



# THE SOWREYS

A unique and remarkable record of one family's  
sixty-five years of distinguished RAF service

Air Commodore  
Graham Pitchfork



A fascinating look into the extraordinary history of the Sowrey family; an RAF dynasty whose service spans the first sixty-five years of the RAF's existence. Members fought in both world wars and five of the Sowreys were awarded the Air Force Cross, amongst their other numerous decorations.

Three brothers, John, Fred and William, all served in World War I with distinction before service in Iraq and the Middle East. The next generation of Sowreys started at Cranwell in 1938; one was killed in action in the Western Desert but John jnr and Freddie served throughout, on fighter operations in the desert and north-west Europe, whilst a sister served in the WAAF. Also during World War II Air Cdre William Sowrey served as an AOC in the often-forgotten campaign in East Africa. John Sowrey went on to become a test pilot in the halcyon days of 1950-fighters and Freddie served in fighters before taking up more senior policy and diplomatic appointments during the Cold War.

Their diverse individual careers and experiences worldwide provide great scope for study into the history and development of the RAF from World War I to the later stages of the Cold War.



THE  
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Air Commodore  
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Foreword by  
Professor Sir Laurence Martin Kt

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This book is dedicated to The Sowrey Family

Remembering in particular Jimmy

'Who failed to return'

24 June 1941

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# FOREWORD

Professor Sir Laurence Martin Kt

This is an unusual book about a remarkable family, six members of which, in two generations, served with distinction in the RAF, spanning the greater part of its history. Five reached very senior ranks, won an AFC each, with many other decorations, and made great contributions to the evolution of the service. The sixth never attained seniority, for he made the greatest contribution possible, his life, in combat over North Africa.

That just two generations could span most of the RAF's duration reminds us of what a young service it still is in the perspective of military history. It is, of course world renowned but perhaps too much of its fame rests on the role of the 'Few' in saving their country and the world from a dreadful tyranny. The story of the Sowreys embraces that heroic era but also recalls, not only, other major episodes in the development of the RAF – such as the first battles over the Western Front, air policing in Iraq, rearmament in the thirties – but also affords glimpses of actions less often recalled even by those generally familiar with RAF history. Some of these were seminal, such as night fighting against Zeppelins and Gothas, pioneering efforts at coordinated air defence that were developed so vitally for the Battle of Britain. Some were tragic, as was the forgotten role of the RAF in resistance to the post-Great War Irish rising. Some had a comic dimension, as when a handful of aircraft were posted to interwar Shanghai, using the racecourse as a runway and compelled to fit operations around race meetings and golf tournaments.

Other episodes in the Sowrey story are less forgivably neglected: the invention by Bill Sowrey, in the unlikely arena of early World War II operations against the Italians in East Africa, of what we would now call close air support, integrating air and ground forces, presaging the 'cab rank' tactics employed in the Allied advance after D-Day. Less glamorous but no less vital were contributions to the training of aircrew in both World Wars, the encouragement of 'air-mindedness' in the ranks of potential recruits, and the adaptation of the RAF post-1945 to the entirely new climate of nuclear deterrence and of conflict without war.

It was only in the last of these phases that I had the fortune, as the academic advisor to the National Defence College, to meet and even work a little with the last remaining Sowrey in the RAF, the second Freddie Sowrey, when he became commandant. I knew nothing of his family then but could not fail to appreciate the experience and dedication that I now know characterised the whole band of brothers. His career had embraced combat in the earlier stages of the war and a wide range of command and staff appointments. My own RAF experience was as a lowly, conscripted officer shortly after the war but even that service with men who had served before and during the war had taught me that the RAF itself was something of a family, concerned with welfare of the whole as well as their immediate responsibilities. The younger Freddie now had to carry that spirit, which the Sowreys had consistently embodied, into a very new era.

The earlier Sowreys had been largely absorbed, beyond flying, in matters of technology and tactics. In the post-1945 era these still mattered but had to be set in a new context of deterrence of conflict without combat in which military strategy can only be effective if closely set in its political context. The younger Freddie grasped that lesson firmly. The NDC was an ideal platform from which to reflect this but the same insight informed his many other appointments.

Now the context is changing again. The threat is no longer so clear, technology evolves with daunting speed and social change is rapid and confused. Partly for these very reasons the resources available to the RAF are shrinking just as the problems become, if perhaps not more dangerous, more complicated and uncertain. We must hope the Royal Air Force rises to these challenges as successfully as it did to those it faced in the lean years between the wars. Those seeking inspiration to undertake this task could well find it in the record of dedication, loyalty, and courage recorded in this volume.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book about the remarkable Sowrey family has been immensely stimulating, rewarding and enjoyable. My thanks go to many people who have helped bring the project to fruition.

First I want to thank Professor Sir Laurie Martin for his eloquent foreword, which sets the perfect tone for what follows, and for his advice.

Without the enthusiastic support of Sir Freddie Sowrey, writing this book would have been very difficult. He has never spared himself to travel to London to meet me in the RAF Club and when I have visited his lovely home he and his wife Ann have been wonderful hosts offering me a warm welcome and generous hospitality. He has given me access to his records, personal papers, letters, logbooks and photographs in addition to allowing me to tape record his memories and views. He has checked all the chapters and offered corrections together with additional invaluable comments and anecdotes. I also thank Sir Freddie's son and daughter, Peter and Susan. The whole Sowrey family have given me great assistance and I am very grateful to the Countess Fortescue for her hospitality and patience and for allowing me access to her grandfather's and father's logbooks, diaries and photographs. Elizabeth 'Boof' Edge, Heather Sowrey, Lorna Sowrey, Mandy Sowrey, Carol Sowrey Thorpe and Gavin Stewart have all been a great help in offering advice and lending me notes and photographs.

Much of the military research has been carried out at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, Watchfield, where the head librarian, Chris Hobson MBE, gave me a very great deal of help and advice and full access to the college's excellent library where he allowed me to spend many hours. I am also grateful to the Air Historical Branch where the head of the branch, Sebastian Cox, and Graham Day have been most helpful.

At the RAF Museum, Hendon, Air Vice-Marshal Peter Dye OBE, the director, and Peter Elliot have responded to all my requests and allowed me access to the Sowrey Archive which is lodged at the museum. I am also indebted to the keeper of the National Archives at Kew where I consulted a wide variety of sources, the major documents being listed in the bibliography. Tim Pierce at the RAF College Cranwell library could not have been more helpful and Diana Manipud helped me at King's College London. I also thank Air Vice-Marshal Nigel Baldwin CB, CBE and Air Vice-Marshal Tony Mason CB, CBE for their valuable advice.

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The great majority of the photographs are from the Sowrey family and the Sowrey Archive at the RAF Museum. I have acknowledged those others that I have been generously loaned.

Finally, I want to thank John Davies, Sarah Driver and Sophie Campbell at Grub Street for all their support in bringing this project to fruition.

# ABBREVIATIONS

AAF	Auxiliary Air Force	DAIS	Directorate of Aeronautical Inspection Services
A&AEE	Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment	D Def S	Director of Defence Studies
ADGB	Air Defence Great Britain	DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
AFC	Air Force Cross	DGP	Director General of Production
AID	Aeronautical Inspection Directorate	DSO	Distinguished Service Order
AMDP	Air Member for Developmental and Production	EFTS	Elementary Flying Training School
AOC	Air Officer Commanding	ETPS	Empire Test Pilots' School
APC	Armament Practice Camp	FAI	Fédération Aéronautique Internationale
ATS	Air Training Section	FTS	Flying Training School
BCATP	British Commonwealth Air Training Plan	GCA	Ground Control Approach
BEF	British Expeditionary Force	GCI	Ground Control Interception
BEM	Medal of the Order of the British Empire	GOC	General Officer Commanding
BT	Bomber Transport	GOC-in-C	General Officer Commanding-in-Chief
CAS	Chief of Air Staff	HMS	Her Majesty's Ship
CBE	Commander of the Order of the British Empire	HMT	Her Majesty's Transport
CENTO	Central Treaty Organisation	IAF	Indian Air Force
CFI	Chief Flying Instructor	IDC	Imperial Defence College
CFS	Central Flying School	IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
CGS	Central Gunnery School	IRA	Irish Republican Army
COSSEC	Chiefs of Staff Secretariat	IRBM	Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile
DAI	Director Aeronautical Inspection	ITW	Initial Training Wing

JSSC	Joint Service Staff College	RAFO	Reserve of Air Force Officers
LDV	Local Defence Volunteer	RAFVR	Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
MAP	Ministry of Aircraft Production	RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
MBE	Member of the Order of the British Empire	RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
MC	Military Cross	RFC	Royal Flying Corps
MOD	Ministry of Defence	RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
MU	Maintenance Unit	RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation	R/T	Radio Telephony
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer	SAAF	South African Air Force
NDC	National Defence College	SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
NTS	Night Training Squadron	SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
OC	Officer Commanding	SASO	Senior Air Staff Officer
OCU	Operational Conversion Unit	SDF	Shanghai Defence Force
OTC	Officer Training Corps	SFTS	Service Flying Training School
OTU	Operational Training Unit	TAF	Tactical Air Force
PAI	Pilot Attack Instructor	UAS	University Air Squadron
PEG	Programme Evaluation Group	UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
POW	Prisoner of War	UKPMD	United Kingdom Permanent Military Deputy
PSO	Personal Staff Officer	USAF	United States Air Force
QFI	Qualified Flying Instructor	USAAF	United States Army Air Force
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force	WAAF	Women's Auxiliary Air Force
RAE	Royal Aircraft Establishment		
RAFGSA	Royal Air Force Gliding & Soaring Association		

# Chapter One

## THE SOWREY FAMILY

From the end of the seventeenth century, a large branch of the Sowrey family was established in the area around Leeds in Yorkshire. William Sowrey had married Ann Rigg at Hawkshead on 16 June 1688 but their six children, the youngest named John, were all baptised in Armley near Leeds. Their

eldest son Francis, born on 3 October 1696, married Elizabeth in St Peter's Church, Leeds in 1729 and their five offspring were all born in Armley. During the next two centuries, numerous Sowrey boys were given the names William and John and born into large families, many of them cloth makers, and they too all lived in the Leeds area. However, in December 1860, Joseph, the youngest of seven children, married Ann Benton from Wolverhampton and they chose to settle in the town. He became a licensed victualler and ran the Boot and Star in Wolverhampton. The eldest of their children was John William Sowrey born on 6 January 1862.

Aged twenty-seven, John married Susan Maria Chambers from Dersingham in Norfolk in 1889. She was seven years his junior and a year after their marriage the first of their six children, Cissy, was born. On 19 January 1892, their eldest son John was born at South Hamlet, Gloucester and eighteen months later, on 25 August 1893, Frederick, named after one of his uncles, was born at Kingsholm, Gloucester. William, also born in Kingsholm, arrived a year later on 8 August 1894 and over the next six years two daughters were added to the family. Two years after the arrival of the youngest daughter Joan, the family suffered a sad loss when the eldest girl Cissy died in 1904 aged fourteen.



The Boot and Star at Wolverhampton.

John senior, an intelligent man with strong Victorian principles, rose to be the Deputy Chief Inspector of Revenue. Throughout his life his family always referred to him as 'The Governor', an af-

fectionate nickname that members of the family recognise gives an accurate assessment of his character and manner. After his retirement he became a very successful investment consultant but, despite their wartime success, he always regretted that his three sons had not entered the Indian Civil Service.

The three boys were all educated at home by their mother and they then passed on their knowledge to their sisters. Built around the affection of their loving and devoted mother, who was the central figure in their lives for many years, the children established a very close bond and spent most of their childhood in each other's company. With less than three years separating the three brothers, they shared many interests. They had an aptitude for science and engineering with a fascination for anything mechanical, particularly motor cycles and, as they grew older, this fascination extended to cars. During their early childhood, sport did not play a large part in the Sowrey household, study and learning took precedence and discipline was rigidly enforced.

From an early age Freddie was the natural ringleader of his brothers and sisters. He was blessed with an ability to turn his hand to many practical applications, a quality that proved beneficial to other members of the family over the next few years. He was very practical and observant and, after watching a cobbler at work, he bought a knife and an anvil and was soon repairing his brother's shoes.

By the time John was ready to attend school, the family had moved from Gloucestershire and settled at Merton in south-west London and John entered King's College School, Wimbledon in 1904 having gained a Junior Entrance Scholarship. It was an independent school founded in 1829, and the junior division of King's College, University of London. KCS, as it became universally known, had recently moved from its long-established location in London's Strand in order to



*Above: 'The Governor' with his sister Annie.  
Below: Susan Sowrey, 1913.*





Above: The three brothers: John, Fred and William.  
Below: John.



expand.

Fred also gained an Entrance Scholarship and joined his elder brother at KCS in 1906 and William – always known as Bill – continued the tradition a year later. Their success, each at the first attempt, reflects great credit on their mother's teaching skills and determination.

In 1909, John gained his matriculation, which completed his schooling, and the following year he moved up to King's College, University of London to take his place in the Natural Science Division of the Faculty of Science. The Sowrey family had a long and distinguished history of service with the Indian Civil Service and it was expected that the brothers would follow this family tradition and John entered King's to prepare for entry into the service. In the summer of 1911 he gained an Intermediate Certificate, Class II in Chemistry.

By the time the boys started to leave school the family had moved to a substantial house and farm in Staines, Middlesex and Yeoveney Lodge became a very happy home full of fun and laughter and a place where the children could entertain their friends. They had enjoyed a very happy childhood. The younger girls idolised their three older brothers and in the difficult years ahead, this family love and mutual loyalty was a great strength to all of them.

Fred was a prefect at KCS and he enjoyed active membership of the school's Scientific Society, which had expanded its interests to include the new and exciting technology of aeronautics. He visited Bisley Shooting Ground on occasions where he became a superb shot, and one year his team managed to win the coveted Ashburton Shield.

He followed elder brother John to King's, London in October 1912 having been awarded a Salter's Company Exhibition and the KCS Maths Scholarship. He too joined the Faculty of Science and after two years he successfully gained a Bachelor of Science intermediate degree. However war intervened before he could complete the three-year course and at the end of the 1914 summer

term, he volunteered for service in the army. John had completed his three-year course and passed the civil service examination in April 1914. Bill, who had gained his school matriculation in 1912, was awarded the Edgell Hunt Science Scholarship to King's College specialising in mathematics, chemistry and physics. He followed his brothers into the Faculty of Science and entered the university a year after Fred. His attendance was also interrupted by the outbreak of war and after two years he too withdrew in order to undertake military service.

During their time at university, Fred and Bill served with the Officer Training Corps (OTC) and attended the annual summer camps so were well prepared for entry into the military. As with so many of their generation, they were quick to volunteer and ready to meet the national call to arms.



Fred in 1913.



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