

## *The War Memorials in St Oswald's Church, Backford.*

by Michael Richardson

### **WW2 Memorial.**

This memorial is a Hopton Wood stone wall tablet inscribed "In proud & honoured memory of the men of this parish who fell in the world war 1939-1945" and after the names "Their name liveth for evermore". It lists eleven servicemen, many of whom served in the RAF and almost all appear to have lived locally or had other connections with the parish, although it has not so far been possible to identify John Pritchard. To this list I have added Wing Comm. J H Hutchinson, commemorated by a window in the church; his family had lived in the parish and his father served as Churchwarden for some time. The names below are as given on the memorial plaque.

As mentioned in the introduction, two of those named on the plaque had been bellringers at Backford church but it has not been possible to identify who they were.



**World War II Memorial**

## James Whitley



James Woodburn 'Tony' Whitley was born in Q1 1921 in Chorley, Lancs, the eldest of four children of Joseph Erle Whitley and Constance Mary née Walker, who later lived on Overwood Avenue in Mollington. After leaving school he enrolled at the Liverpool School of Architecture, hoping to follow his father's profession, but on the outbreak of war he joined the RAF and initially trained as a wireless operator. After serving with 100 Squadron he was transferred on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1943 to 550 Squadron based at North Killingholme near Grimsby, on its formation. Lancaster LM425 was delivered to the Squadron on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1943 and on the night of 30<sup>th</sup> March 1944 Sergeant Whitley was one of the crew (rear air gunner) when it took off at 9.45 pm to take part in a raid on Nuremberg<sup>(24)</sup>. On the outward flight it was hit by flak from batteries near

Liege and exploded in mid-air near the Barrage de la Gileppe, 8 km. east of Verviers in Belgium. Three survivors managed to parachute to safety as the Lancaster blew up but Whitley and three others were killed and are buried in the Heverlee War Cemetery, near Leuven, whilst the three survivors were interned in PoW camps, one of them after hospitalisation. LM425 was one of two Lancasters of 550 Squadron lost that night, which saw the heaviest losses of the war for Bomber Command. A memorial was erected in 2010 in woodland to the south of Gileppe Lake, with a plaque giving the names of the crew members and including some fragments of the aircraft<sup>(25)</sup>.

The radio operator on that ill-fated flight was Sgt Stanley Keirle and he has written about his memories of that night and his subsequent experiences in POW camps until he eventually made his way to Halle and was repatriated to the UK in May 1945<sup>(26)</sup>.

James' sister Doreen served in the ATS during the war<sup>(3)</sup>, married Lieut Clifford Eriksen of the US Army at Backford church in October 1945 and emigrated to the USA in 1946 under the 'War Brides Act' which saw up to 100,000 GI brides leaving the UK.



**Sgt James Whitley (at left) and crew of Lancaster LM425**

By permission of RAF 550 Squadron and North Killingholme Association



**Memorial to the crew of Lancaster LM425, near Gileppe Lake, Belgium.** By permission of Ed van der Pas/STIWOT

Le 31 Mars 1944  
 Ici, au lieu dit "Coeur de Marie"  
 Un lancaster anglais a été  
 abattu par la flak allemande et  
 s'est écrasé avec à son bord

†	†	†	†
Jefferies Ah.	Simpson H.	Paxton Pht.	Whitley J.
21 ans	21 ans	39 ans	23 ans
POW	POW	POW	
Jeffrey Ds.	Keirle Sa.	Upton Wg.	

Ils étaient tous "Royal Air Force"  
 Volunteer Reserve