

Community Services Committee

Report Title:	Tributes to Johnny Smythe
Meeting Date:	16 July 2024
Contact:	Jane Webster, Administration Officer and PA to the Mayor Cllr David Dawson

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek Thame Town Council funding to support a film tribute at the museum to John Henry Clavell Smythe QC MBE OBE.
2. To seek support for the installation and funding of a Blue Plaque for John Henry Clavell Smythe to be installed in 2025/26.

Benefits

3. The Project will bring more tourists to Thame interested in the history of John Henry Smythe as a war hero and the officer in charge of the inaugural Windrush voyage to the UK in 1948.
4. Raise awareness of Thame's links with a key figure in the UK's diverse heritage and provide a learning resource for school students visiting Thame Museum.
5. Blue Plaques increase public awareness of the significance of certain sites and buildings and celebrate the achievements of people of note, adding to the historic substance of the town.
6. Blue Plaques extend local knowledge about the town's past, strengthen the sense of identity with our place in history, and add a further point of interest for visitors to the town

Background

7. See [Appendix A](#) at the end of this report to read the extraordinary life of former Thame citizen John Henry Smythe.
8. To note that:
 - The Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board has approved a blue plaque to be fitted on the wall of the former home of John Henry Smythe at 1 Garden City, Thame at some point in 2025.
 - Thame Museum is installing a permanent exhibit to John Henry Smythe that will be opened at some point before Armistice Day this year.
 - John Henry's son Eddy, who lives in Chinnor, is donating a number of his late father's artefacts to the museum.
 - A six-minute film is being produced for this exhibit. Local video production company Raw Pictures is donating its services free of charge as is local drone company Rubicon Drones.
 - Archive video material from British Pathé's archive has been secured at a discounted price of £590 for a five-year licence.

Promotion

9. Details are yet to be finalised and final decision rests with the museum but there will be a formal opening of the exhibit at some point. As John Henry Smythe is descended from the Krio community in Sierra Leone his son Eddy is in discussion with Idris Elba's agent. Idris Elba is also descended from the Krio community and an active campaigner to raise awareness of them.

Resource Appraisal

10. £590 from the Community Activities budget for the film Licence.
11. A budget of up to £1,100 towards the purchase and installation of the plaque and design costs to update the Blue Plaque information booklet.
12. Impact on staff time will be minimal as Cllr Dawson will take the lead on project management, with TTC officers raising the purchase orders as required.

Recommendation

- i) That the Council approves funding the archive video material in full for £590 to cover the next five years.*
- ii) That the council supports the blue plaque project and budgets in the 2025/26 accounts for the installation of the Blue Plaque for Johnny Smythe and associated administration.*

Appendix A

Newsletter Article from TTC's e-newsletter (26 October 2023)

Celebrating Black History Month

October is drawing in, however there is still time to celebrate Black History Month and we would like to use this opportunity to celebrate the life of John Smythe, who once resided in Thame and is buried in St Mary's Church.

Born in Sierra Leone, West Africa, John, also known as Johnny joined the Royal Air Force in 1940 at the age of 25, as at the time Sierra Leone was a British colony.

John was selected to train as a navigator due to his mathematic skills. During the war he flew 26 missions as a Short Stirling bomber crew member. His plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire, which resulted in an engine explosion and John was struck. After time in hospital he was transferred to Stalag Luft I, a prisoner-of-war camp in northern Germany and remained there for 18 months.

John was a prisoner until 1945, when one morning his inmates woke to find that all the guards had disappeared due to the news that the Russian Army were heading to Germany.

John returned to London and worked with the Colonial Office, providing welfare for demobilised airmen from the Caribbean and Africa. He later became a senior officer on a captured German troop ship, which had been renamed the Empire Windrush. John was given sole responsibility for demobilising all the Caribbean troops back to their homes at the end of the war. He quickly realised the troops had no work back at home, whilst England needed to be rebuilt, and therefore needed workers. John arranged with both Governments ships to bring these Commonwealth citizens back to the UK, and to get them into jobs and the community.

He continued working with the Colonial Office, however after winning a court case defending a demobilised RAF soldier, despite having had no legal training, he was introduced to the Inns of Court by the presiding judge. John qualified as a barrister in London, before returning to Freetown where he went on to become the Queen's Counsel and Sierra Leone's attorney general.

Like many soldiers John did not discuss his experiences in the war until much later in life, and suffered greatly with PTSD. Even in his 70's when an X-ray was taken he still had pieces of shrapnel in his intestine.

John retired and lived in Thame, to be close to his son Eddy, who now resides in Chinnor. John passed away in 1996.

His story is such an interesting one, his tenacious attitude and fight for all to receive justice is something we can all learn from! Thame is proud of once having John as a part of our community, and as with all the fallen soldiers who once lived or resided in Thame, Thame remembers.