GENERAL JACK OF KIBWORTH HARCOURT 1880-1962

Angela Hall

General Jack lived in Kibworth Harcourt from 1923 until 1962, he was a well-known local figure and is still remembered.

Childhood and Early Military Career:

James Lochhead Jack was born on 18th April 1880, the eldest son of Peter and Mary Jack of Paisley. His father was a carpet manufacturer who owned a business in the town. Tragically his mother died when he was only seven.

From an early age Jack developed a passion for horses and riding which lasted throughout his life. His father regularly hunted with the Lanark and Renfrewshire Foxhounds and this is where Jack's love of fox hunting developed. His early schooling took place in Scotland and it was also here that he began his long military career, as in 1897 as a private in the Merchiston Castle School Cadet Corps he attended a public review in the presence of Queen Victoria.

In 1898 he became a Private in the 2nd Volunteer Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (A&SH), and during 1899 was promoted to Second Lieutenant in the same battalion. He was nominated for service in the South African War early in 1901, where his column was involved in sweeping the Eastern Transvaal clear of the enemy. Jack was awarded the South African War Medal with five clasps.

From 1904-1909 Jack served in India, where he was promoted to 1st Lieutenant. At this time Jack played polo whenever possible and was involved in two accidents which laid him up for several weeks, one involving a blow to the shin which nearly cost him his leg. Early in 1910 his battalion arrived in Bloemfontein for a two-year tour.

A letter sent to his father in February 1910 describes a typical day:

"Up at 6am. Ride from 6.30am until 8am. Office 9-2pm. Lunch 2pm. Work in quarters till about 4pm. Ride or tennis till 7pm."

In May 1910, Jack was told of the death of his father. They had always enjoyed an affectionate relationship and he said afterwards:

"His last present to me, a very handsome gift sent shortly before his death was a cheque with which I bought a good polo pony Throughout our lives together he never saved himself any pains to ensure the welfare of my brother and myself." Jack's equestrian activities also continued during the years leading up to the Great War. He entered many races or point to points riding his hunters Home Park or Ardscull Boy.

"In April 1914 Home Park seemed to be winning the Adamhill Cup, when I came to grief at the last fence,"

His memoirs record. Fox hunting was also a regular activity and Jack enjoyed many outings with the Warwickshire Foxhounds and the Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire Hunt among others.



James Lochead Jack 1919

The Great War:

Jack served with distinction during the Great War, and was awarded a number of medals including a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and Bar, and the French Croix de Chevalier. Throughout the war he recorded his daily activities in a diary which was published in 1962, after his death. He would make daily jottings in a small notebook and then expand his notes from memory while out of the line. The result is an extremely valuable primary source of information describing the appalling conditions of the Western Front.

Jack started the war as a Staff Captain with the 19th Infantry Brigade. From August to November 1914 he took part in many of the early actions, including Mons, Le Cateau, the Retreat to Paris and the battles of the Marne, Aisne and Armentieres. On August 12th he recorded a sad entry in his diary:

"A note from the Remount Department tells me that my two remaining private hunter horses, Ardscull Boy and Home Park have been taken for the army - the first war wrench." Later that month he describes the scene when troops retreating from Mons arrived in Le Cateau.

".....it is heartrending to witness the exhaustion of all ranks after their march of almost 23 miles in steam heat and heavily loaded..... The men have scarcely been off their feet for three days besides having had no more than snatches of sleep or scraps of food because of transport delays through road blocks."

After Le Cateau, Jack was awarded the Croix de Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour. In his diary he remembered that another officer was nominated for the award at the same time:

"But he died and I lived..... and I always consider that I wear the medal as much for him as for myself"

During November 1914 Jack was sent home on sick leave after catching a "feverish chill" After his return in December, conditions on the Western Front remained grim:

"....nearly all the trenches became almost knee deep, or deeper in water and mud during the winter.... The men had no protection from the weather apart from their waterproof capes rigged up as shelters behind the parapets...."

In June 1915, Jack was appointed to command a company in the 2nd Battalion of the Cameronians. He took part in the action of Bois-Grenier in September; this coincided with the Battle of Loos in which British forces suffered major losses.



Captain Jack (right) 1915. (General Jack's Diary)

Jack's battalion moved to the Somme area in April 1916, where preparations were soon taking place for a major assault that was planned for July. The action started on June 24th with a ceaseless bombardment of the German trenches, and on the 28th Jack recorded:

".....the air reverberates to the drum of our cannonade, the shells from which we hope are blasting the enemy and his positions into powder". On June 30th he moved up to the front line where the assault was to be launched early the next day. He did not expect to survive:

" About 4.30am on July 1st, following an almost sleepless night of work and tension, with the deafening cannonade, too, still ringing in our ears, I rose, shaved - there was not enough water for washing - slipped on tunic, boots, accoutrements and silver spurs in order to be properly dressed for, likely enough the last time."

The diary describes in detail the actions that he was involved in that day, which has been described as the blackest day in British military history. At the end of his entries for July 1st he says:

"I quitted the field on which such brilliant success had been expected that fine summer morning, leaving behind, dead or maimed in that vast garden of scarlet wild poppies, some ninety percent of the officers and about sixty per cent of the other ranks of the twelve infantry battalions of my division."

He was indeed fortunate to survive!

After this Jack was appointed to command a battalion in the West Yorkshire Regiment and while still serving on the Somme front was successful in capturing the village of Villers-Guislain. This involved an advance of nearly a mile into German held territory, and he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for this action. The recommendation read:

".. his gallantry and soldierly example to all around him is most inspiring"



Brigadier-General Jack on 'Oudenarde', Cologne, 1918. (General Jack's Diary).

In May 1917 the Regiment quitted the Somme and was moved to the area around Ypres. Jack became involved in the third Battle of Ypres otherwise known as Passchendaele, and in July took part in an assault on an area known as Bellewarde Ridge. He was severely wounded and hospitalized for six months. At this time he heard bad news about casualties suffered by his battalion:

"Being dangerously ill at this time, the news that almost all my boy officers had fallen caused me a serious relapse?

Jack finally returned to the Western Front in July 1918 and was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in command of the 1st Battalion of the Cameronians. He received a telegram requesting his attendance at Buckingham Palace to be presented with his DSO by George V. In the autumn he was promoted to the rank of Brigadier-General in command of the 28th Infantry Brigade. His involvement in the last series of engagements of the War, near Courtrai in Belgium earned him a Bar for the DSO. His records include a certificate signed by Winston Churchill awarded:

"for gallant and distinguished services in the field."

After the Armistice, Jack continued his army service in Germany until 1921. He suffered serious injuries while riding in a steeplechase and retired with the rank of Brigadier-General. A confidential report by a senior commander, Sir Phillip Robertson sums up his war service:

"An experienced first-rate officer with excellent power of command and drive. Very hard working, most reliable and thoroughly sound. Is a strict disciplinarian, never spared himself on active service and was most cool and gallant. Excellent horseman."



The Old House, Kibworth Harcourt

Post World War I:

In June 1923, Jack married Miss Jeannette Watson of Hamilton. Shortly afterwards he purchased the Old House in Kibworth Harcourt and the couple settled in Leicestershire. The main reason for this relocation was Leicestershire's reputation for excellent fox hunting. His memoirs state:

"My very popular young wife, being a brilliant horsewoman to hounds and our home standing at the very centre of fashionable hunting England, a county practically all grass with scarcely any plough. We have indeed had a happy time in the saddle with the Fernie, Quorn and Pytchiey Hounds...."



General and Mrs Jack

Jack regularly took part in many point to points and other races, winning a Farmer's Race in 1929 and the Fernie Hunt Cup in 1931. His memoirs record that since the end of the Great War he had suffered four broken collar bones, several fractured ribs and many concussions sustained in racing or hunting. He tells of an amusing incident that occurred in a race in March 1931:

"Had the rider of another horse in my lap at one fence and heaved him back gratefully into his saddle."



This artists impression of General Jack is taken from an illustration entitled: *'Followers of the Fernie'* dated 1927 by 'the tout'. This drawing featured all regular participants to the meet. (History of the Fernie Hunt 1856-1987).

Jack was an active member of the Fernie Hunt Committee for several years. He took up various other public appointments locally including becoming a Magistrate on the Harborough Bench and President of the local British Region branch. In 1931 he was honoured to be appointed an Aide de Camp to George V. This involved attending many official and public functions to assist the King or act as his representative.

During World War II, Jack was asked to raise and command the Market Harborough Battalion of the Local Defence Volunteers, later known as the Home Guard. Within fifteen days 2,500 men were enlisted and eventually armed with private sporting rifles and shotguns. Many were ex-servicemen and the Battalion soon gained an excellent reputation. Its area extended from North of Billesdon, southwards to the Harborough - Bosworth Road and from Great Easton, westwards to Lutterworth. Its role was to watch for hostile landings from aircraft, report them and delay the enemy until the arrival of regular troops. An amusing incident occurred in Kibworth one evening. Jack had agreed to assist the local ARP warden whenever needed and it had been agreed that he could be contacted at night by someone pulling a cord that was suspended from his bedroom window. This cord was tied to a chair next to his bed, the idea being that the rattling chair would wake him. On this occasion the system failed miserably until the noise awoke Mrs Jack in an adjoining room. She entered to find the chair dancing about the room and her husband still sound asleep.

The fact that he was a Magistrate did not exempt Jack from the wrath of the local Bench. In October 1940 the Market Harborough Advertiser reported that he had been fined 10s (50p) for having an out of date driving licence. The reason given was that:

"He was working over twelve hours a day on Home Guard and other duties"

The licence was 62 days out of date. Again in November 1940 he was fined £1 for failing to obscure lights in his house during the blackout.

In later life Jack continued to take an active role in the local community, holding a number of public positions. He carried on riding and hunting with the Fernie Hounds until the late 1950s. Local Kibworth people have very fond memories of him, one writes:

"General Jack lived at the top of Albert Street where I lived with my parents. I remember him as a very kind gentleman"

Another resident describes him as a: "perfect Victorian gentlemen".

General Jack was President of the Market Harborough Branch of the Old Contemptibles Association and on 15th November 1962 the local paper reported on the annual Remembrance Service:

"One familiar figure was missing from the service - Brigadier General J. L Jack of Kibworth. It was the first time for as long as anyone could remember that the President had not been able to attend. The reason was ill-health."

General Jack died on December 22nd 1962. A quote from one of his favourite poems, Finis Exoptatus by Adam Lindsay Gordon provides a suitable ending.

Life is mostly troth and bubble, Two things stand like stone, Kindness in another's trouble, Courage in your own.



Mr Fernie's Hounds at Foxton (History of the Fernie Hunt 1856-1987)



Fernie Hunt at Evington Village. (History of the Fernie Hunt 1856-1987).

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Various extraxts have been reproduced from the Market Harborough Advertiser.

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