

Military valour, civic endeavour

ARMY: Gardner family

Past Times

by Michael Riordan

THE sequestered and beautiful cemetery set on Northallerton's medieval Bishop of Durham site seems a far cry from the turmoil and cannons' roar of the Crimean War. Equally remote from that tumultuous conflict appears to be the Northallerton pensioners' sedate annual outing to the captivating Lake District on July 3.

Yet there are positive connections, for Capt George Dudley Gardner, a hero who survived that war's Battle of Balaclava in 1854, lies in the cemetery alongside his grand-daughter, Grace Gardner, whose bequest initiated the Grace Gardner trust which does so much to benefit Northallerton's old folk, including their regular, much-enjoyed trips.

And the Gardner Northallerton legacy is currently in the spotlight as the Gardner trust committee has recently opted to replace Grace's gravestone, which has worn quickly, and to refurbish the Victorian white marbled monumental edifice of the Captain.

An honoured place in Northallerton's standing is indeed their rightful due, because they and their family members did much to bring distinction and to set high standards of patriotism and civic responsibility in a century's service to the North Yorkshire county town.

Capt George Dudley Gardner was already a legend in his own lifetime when he was appointed by the North Riding of Yorkshire magistrates as the governor of the North Riding jail at Northallerton in 1862 and came to live with his family in the adjacent governor's quarters in the court of sessions house down East Road.

At the Battle of Balaclava, as a lieutenant in the 13th Hussars, he was involved in the famous Charge of the Light Brigade by the English horsemen with swords on the Russian cannons immortalised by the Poet Laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson:

Into the jaws of death, into the mouth of hell,

Cannon to the right of them, cannon to the left of them,

Cannon in front of them, rode the Six Hundred.

His horse was hit full in the breast by a shot, flinging him on to a Russian cannon, but in the confusion of the battle he was able to escape or fall being one of only nine survivors in his entire

company.

He made an enormous impact and impression when he came to Northallerton. Although retired he was still every inch a soldier, riding around the town on a majestic white charger, itself a brave survivor of the Crimean War, to become the most distinctive character in Northallerton, remaining as governor of the jail for a record 29 years before he retired in October, 1891. Throughout this time he endeared himself to his staff and prisoners alike - 37,000 inmates passing through his humane hands - by his manners, kindness and sense of justice.

He was equally revered by his fellow citizens and his funeral in 1895 brought Northallerton to a totally respectful standstill, all blinds were drawn and the Wednesday market suspended as his coffin was borne on the railway station down the high street to the cemetery, preceded by Northallerton Volunteers' band.

Appropriately his gravestone was epitaphed with "One of the Six Hundred" and is now an integral part of the town's heritage trail and historic annals.

His two surviving sons, Arthur and Ernest, followed his influential example in civic duty, Arthur becoming a dedicated, respected and well-loved medical general practitioner in Darlington for more than 40 years, while Ernest was Northallerton's leading solicitor for three decades, renowned for his skill, eloquence and humanity. He practised just north of the Fleece inn and became coroner for the North Riding.

His accomplishments were not, however, confined to the legal sphere and he was one of the most distinguished and gifted persons locally. He was a member of Northallerton and District Urban Council for more than 20 years and became the chairman, he was chairman of the thriving and powerful Northallerton Liberal club and, as a young man, he joined the Northallerton Volunteers of the Green Howards, served in the Boer War and finally rose to be their captain and commanding officer.

Finally he was one of the most talented and active amateur actors and vocalists in Northallerton and played numerous leading roles in Northallerton opera company productions including *Yeoman of the Guard* which opened the Drill Hall in Thirk Road on

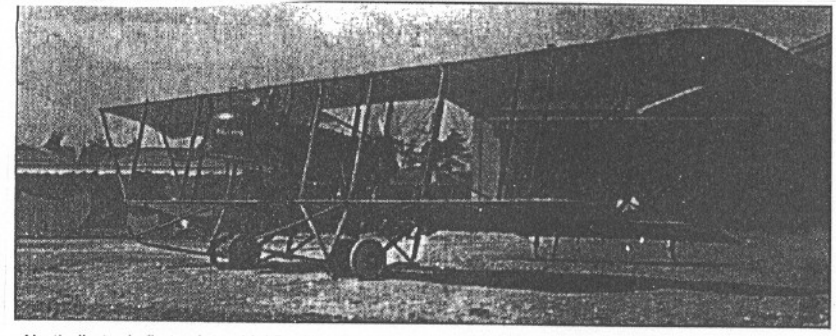
December 6, 1911.

Cicely, his wife, was the eldest daughter of the prominent Northallerton attorney and local historian John Ingleby Jefferson, of Standard House, North End, who incidentally gave the town its present market cross in 1911. She shared Ernest's patriotism and civic endeavour and led Northallerton's voluntary effort of collecting 4,000 warm garments for Green Howards on the Western Front during the First World War.

The couple had two children, Grace and Dudley, born in the 1890s, who became leading representatives of their generation in Northallerton and were imbued with the Gardner traits of courage, public duty and adventure. Some of this was evident from an early age for when Gustav Hamel, the famous pioneer pilot, came to Northallerton to give flights round the town at the 1913 carnival from the show field (now the Friarage hospital), Grace and Dudley were the first local teenagers to volunteer for and indulge in the thrills of hair-raising flying in a flimsy Blériot monoplane. Oh heady days!



Ernest Gardner - solicitor, coroner, officer and thespian - with his children, Dudley and Grace, and their friend, Hilda Russell (extreme left), in leisurely mood in 1911 at Northallerton, near his South Parade home.



Northallerton's first aviator, Maj Dudley Gardner of the Royal Flying Corps, "about to go", as he put it, during First World War action in 1917.

Dudley was enormously influenced by this experience and when the First World War broke out in August, 1914, he volunteered immediately, became an officer in the Green Howards, transferred to the fledgling Royal Flying Corps and soon qualified for his "wings" to become Northallerton's first aviator in 1915, a tremendous feat for one barely out of Northallerton grammar school.

From thence onwards, he flew in combat continuously throughout the rest of the war, primarily on the dangerous Western Front. He was awarded the Italian Silver Star by the King of Italy, mentioned in despatches three times and in January, 1918, by this time with the rank of major at only 22, was decorated with the Military Cross for "consistent and meritorious bravery" as the citation ran.

With the coming of peace he rapidly rose in civilian life to become the organisational manager for Horlicks but immediately on the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 he rejoined the Royal Air Force and held a crucial position in administration and operations at the Air Ministry as a wing commander.

Such was his contribution and standing that he was awarded the OBE and a drawing of him was commissioned and executed by Sir William Rothenstein and hung in the Air Ministry portrait gallery.

His sister, Grace, meanwhile had remained at Northallerton where she too had distinguished herself, commencing like Dudley with the First World War



Left: Wing Cmdr Dudley Gardner OBE MC, drawn in 1943 by Sir William Rothenstein for the Air Ministry portrait gallery.

North Riding county hall was transformed into a Red Cross hospital in 1914 to receive Western Front trench casualties.

One of the first volunteers at the hospital was Grace Gardner, who served there until its disbandment in 1918. She continued after the war in the Red Cross to become commandant of Northallerton district from 1930-37.

As in the First World War, her local contribution in the Second was also profound. She took two evacuees into her South Parade home, became welfare officer for the Women's Land Army and was increasingly involved with the Women's Voluntary Service, continuing this after the war when she was appointed WVS Northallerton centre organiser in 1957 and area organiser soon afterwards.

Among her many activities, her heart lay mainly with the old and

incapacitated. She was a highly motivated member and then chairman of the North Riding voluntary care committee for the blind and also the Northallerton old people's welfare committee, both of which operated from the Red Cross rooms next to the Golden Lion hotel.

This empathy with the Northallerton aged was fully reflected in Grace Gardner's legacy to them when she died in 1966. After leaving £100 to Northallerton parish church and other benefactions, she left the bulk of her estate to support the welfare of the town's pensioners. The original amount invested was £21,877 and the Grace Gardner trust, set up to administer the funds and promote old people's interests, has become one of the most successful welfare organisations in Northallerton's history.

Grace's decision to will the Gardner monies to the older people had been simplified earlier by a twist of cruel fate with the untimely death on active service of her nephew, Michael, at 21 - Dudley's only child and the sole Gardner family heir.

Typically, following the family's patriotic tradition, Michael had volunteered for air crew service in the RAF at the start of the Second World War and was killed as a sergeant bomb aimer with his Lancaster crew-mates in a mid-air collision with a Wellington over Wiltshire in the dead of a dark June night in 1943.

That Michael, the last of the Gardner line, should be so fated to die on an aerial training flight before actual combat, when his great-grandfather and father had miraculously survived in extreme hazards of warfare, was a deep family sadness and the tragic irony of the Gardner legend.