scored most of his 27 victories.

Leutnant Wusthoff went on to shoot down an RFC Sopwith Camel a couple of hours later, making up two of his 14 victories in September 1917 alone. On 22nd November 1917 he became the second-youngest winner of the coveted *Pour Le Merite* award ('The Blue Max') and was soon put in command of his squadron. However, his youthful arrogance made him unpopular with his fellow pilots. He also began suffering from stomach problems and 'nervous disorders' caused by the stress of combat and his run of victories dried up. In March 1918, after only two months in charge, he was relieved of his command by his superior Manfred Von Richthofen. On 16th June 1918, his aircraft was forced down behind allied lines by a group of four RAF fighters. Wusthoff was severely wounded in the legs and spent the rest of the war in a French prison camp. After returning from captivity, Kurt Wusthoff resumed flying and died while performing an aerobatic display near Dresden in July 1926.

On Wednesday 5th September 1917 James Binns received a telegram at the Fernhill Hotel in Bury stating that Jack had been missing since the day before. The next day, a letter from Captain C.H. Briggs arrived:

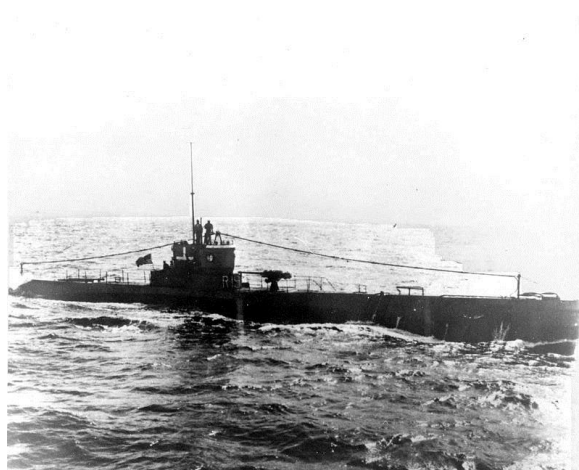
'In confirmation of the telegram I sent you this morning, I beg to state that we have no further news to hand as regards his ultimate fate. A British machine was seen to be forced down at 7-6 this morning in a certain direction on the other side of the lines., As we have heard nothing more about your son, Lieutenant J.H. Binns, of this Squadron, we can only presume that he must have been compelled to alight in the enemy's lines.'

On 28th November 1917, Jack Binns was officially presumed to have been killed. Crashing behind enemy lines he had died of his wounds and was originally buried by the Germans in De Ruiter Military Cemetery at Colliemolenhoek near Roulers (Roeselare). After the war his body was moved to Tyne Cot Cemetery, where he lies at Grave Reference LIX.E.28. He is the only BGS old boy known to be buried here, in the largest Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery in the world, although seven former pupils are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing.



The grave of Jack Binns at Tyne Cot Cemetery

As far as is known, Will Houghton and Jack Binns are the only uncle and nephew to be commemorated on the Bury Grammar School war memorials. On 12th September 1917, only six days after Jack's death, his step-mother Polly gave birth to a son, who was named James Landless Binns. On 21st June 1942, Acting Leading Stoker James L. Binns was a member of the crew of HM Submarine P-514, which was sailing off the coast of Newfoundland when it was accidentally rammed by a Canadian minesweeper, HMCS 'Georgian', which mistook it for an enemy U-Boat. P-514 was lost with all 42 of its crew, including James Binns. Jack's half-brother has no grave but the sea and is commemorated on the Chatham Naval Memorial in Kent.



The submarine HMS P-514, in which Jack Binns' step-brother James died in June 1942.

Sources: Bury Grammar School Archives; UK Censuses; Commonwealth War Graves Commission; 'Bury Times'; RAF Historical Section; St John and St Mark Church, Bury; Members of 'Ancestry.co.uk' website; 'The Aerodrome' website; Contributors to the Great War Forum.

Written by M.J. Hone 2017