

A Felixstowe Friendship

Compiled by Anne Williamson

A scattering of letters between Captain C.O. Whitfield and HW from 1918 to 1940

I have known about these letters for some time but due to a 'local difficulty' was unable to obtain permission to use them. However, both Captain Whitfield and his brother are now deceased, and I was extremely pleased last year to receive out of the blue copies of these letters from their nephew, Edward Charles Rixon, with full permission to use them – a most generous gesture. (The actual copyright belongs of course to the HW Literary Estate.)

Although of little importance in the overall scheme of things within HW's life – they reveal mainly HW's normal mode of nostalgia and angst – all such 'scridricks' help to illumine his life and indeed his writings. Above that, it is one of those strange little coincidences that I often refer to that these letters should appear in this issue, as they complement and indeed confirm some of Mike Maloney's findings.

Who was Capt. Whitfield, and why are there letters between him and HW? The answer lies in the title of this piece. They met at Felixstowe. I did make reference to him in my war volume but here I am able to enlarge on his life from the information that Mr Rixon sent me.

Charles Owen Whitfield was the son of a London Police Constable. His parents had come to London from Devonport in the 1890s. Charles Whitfield volunteered for service on the outbreak of the First World War and was enrolled in 2/2 Battalion Royal Fusiliers on 21.9.1914. After basic training he was sent to Malta, arriving on the last day of December 1914, and after further training was sent to Gallipoli, arriving about 13 October 1915. However, he fairly quickly went down with dysentery and malaria and was repatriated – it is thought on HMHS *Mauretania*. After convalescence he obtained a commission and served as a Bombing Range instructor, Prison Camp Inspector, and then adjutant to Lt-Col. Lord Amptill (Commanding 3 Beds) at Felixstowe, where of course he met HW, and also Frank Hedges. Whitfield retired with the rank of Captain. After the war he entered Lloyds Bank, retiring as Manager of Harrow branch in 1953. He reached high levels in Freemasonry and during the Second World War was in charge of Air Raid Precautions in the City of London, of which he was a Freeman.

I have also found a couple of letters from Whitfield to HW in the archive so will also include those here. Not all HW's letters are dated (from he who was so particular about other people dating their letters!) but with a little intelligent guesswork one can at least fix the point in his life that they were written. The first one has to be from Felixstowe – in 1918.

Saturday night.

Nothing to do.

No friends. Desolation Camp.

Dear Witty

For Heavens sake get me out to France. I can't stand this much longer. It is terrible.

My brain is going. I can't sleep. Spectres haunt me at night. The fog chokes me by day. The sausage meat is undermining my constitution. I am never happy. The barber today asked me why my hair is going gray. I am permanent orderly officer and attend drill again in the morning. It is terrible.

Pity me. Use your influence. A word, coming from your sapient mouth, is omnipotent.

They are starving me down here. No leave is to be given in future. Our boots are wearing out: Army Orders prevent us from getting them mended. Straw is served for breakfast now. The messing is raised to 12/6 per diem. No officer is allowed to go to bed before 11 o'clock. The Adjutant gets us out of bed at 6 am with a whip. I am one mass of bruises. I have lost the sight of one eye. My kit has been sold to pay the rent. Soon your bed will go for firewood. Four officers were shot this morning for falling out on a route march to Ipswich and back. For God's sake, get me to France. Love,

Willie.

That is a most plaintive letter – even if jesting in parts – and bears out HW's state of mind at that time as shown by Dr Maloney's article. There is then quite a gap, although it is obvious that the two

men had kept in touch (HW is known to have attended annual Bedfordshire Regimental Dinners over several years, having joined the Regimental Association as early as 1920, and attending a service for presentation of colours in November 1924, see Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson and the First World War*, pp 152 and 154). The next item is a letter from 'Whitters' from his home in Dunster Gardens, NW6, dated 1 November 1928.

My dear Willie,

I have been wanting to write to you for some time past to congratulate you on winning the Hawthornden Prize but have been unable to do so as I did not know your address. I have recently received a list of members of the Regimental Association, hence this letter to say how delighted I am to hear of your well deserved success.

Have just been reading the reviews of "The Pathway" which book, judging by the experts, should have a second sale. What do you think of Arnold Bennett's dissertation?

Looking forward to seeing you at the Dinner next Tuesday. All the best,

Whitters

And a further letter dated 24 December 1928:

My dear Willie,

Many thanks indeed for the case of wine – thanks in which my wife joins. I confirm the opinion of an expert, to wit yourself, that it is damned good stuff and far superior to that which the money-grabbing hotels serve up at dinners and the like.

No, I regret to say I have not yet read "The Pathway". In spite of what you said, I have been trying to get a first edition with the aid of a friend of mine in the publishing line – brethren's – but without success. I can see I shall have to content myself with a reprint. I was offered a third edition a week ago. Third mark you – a tribute to your genius.

I hope you are making progress with the "War Trilogy". I am eagerly looking forward to its publication. Please give me advance information as to when it will be published so that I can really get a signed first edition.

Our best wishes to you all for the New Year, and again much thanks.

Yours as of yore,

Whitters

P.S. How's the car?

On Skirr Cottage headed stationery – but in ms 'Shallowford Filleigh', dated 28.11.29:

Dear Witters,

Sorry I missed the dinner. I came up for it: went to the LRB 1914 dinner the night before: got fed up, felt a ghost, and flunked the Bedf. Dinner, you know why. Read Graves "Goodbye to all that" (in all libraries; and read about Sassoon therein: and then recall that heart-breaking conversation about Sassoon at the last dinner. I haven't the guts to face un-understanding.) So altho' I wanted to see you, I stayed away. I'm coming up after Xmas and will see you.

I'm writing the Patriot's Progress at the moment. Hack work. I wonder if you'll look at the typescript when done (its very short – illustratory) and criticize with utterly fierce constructiveness. It was undertaken rather foolishly: to illustrate 120 woodcuts: and I find its stealing my own stuff planned 10 years. You might help me with detail: I feel quite awful about the book.

Love, Willie.

We're flooded out here: rain, rain, rain. My book is full of impressionistic soldier stuff, e.g.

"Up the sodding steps into the cold misty air of the flashing sky, over the sodding parapet with screw pickets – old Bimbo the C.O. got the bloody wind-up, afraid of being scuppered – fixing screw-pickets out in front, and untwisting and coiling the sodding barbed wire among them while crackerdicrack and psspsps the bullets went past in the flares greenish-powdery light" etc. [the last words are so small and faded that only read with difficulty]

The next item is a postcard – postmarked 11 MAR 30 – printed heading ‘Henry Williamson, Georgeham, North Devon’, ‘Georgeham’ crossed out and ‘Filleigh’ substituted.

D.D. was first published in 1922, and a complete failure artistically and commercially. The copies are scarce worth a few pounds I'm told. The revised version is not of course the first: but 200 copies were done on handmade paper and signed at £2/2/-. The book is yellow all through; cover and contents. These [an arrow line goes up to first sentence] will be worth 2d soon, for the bubble of H.W. is only a bubble and not a gem.

I was too nervous to come near the [? Word difficult to read – not ‘Regt’ – ‘L-re’ – ‘Lone’?] Pinner: and I'll be more so next and succeeding years. The Pat. Progress will do me in: such bad words! I don't go anywhere – I hear there is hell to pay because D.Days is said to lampoon my old school. After June I shan't be able to live in Devon because then the Village Book is being published. A proper b----y Ishmael; in feeling, if not in fact. Appreciation to my face just as bad effect. Yet without it I wither away; so you see the position! I'll send you a copy of the revised edition when it appears, I hope shortly.

[HW has stamped the owl colophon at the bottom right-hand edge – and the last sentence curls round it.]

The next letter was from 70, Grove St, New York City, 25 Nov 1930:

My dear Witters

Thanks for yours of 28 Octr. I came here deviously: so you see why I didn't turn up at the dinner. Also, as I told you ... that Sassoon business ... it just depresses me. [NB – the dots are HW's own – not deleted material!] It was like a touch of cocaine on the eye-pupil – flick – darkness. Not personal of course. But it extinguishes something that, before, was living ... and one can't bear to think about it. Which is damn silly.

I'm here trying to find happiness. I'm longing to return in March. Damned expensive here. I'm in a poorish quarter, too, unfurnished flat – chair, table, bed, telephone, radio. 70\$ a month. A charwoman costs 8/- for 2 hours work. So you'll see. My books don't sell here. Like a fool, I can't lecture, so this trip will cost me 3 years savings – £800. Can't write for their bloody magazines, either. Women flock here. Its like eating an apple and throwing the core out of the bloody window. I'm drunk half the time. End of your poor young friend bloody Willie. Gone to bits. But when I get back I hope to be good, kind, considerate, and unselfish. So I'm in purgatory meanwhile, and trying to write,

Best wishes to Mrs Witters and yourself

Willie

I'm the first author to creep in here unknown, unpublished, 3rd class, bloody lonely life my boy.

The next letter, typewritten, is undated but appears to belong to an envelope marked 23 Nov 1933.

Dear old Witters

Sorry haven't answered before. Ill, worried to death, and utterly miserable. Don't tell anyone.

Am no companion for anyone. Came actually to the dinner, but went away again. O God, Witters, I'll tell you one day perhaps, if I live to see you again.

Meanwhile, my love to you and yours, and old Hedges if you see him. I clasp your hand,

Yrs

[ms] Willie

Money all gone, trying to write, get £2/18/- weekly only from Sunday Referee. Simply tired, worked too hard in past; now this crushing thing. Don't tell anyone. I can't write details.

[Biographical reminder: Robert and Rosemary had been born in early September, and HW was now involved with Ann Edmonds. It is not surprising that he felt in turmoil.]

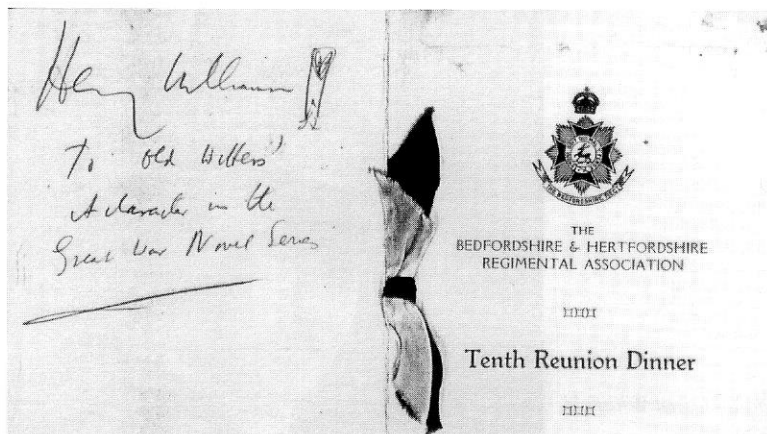
The next letter was from Shallowford, dated 1 November 1934.

Captain Charles Owen Whitfield.



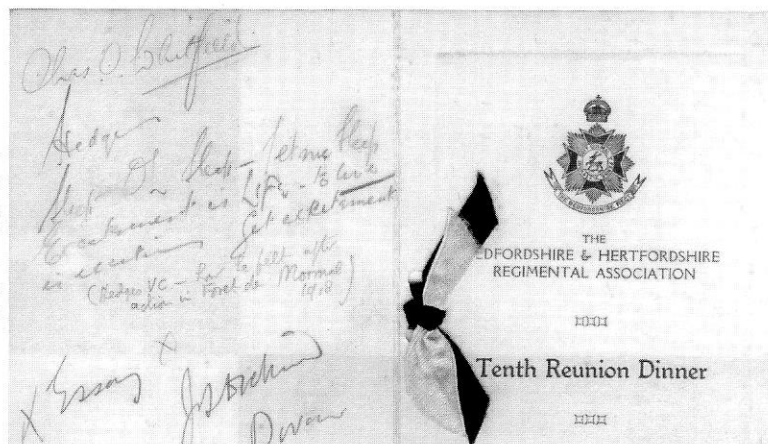
Frank Hedges.
(NB: See connections with 'A Test of Detection'.)

Photographs courtesy of E.C. Rixon
(nephew of Captain Whitfield).



Willie signed 'Old Witters' menu
Tuesday 6 November 1928.

Witters and Hedges signed HW's.
Hedges has written:
'Sleep - Oh Sleep - Let me Sleep
Excitement is Life - to live is
exciting Get excitement.'
Underneath HW has added:
'(Hedges VC - how he felt after
action in Foret de Mormal 1918)'



Postcard sent by HW to 'Witters' (Capt. C.O. Whitfield),
11 July 1942. See text opposite.

My dear Witters

Your letter strikes remorse into me, for I fear I shan't be coming to the Dinner this year. Some strange force holds me back: and I shan't be in London then, having just returned from a visit there: and disturbing it was too. Not that one hates London; but I suppose I have one skin too less for ordinary life. I feel like a deserter from you and Hedges. The only three of the old Brigade, Manor Terrace and Felixstowe 1917/18 left. Eheu, fugaces. How time flies. I simply can't understand it; since I feel the same as in those years, less nausea from too much whiskey and etc etc. Am still hoping to write those years: that's why I think my instinct must make me keep aloof: Am always sad and distraught at such reunions. I plan such a walloping great book, all of it in. Have you read WINGED VICTORY? Firsts are still available. I have two. It's a grand book, RFC 1918. I wrote parts of it. Give my love to them all. I would come, but am not too well and am tired with overwork and a slump which has overtaken me and my work – large overdrafts, etc, and am tired to death of so much hard work.

With love,
Willie.

One year later (one sees what is keeping this friendship going) on 29 October 1935 – note spelling here is as in original!

Dere witters yes it was a bad miss to cancel the dinner: just the very thing ampthill would have NOT wanted. I wonder if the smaller and smaller band will dissolve altogether, by next year? If so, a thoughtless application of an outworn convention will have helped to do it. I am surprised at cavan doing it, and can only think it was done soon after the colonels death and at a meeting hgere the overwhelming feeling was one of a loss that would so alter things. Alas none of us goes on for ever, Eheu fugaces, time changes the places that new us, our loves into corpses, or wives: and death and decay and derision make barren our lives. i thought first when Lawrence died that death was easy; then that i must keep on doing things he would approve (he being so tired and rootless and restless and EXHAUSTED altogether) also my old friend yeates of winged victory

Cant we meet and hedges and have a quiet little dinner somewhere in soho 3/- or so, and then go to a talkie or something, just for old times sake? I cant drink, that's all, being more or less done in; 70 years old in mind and vitality, and who will look after the darling little boys when i am gone, is more or less a permanent state of mind now days but enuff of boring self. i didn't think one could overstrain a brain but now i know. i am salar; the darkness awaits. Look deaerie i shall be in london c/o Richard de la mare, 14 Gower Street from evening of 4 November for about a week and preps if you and hedges and i can get together and any others you know of well meet somewhere and youll phone me there?

Yours ever and always
Willie

The last short item is a postcard from 'H.W., Stiffkey, Norfolk' and the postmark seems to be '11 JY 42': Not just any postcard however, but one of those by 'ANTONY D'YPRES':

Seeing your name in a faded 1920 Regimental list – oh, the nostalgia! How are you? How is Hedges? All to do over again! Are you well? Are you back again? Or lost at Dunkirk, or Malaya? My experiences are small – farming since 1937 – arrested in june 1940 under 18b – later released – trying to get along in a world that is not somehow the world one knew – tho' the ghosts now come not so frequently. My love to you, wherever you are. Willie.

Thus all there seems to be extant of what was almost certainly a more extensive correspondence of a friendship of comrades in arms: a small glimpse of that time in ancient sunlight that bound men together *vi et armis*.