



Henry Courtney Brocklehurst.

LEEK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HENRY Courtney Brocklehurst was born in 1888 and grew up on the Swythamley estate; he was very sporty and enjoyed taking part in shooting parties. He was influenced by Frederick Courtney Selous, a great game hunter who worked for Cecil Rhodes in South Africa.

After Eton, Brocklehurst joined the Army Prep school at Buxton and then, in 1908, became a cavalryman in the 10th Royal Hussars. This was a regiment of aristocrats who paid for their own horses and uniform.

His first assignment was in India where the life consisted mainly of parties, polo and pig-sticking, with a trip up to the Khyber Pass for a change of scene.

In 1911 he was promoted to full Lieutenant and participated in the Delhi Durbar and around that time also took an extended trip to British East Africa with his brother Philip.

A year later he joined an Arctic expedition to Spitsbergen and Greenland, returning with a walrus as his trophy.

In 1912 the regiment transferred to South Africa where there was much more military work to be done although he still found time for a three-month game hunting trip in Mozambique.

In May 1914 he was accepted to join Shackleton's team on their third trip to the Antarctic and set out with them on August 1.

However, they had only reached Margate two days later when Germany declared war. So our gallant hero promptly left to join the 5th Dragoon Guards and by August 23 was in the midst of the action at Mons.

In November he re-joined his old regiment and in February 1915 was made Captain at the front.

But this war was a disappointment to Brocklehurst and his colleagues as they quickly found that their cavalry skills were useless and the conditions ghastly in trench warfare.

He participated on foot in the second Battle of Ypres where 140 were killed or injured.

Spring 1916 saw him at the Somme, where the cavalry were again of no use; this was a bitter blow to Brocklehurst's pride and prestige.

Rather than hang around feeling useless, in September 1916 Brocklehurst joined the new 'Flying Corps'; he considered that flying must be 'easier than riding a horse!'

Training was minimal and consisted of sitting in a mock-up of a fuselage while being pushed along the ground by colleagues and the planes were little more than 'pram-wheels, waxed paper and string.'

The Flying Corps had only 63 planes and there were many crashes. Over 14,000 aviators lost their lives, half of those in training.

Fortunately Brocklehurst survived and, after gaining his aviator's certificate in January '17 he was given a Graham-White Bi-plane and was assigned to 26th Squadron in German East Africa (now Tanzania), where the airbase was continually on the move to keep pace with the enemy.

By May 1917 the base was in the remote south of the region and difficult to get to.

Brocklehurst was an adventurer, soldier and giant panda fan!

On his arrival at an earlier base he was given a plane whose engine failed its first flight. It landed nose down, catapulting out Brocklehurst's possessions.

The plane was a write off but miraculously Brocklehurst and his rifle came out unscathed.

After waiting five weeks for a replacement plane he finally reached the last airbase to find that the enemy had crossed over into the surrounding neutral Portuguese territory and so were out of range; so the Squadron was disbanded and Brocklehurst spent some time in a Cairo hospital recovering from the effects of Malaria.

April 1918 saw the Flying Corps become the RAF and the Squadron was sent to Palestine to drive back the Turks after which Brocklehurst wangled a trip back to England where on July 18 he quietly married Lady Helen Mitford; a widow with two young daughters (and aunt to the Mitford sisters).

In September he was part of Shackleton's team helping the white Russians fight the Bolsheviks where his experiences in coping with Arctic conditions were invaluable.

In February 1919 he returned to the UK and resigned his commission a month later.

For the next five years he lived the quiet life with his wife and family but his longing for adventure persisted.

He and Philip went out to the Congo on a big game hunt which led in 1922 to the post of game warden for the Sudan.

His job was to conserve wildlife, principally so the rich and famous could have something to shoot at. He was very successful at his job and learned much about the animals and their habitats.

The outdoor life suited his temperament and gradually he began to promote the idea of bagging one specimen of quality rather than quantity and eventually encouraged the use of camera instead of rifle.

At first his wife spent the winter months with Brocklehurst in the Sudan but they were growing apart and in 1930 she filed for divorce after Brocklehurst's affair with another woman.

In 1931 Brocklehurst left his job in Africa and returned to Leek to live in Roches House, where he spent much of his time organising and participating in shooting parties.

But still adventure beckoned. Though very un-politically correct now, in 1929 Teddy Roosevelt's sons had shot a panda out in China and Brocklehurst yearned to do the same.

He visited the boys to admire the specimen and to seek advice for the trip and in 1934 left for China with the support of the Natural History Museum.

His trip was made more adventurous by the Chinese Civil War which made many routes inaccessible, but eventually he reached the mountainous eastern edge of West China where, camped at 13,000ft, he heard a roar which turned out to be a two-metre tall male panda which he promptly shot; though decided not to also shoot a female as she might be pregnant.

Roland Ward was commissioned to mount the specimen and it was displayed in London in 1936 and in Berlin in 1937.

In 1938 Brocklehurst offered it for sale to the Natural History Museum, who declined the offer as by then they already had four specimens, so it was displayed in Swythamley Hall until World War Two, when it was given to West Park Museum in Macclesfield to protect it from the soldiers billeted at the hall, and where it still can be seen today.

After WW2 Brocklehurst went back to China to try to capture a live panda but was unsuccessful.

In 1936 he had acquired surplus animals from Whipsnade Zoo, including the famous wallabies whose descendants still roamed the Roaches until recently and a yak who some locals objected to as it had a habit of overturning vehicles in its path.

At the onset of WW2 he applied to re-join his regiment; he was rejected because of his age but was taken on by MI5 and spent 10 months as a special agent.

He was given the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and sent into Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) to try to get the tribes to rise up against the occupying Italians; but the mission was abandoned after Haile Selassie protested to Churchill.

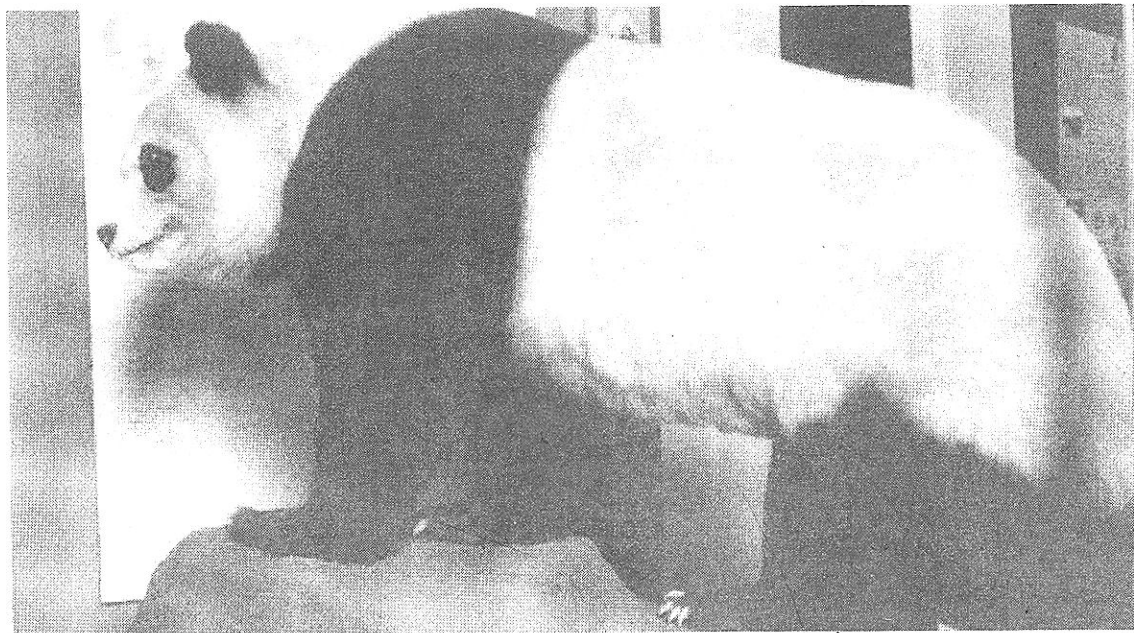
Brocklehurst, then aged 54, became part of the team who were sent on Mission 204 to Burma to infiltrate themselves into China in order to train Chinese guerrillas to fight against the Japanese and it was here that his luck finally ran out.

The team were sent without supplies, they were expected to forage for food en route and at every turn they found themselves in a hostile jungle environment and surrounded by the Japanese army on all sides.

Starving and suffering from malaria, typhoid and dysentery one by one the team members succumbed and for a long time their fate was unknown.

Brocklehurst was reported missing, presumed dead, in June 1942 and in August there was a report that he had drowned while trying to escape the Japanese.

He is remembered by a memorial window commissioned by his mother for Swythamley Chapel and the plaque on the Hanging Stone to the North of the Roaches.



Panda shot by Courtney Brocklehurst at West Park Museum.