



James Alexander Lowery (1919 – 1939)

Alex Lowery (as he was known to his family) had the bravery to volunteer to fight for his country. However, tragedy was to strike in the run-up to the outbreak of WW2 when he was involved in a 'plane crash that robbed him and his two crew colleagues of the opportunity to confront the threat from the Nazis based in Germany.

Lowery was born on 1/8/1919 and he features in the 1921 census. He is recorded as living in 12 Pond Street, Shincliffe Colliery, County Durham. His father, also Alexander, was twenty-four and was a miner at Bowburn Colliery, just to the south. His wife, Ethel (nee Broughton), was twenty-three and was living in 55 Steavenson Street in 1911 with her parents (father a miner at Bowburn), mother, and five siblings. Alex and Ethel had married in St. Cuthbert's, Durham, on 12th October 1918. It was a church that was to play a significant role in their lives. Elizabeth, James' sister, was just seven months in June 1921. There is a [tribute](#) to Alex Lowery on the St Cuthbert's Church website.

Alex Lowery Sr. had been born in Wingate, County Durham. In 1911 he was living in nearby Wheatley Hill with his parents and four siblings. His brother, Michael, would go on to lose his life on 1/7/1916, an infamous day in the British Army as it was the first day of the Battle of the Somme. He had served with the Northumberland Fusiliers. Another of JAL's uncles, James McKeown (Northumberland Fusiliers), also from Bowburn, was killed in this battle on the same day.

Alex Lowery Jr.'s final day was Friday 21st July 1939. He and his fellow crew members, Flying Officer York Plant Wilson (aged 25, from Vancouver, Canada) and Pilot Officer Ivor Russell Barton (aged 26, from Ontario, Canada) were part of 148 Squadron and took off from RAF Stradishall near Haverhill, Suffolk. Lowery was the 'plane's wireless operator. Wilson and Barton were the first and second pilots, respectively. The station is no longer operational.

The Haverhill Echo of 29/7/1939 reported that the 'plane had been on a training run up to Scotland before returning to Stradishall. In a cruel irony, Aircraftsman (first-class) Lowery was to have been relieved of his duty. However, his relief was due for leave and so he elected to go out once again in his place.

Our research has revealed that the 'plane was a Vickers Wellington MK 1 Bomber (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Royal Air Force Wellington Bomber Mk1 (Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons)

148 Squadron was part of a mass flight to Bordeaux in July 1939, no doubt as a show of strength to the Luftwaffe and demonstrating its capabilities. It is not certain that the three airmen mentioned here were part of that flight. Following the visit to Scotland, the crew set off for Plymouth. The Wellington was normally crewed by five men, but no explanation has been given for only three being on board. Tragedy was to strike as it made its return to base and Mr Robert Burgess, a resident of Russel Place, Milborne Port, near Yeovil, was witness to its final seconds as it ploughed into an orchard near the village road to Templecombe at about 23:35 (details courtesy of The Western Gazette 28/7/1939). His account also featured in The Shields Daily News on 22/7/1939.

“It just cleared some trees and then the whole sky was lit up and the machine, burning furiously, crashed into a field. I tried to get near enough to render assistance,” he said, “but the heat was terrific. I think an attempt was made to open parachutes as one was burning beside the machine.” Such was the impact, parts of the plane were found a quarter of a mile away. The Western Gazette’s report of the inquest into the crash, held on 24th July 1939, contains very graphic details from the witnesses as they were questioned by J.B.B. Rutter (Deputy Coroner for Southeast Somerset).

We are extremely grateful to Milborne Port History and Heritage Group for their help and guidance in providing more information about the crash.

The initial conclusion of a later [RAF court of enquiry](#) into the crash of Wellington L4290 was that the inexperienced Barton was at the controls at the time of the impact and that he had lost control when trying to turn out of a cloud. Significantly, the court also recorded that the Wellington tended to become nose-heavy in a turn that would develop quickly into a dive from which it could take considerable height to recover. These were early days for the Wellington and later it was discovered that it suffered from ‘rudder overbalance’ that caused the rudder to lock to one side and the aircraft to enter an unrecoverable spiral dive.

Lowery's parents and his siblings were at this point living in "Glendalough" in Whinney Hill in Durham. His father was an assistant manager in an insurance company and became a special constable at the start of WW2. Alex Lowery's death must have been a terrific blow to the family and the wider community. As a former altar boy and sub-organist, a memorial plaque was erected to him (Fig. 2, below) at St. Cuthbert's Church in Old Elvet, Durham. Following a Requiem Mass and the cortege being escorted with full military honours, he was buried in the Roman Catholic cemetery in Redhills. Wilson and Barton were buried in the grounds of Stradishall Church.



Fig 2: Plaque to honour J. A. Lowery at St. Cuthbert's R. C. Church, Old Elvet, Durham

The story, however, does not end there. Developments of new houses have been undertaken in Milborne Port in the last few years. One of the streets has been named Wellington Close in honour of the doomed bomber.

Shincliffe Local History Society has added the name of James Alexander Lowery to its electronic war memorial as a lasting tribute to him.