

# Air Chief Marshall Lord Dowding GCB GCVO CMG Commander in Chief Fighter Command.

by A M Macfarlane

Location of plaque – Darnley Drive, Southborough.



Hugh Dowding was born at Moffat, Dumfriesshire, in 1882, educated at Winchester College and the Royal Military Academy Woolwich, and was commissioned into the Royal Garrison Artillery in 1900. After service in Gibraltar, Ceylon and Hong Kong, he was posted to the mountain artillery at Rawalpindi, India, and the next six years were, he later claimed, the happiest of his entire career.

Whilst at the Staff College, Camberley, in 1912, where he earned his nickname “Stuffy”, he learned to fly at his own expense and, on the outbreak of War in August 1914, he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps.

In 1920 and 1921 he was responsible for two of Hendon’s hugely popular annual air pageants, and nothing, he recalled “has ever induced in me a comparable state of prostration”. However, his upward progress was steady and in January 1933 he was promoted air marshal and awarded a knighthood. He became air member for research and development at a time when both the Hurricane and Spitfire were being developed.

In July 1936, he was appointed first head of the newly-created Fighter Command, with his HQ at Bentley Priory, and set about preparing the world’s first effective air defence system, based on two excellent fighter aircraft, two chains of coastal radar stations and superb operations rooms. It was quoted in The Times of 16 February 1970 that, even if he had died *before* the Battle of Britain was fought, “his work in the field of technical development would have placed him high among his country’s saviours”.



Lord Dowding had married on 16 February 1918 the widow of an Army officer, Clarice Maud Vancourt. They had one son but sadly Clarice died suddenly in 1920.

Lord Dowding delegated the actual conduct of the Battle of Britain to his Group commanders, especially Park, and was finally replaced in November 1940 and retired in 1942. He was created a Baron in 1943. He was married again in 1951 to a war widow, Muriel Whiting. They lived together at 5 Darnley Drive, Southborough, from 1951 to 1967, then moved to Tunbridge Wells. His last public appearance was in September 1969 at the premiere of the film “The Battle of Britain” where, crippled with arthritis, he was confined to a wheelchair. He died in February 1970, and his ashes are in Westminster Abbey.

His son, Derek, who served as a fighter pilot during the Battle of Britain and retired as a wing commander, succeeded him as the second Baron Dowding of Bentley Priory.