



John Frederick Lait

928878 Sergeant, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

He was killed when his plane was shot down on 13th January 1942, aged 19

John is commemorated on the Malta Memorial



Whilst the 20's and 30's may not have been quite the land fit for heroes that was promised to the men who returned from the Great War, and was still, to modern eyes, quite a stratified society, it was a time of more social mobility than had been seen for centuries. Ordinary young men had more leisure time and could fit social activities around their education and work life. John's parents were Charles and Dorothy Lait nee Ling, they appeared in Crown Court (Briar Walk) in the 1939 census when 46 years old Charles was described as being a butcher, slaughter man and meat salesman; a useful decent member of society. Their two daughters, Jean and Betty were also in the household.

John Lait was a bright lad who, along with other bright Harleston lads, middle and working class, made it to the Bungay Grammar School for his education and was of a generation of lads who were able to take advantage of the increased choices of life and leisure opportunities that became available in the town in the first half of the 20th Century.

John's grandfather, John Lait Snr was the son of an agricultural labourer from Weeley, in Essex. This chap, Samuel Lait and his wife, Susannah, had one daughter followed by at least 7 sons, seems to be a family good at churning out boys! John Snr, unlike his older brothers, had aspirations beyond



working on the land and 1881 found him lodging with 17 other men in Southwark. Most of the men were, like John Snr, young, but unlike him, mostly came from the home counties. Most worked for drapers, but John was a 'Domestic House Porter'.

However, being an ambitious young fellow, he joined the railways, I suspect that it was in Ipswich that John met his wife, Harriet Clarke, who in 1881 was working as a cook in one of the more modest villas on Anglesea Rd Ipswich.

*Number 20 Anglesea Road,
Harriet's workplace in 1881*

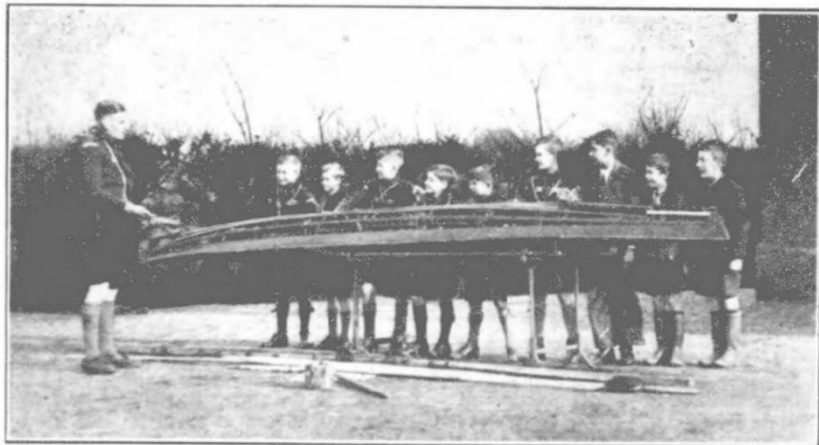
The young couple married in Suffolk in 1887, by which time Harriet's parents had moved from her home town of Diss to Palgrave. John Snr soon had a job as a railway carriage examiner, (I think this is the equivalent of a ticket inspector). When the couple appeared in 1891, they were living on Purplet St in Ipswich, a terrace of modest houses not too far from the station which probably explains why so many of their neighbours were also employed by the railway. 10 years later on and they were still in Purplet St with their first 4 sons. In the 1911 census the family, with 5 incomes coming in, had moved to a larger 6 room house. Between the 1901 and 1911 census, two of these sons had changed the names they gave to the census taker – demonstrating another of the pitfalls for the family history researcher. This census reveals they'd had 6 sons, the four oldest being born within 4 years of each other. One son died, the youngest son, born when his mother was 43, in the harsh way of the time, was described in 1911 at the age of 9 as having been an imbecile since birth. I suspect the son that had died may have been their first son, a Harry Reeve Lait died as a baby in 1889, two years after their marriage and 2 years before the birth of their oldest surviving son.

Whilst his older brothers may have changed the names they used, their third (fourth?) son appeared under the same name, Charles, in both censuses and it is this chap who started off his career as a butcher's apprentice in Ipswich and was to become the father of our Harleston Hero, having named his son, John, after his own father. Quite when Charles moved up to Harleston, I don't know, but he married Doreen Ling in 1922. She was a middle daughter of a shoemaker, Frederick Ling from Bungay, one of 8 siblings.

Doreen's father, the Cookley-born Frederick Ling was already bound as an apprentice in 1881, when he was only 13 years old. In contrast to the Laits and their numerous sons, he was actually his parents only son, arriving 7 years after the birth of their 6th daughter! Very much a tail ender, he was, in 1881, the only child still at home and by 1891 had moved into Bungay with his widowed mother, shortly after that census he married Amelia Bedwell, the daughter of a Bungay Bricklayer and went on to build his own family including Doreen who was to become the mother of our Harleston Hero.

Harleston Hero, John Frederick Ling, was their oldest son, birth registered in Thetford in 1923. Four years later and his sister Jean was born, also in Thetford, but the family had made it to Depwade by the time their youngest daughter Betty was born in 1931. In 1933 John's athletic prowess became apparent when he won the age 9-10, 60 yd sprint at the district sports and was also on the winning relay team

John may have wound up in the air force but he started afloat with the newly formed Harleston Sea Scouts. This was a pet project of the Elementary School Headmaster who had naval connections.



Harleston Sea Scouts with the Canoe they are building under the direction of their Troop-leader, Mr. C. J. Rhodes.
Photo: J. Perfitt, Harleston.

In 1936 the patrol leaders were J. Drake, L. Turner, our John Lait and K. Kerrison. John's fellow patrol leader, Lionel Leslie Turner, died a year after John Lait, also aged 19, the third patrol leader (Harry) John Drake, died in 1944 aged 21. With painful irony, in 1937 the Harleston Sea scouts were looking forward to a trip to Germany in the summer.

The Sea Scouts in 1937 – the two older boys are probably the patrol leaders, 3 out of four of whom died in the second world war.

That year all three of the boys, John Lait, John Drake and Lionel Turner performed together in the Sea Scouts first concert and in 1938, John Lait and the Drake boys were again giving it their all in their second annual concert at the Corn Exchange – a large hall and a large audience. I have been to

CONCERT.

Arranged by the Rev. H. S. Bally, M.C. a variety programme was given in the Hut on Friday by the Harleston Troop of Sea Scouts under Scoutmaster C. J. Rhodes and Assistant Scoutmaster M. Riches. Mrs. C. J. Rhodes was the accompanist. An opening chorus by the Troop was followed by various amusing sketches, etc., including "The Newspaper Reporter," played by Scouts J. Drake, Lait and L. Turner, and "The Cannibal" costumes, swords etc., having been made by the Troop. Mr. M. Riches on his piano-accordion led the company and audience in community singing, and also sang a cowboy song. J. Drake was the soloist in a Wild West item, and Scouts Bush and Hart evoked much laughter as "The Drummer and the Cook." The Scoutmaster gave an item "Song Titles" with interruptions from the Troop and W. Thurston in an impersonation of Claude Dampier was a great success. B. Drake also sang and a finale "Good-night, Rushall" concluded a very successful entertainment. As a result the Rushall Sports Fund will benefit.

a modern-day scout production and find it impossible to put myself in the seats of the audience knowing what we know now. Three lads, Drake, Lait and Turner, performed an 'amusing sketch'; all 3 lads were to die in the second world war.

*Diss Express
24 Dec 1937*



On the eve of war Lait was playing for the Harleston Magpies, once again with some of his friends from the Sea Scouts. He also pitched up to give a few creditable performances for the Tennis Club. In 1940 he had made it to the dizzy heights of the Tennis Club Committee – I wonder if it was his idea that members of H.M.Forces got a discounted rate?

HARLESTON PARENT AT MALTA

His Impressions

An interesting first hand account of the unveiling by the Queen on Monday week of the Memorial at Floriani, Malta, to the Commonwealth Airmen who gave their lives in the defence of Malta and the Mediterranean Sea routes, has been given by Mr. Charles Lait, of No. 10 The Pre-Fabs, Harleston, who was one of the several East Anglian parents present at the ceremony. The Memorial is a fifty-foot marble column surmounted by an eagle. One of those airmen was Wireless-Air Gunner Sergt. John Lait, R.A.F., only son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Lait, who early in 1942 was reported missing when a Blenheim bomber failed to return to its war-time base. Sgt. Lait, a former Bungay Grammar School boy, first went into action when he was only 18 years old.

By the time of the 1939 register, the family were living in the Crown Yard although at some point after the war, the parents moved to No10 the Pre-Fabs, appearing there in 1954. Pre-fabs were 'pre-fabricated' buildings that could be quickly thrown up and were a necessary solution to the post war housing crisis although I had not realised Harleston had them! The couple had not moved far, the pre-fabs were just a little further up Mendham Lane, only a hundred yards or so from The Crown, roughly where the sheltered bungalows now stand.

Diss Express
14 May 1954

We know of this as, in 1954, Charles Lait flew to Malta to attend the unveiling of the Memorial at Floriani, Malta, that had been erected to honour those who gave their lives in the defence of Malta and the Mediterranean Sea Routes.

Lait and a number of the other parents, flew from London on a Saturday afternoon arriving in Malta after a 7-hour flight. Sunday was spent at church and touring the island of Malta whilst Monday was

the true start of the festivities. Early in the morning, there was a fly past of planes from the Australian and New Zealand Air Forces together with Royal Navy Aircraft whilst

'From the belfries and steeples of Malta churches came a paean of welcome as the bells rang out'

This welcome was not just for the relatives of the fallen but was also to greet the Royal Yacht steaming into the Harbour bearing the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. At the actual unveiling of the Memoria, our hero's father was only 5 rows away from the dais upon which the Royal couple stood before the Queen addressed those come to mark the commemoration of their relatives.



The Queen then firstly released the Union flag covering the central inscription followed by the Air Force flags covering the names on the plaque. Wreaths were then laid including one by Charles Lait whilst the R.A.F. band played before the Queen engaged in an informal meet and greet with a number of the relatives. As she moved off the attendees were ushered to the monument.

After the serious element of the day, a polo match was held for the entertainment of the visitors (although the Duke who was listed to attend was unable to do so) followed by a concert on board the T.S.S. Mediterranean.

Mr Lait left the Island the following day, arriving back at "his pre-fab home at Harleston in the early hours of Wednesday week. Five hours later he had re-commenced work at a butcher's shop in the town."

In the column adjoining the report of Lait's adventures on Malta was a report of "the annual dinner of the Harleston Town Football Club, held in the first-floor room at the new Memorial Pavilion on the Recreation Grounds on Thursday week. Before the commencement of the toasts as silent tribute was observed to the men of the town and district who fell in the two world wars", doubtless many there included those three young sea scouts who had flung themselves into life, social and sporting in those precious years before 1939, and who were to perish in Europe, North Africa and the Mediterranean within a few short years.

The deaths of any and all young men who die prematurely is a tragedy for their friends, relatives and community. Somehow, seeing a report of three of the men who appear on our war memorial also appearing together as boys in a comedy sketch makes the losses even more poignant.