

## **From 'hair brained trifler' to 'real hero'. The Life and Times of Johnnie Johnson.**

John Weitzel, Loughborough Grammar School's Archivist, spoke to the Local History Group about 'Johnnie Johnson', arguably Loughborough's most famous son. One hundred and eleven years to the day after James Edgar Johnson was born on 9 March 1915 to a Police Constable and his wife in Barrow-Upon-Soar

For the first half he concentrated on Johnnie's seven and a half years at the Grammar School, which he entered at the age of 9 in 1924 when his father became a Sergeant in Loughborough. Displaying his record cards, which showed him bottom of his form in his first year in the senior school 'Very Worrying a hair brained trifler' followed by him improving considerably when he entered the boarding house after father became an Inspector in Melton on Mowbray. He stressed his athletic ability – winning House Cross Country 3 years in a row and both the 1 mile and 880 yards at Sports Day and being a member of the School's football and cricket teams – before he was expelled for swimming naked in the School's outdoor pool just before his final term, which ruined his desire to go to RAF Cranwell.

After working for the Borough Surveyor in Melton, he went on to do a Civil Engineering Degree at University College, Nottingham whilst paying for his own flying lessons. However he was rejected first by the Auxiliary Air Force, then the RAF Volunteer Reserve before being accepted and completed his flying training in May 1940. Unfortunately the recurrence of an earlier rugby injury kept him out of the Battle of Britain before entering the war in 1941 flying alongside Wing Leader Douglas Bader and opening his account in June.

In the subsequent four years he was to fly over 700 combat missions – most notably leading his wing four times over the Normandy beaches on D Day before then becoming the first Allied fighter unit to operate in France, famously having his spitfire converted to carry barrels of beer for the unit from the UK – flying for 1741 hours before his spitfire was struck by a single shell. He shot at 57 aircraft, hitting 51 of them, and his tally of 38 'kills' made him the top RAF pilot of WW2.

It is for this reason that his initials JEJ feature on virtually every model of a spitfire and in every picture. After the end of the war he was offered permanent commission and stayed in the RAF. In 1950 he was attached to the USAF and flew with them in the Korean War. In 1960 he was made a CBE and in 1965 was promoted Air Vice-Marshal and appointed a Companion of the Order of the Bath before retiring in 1966.

He died on 30 January 2001 and later that year his medals were sold for a world record sum of £241,500 and part of his estate continues to fund travel awards at the Grammar School for boys to do things that he would have approved of.

Remarkably he is not remembered in Loughborough – other than a magnificent mural as part of the Ladybird Collective – but is remembered at the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection in Salisbury where a full size replica spitfire with his initials JEJ was erected, to mark the role of the local residents in building over 2000 spitfires.

At the end of his talk members were able to view a large collection of memorabilia that John had amassed, most notably the record of his 38 kills found at a 'Yard Sale' in Oakhurst, California.