

740551  
J.M.Gladwell  
Pilot  
Royal Air Force  
8th January 1941



Few people are aware that St. Peter's, Kington Langley, has a war grave in the churchyard. The War Graves Commission provides a headstone of a standard pattern, and is responsible for its upkeep. The one at St. Peter's is near the southeast corner of the church.



Just why he was buried here when he was not a local man has been a mystery until just recently, when, with the assistance from the Air Historical Branch (RAF), and other very helpful people, the story has unfolded.

Sergeant John Mervyn Gladwell was serving with No. 8 Ferry Pilots Pool based at RAF Hullavington. The job of ferry pilots was to collect aircraft from one location and deliver them to another. Say, for instance, from a factory or a storage facility to an operational unit. Probably the best known organisation was the Air Transport Auxiliary, many of whose civilian pilots were ladies, operating in dangerous wartime conditions. In order to move the pilots to and from the locations within the United Kingdom the units employed small, passenger-carrying aircraft.

Sergeant Gladwell was the pilot of an American-built Curtiss Mohawk Mark IV, a single engine fighter aircraft, serial No. AR651, which he was taking from Lossiemouth, on the Moray Firth in Scotland, to Colerne. In the Severn valley he was forced to lose height due to rapidly deteriorating weather conditions of snow and mist. He tried to turn in visibility of little more than 100 yards, at a very low altitude, and in so doing one wing struck a gate and caused the fatal crash, near RAF Quedgeley on the outskirts of Gloucester, at 2.10pm. on 8th January 1941.



As I said, his unit was based at Hullavington, but his headquarters were at Steinbrook House, which, of course, is in the parish of Kington Langley. His funeral service and burial were the responsibility of the Unit Headquarters, which is why his grave is in St. Peter's churchyard.

So that is why we have the honour of caring for his grave, as our churchyard was the closest to Steinbrook.

## Correspondence between Eleanor Reyden and John Lawton

A cousin of mine, Anthony Gladwell, said that you had been enquiring about John Gladwell, who died in active service in the RAF on 8th January 1941 and was buried near where you live. John Gladwell was my uncle, my mother's only brother, but I never knew him because he died before I was born. I have a photo of him, and can tell you more about his life if you are interested, though I don't know much about his career in the RAF (I suppose he would be on Air Ministry files?). I was once taken by my mother (now dead) to see his grave, and I am glad to hear that it is well kept.

Please get in touch if you would like to know more. ELEANOR RAYDEN

Thank you for your email. My interest in John Gladwell is on behalf of St. Peter's church members, because they would like to know more about him as, so to speak, he is a member of their community. I am a retired Squadron Leader and we have lived in Kington Langley for 30 years, so my service background makes me a likely candidate to find out what I can. What we don't know is: Why is he buried in Kington Langley? How did he die? What unit did he belong to? What aircraft did he fly? It's just that it would be nice to get to know him. A small wooden cross with poppies is placed on his grave each year. JOHN LAWTON

I'm afraid I don't know the details of John Gladwell's service career, but I do know that his RAF serial number was 740551. This might make it easier for you to find out more, if you wish. I haven't yet had time to investigate this myself.

I was told that my uncle was returning from a spell in hospital in the north of England, on a solo flight in a small plane, and crashed near Kington Langley; so I assume that is why he was buried there. He was born in 1911 (or 1912), was sent to Exeter Cathedral Choir School at the age of eight, where he ended up as Senior Chorister, and then attended Bristol Grammar School. At school the only thing he enjoyed (according to my mother) was the OTC band. He left after 'O' levels, went to work in an insurance firm, and spent all his free time training with the RAF – which he joined at the outbreak of WW2. He became a Sergeant Pilot, married a Bristol girl called Joan Pitt in 1940, and was killed in 1941.

His death broke my grandmother's heart, and she died in 1945. My mother was in India all through the war, working as a doctor in Delhi. She was extremely fond of John, and recounted playing piano duets with him at home, and seeing him with his motor-bike in bits all over the kitchen floor. My brother was born in 1948, and named John Gladwell after him; he too was musical and mechanically-minded (sadly, he died suddenly of heart failure in August this year).

If you would like a copy of my uncle in his RAF uniform, I will gladly send you one (I'd need your postal address). Thank you for your interest, and that of the church community; it is gratifying to know that his grave is cared for and his memory honoured. ELEANOR RAYDEN

**Source: Kington Langley St. Peter's, John Lawton**