CHRISTMAS ISLAND

The Story of David Edward Thorley



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There have been two locations known as Christmas Island. One is an Australian territory situated in the Indian Ocean, named by Captain William Mynors when he passed by it on Christmas Day in 1643. This island lies between Java in Indonesia and Australia's northwest coast.

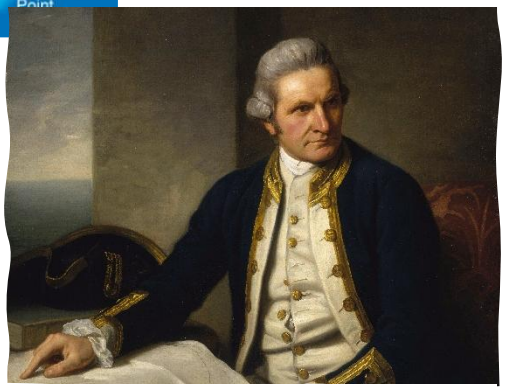
The other Christmas Island, now called Kiritimati, (pronounced Kiribass) is part of Kiribati in the Pacific Ocean.





It was first recorded by Captain James Cook on Christmas Eve in 1777.

In the 1950s, Britain conducted several nuclear tests on this Pacific island.

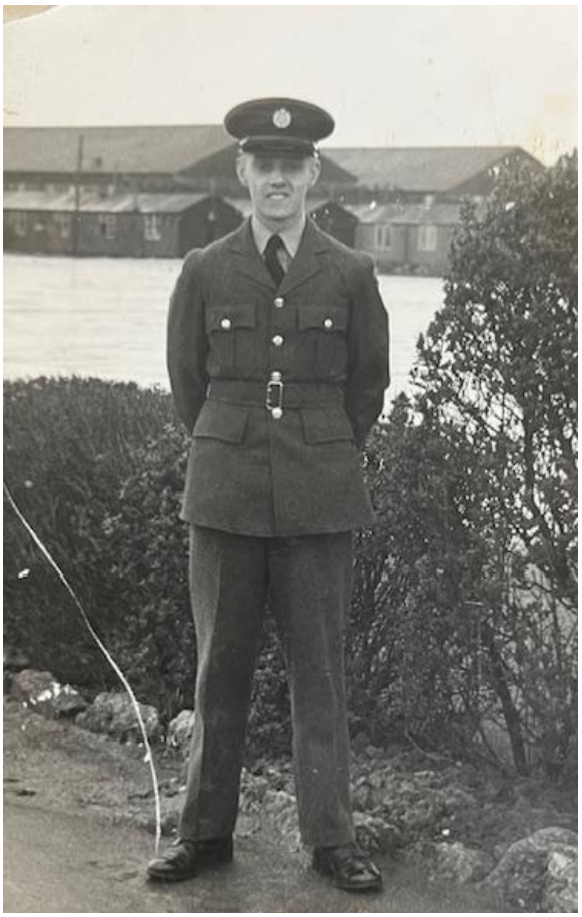


Captain James Cook

David Edward Thorley was one of eight children born to George Henry Thorley and Frances Lizzie (née Wigley), known as Lizzie. He was the twin brother of Dorothy Elizabeth; they were born on 8 January 1937. David and Dorothy were baptised on 16 May that same year. Prior to David's birth, his parents and five older siblings lived at 7 Church Lane. Subsequently, Lord Leigh arranged for the family to move to a larger residence at 1 Birmingham Road, now known as Phoenix Cottage. George died in 1950 at the age of 53, leaving his widow, Lizzie, to care for the family. David was 12 years old.



David and Dot in 1940 with their Grandmother Maria Thorley



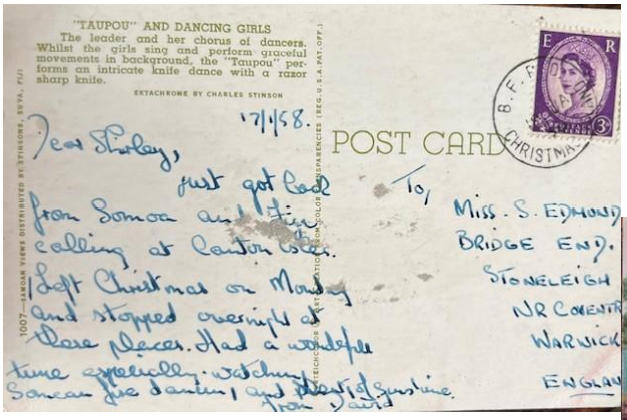
David aged 18 at RAF West Kirby
Regiment number: 4168414

After finishing school at the age of 15, David began an apprenticeship with Dunlop as a rim and wheel pattern maker. Then in 1955, at the age of 18, he was conscripted for National Service. He enlisted in the Royal Air Force on 27 April and trained at RAF West Kirby, eventually achieving the rank of senior aircraftman (SAC). After spending two years at RAF West Kirby, he was posted to Christmas Island (Kiritimati) in September 1957 for a year, where his duties included servicing Vickers Valiant bombers, which carried the H bombs that were used for nuclear testing.



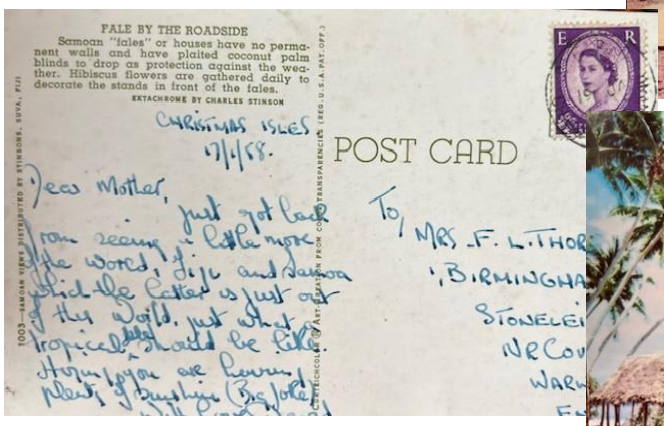
David on Christmas Island, 1957, with fellow servicemen

While stationed on Christmas Island David's accommodation was a tent.



He sent many letters home, including postcards to Shirley Edmunds and his mother from his trips to Samoa and Hawaii.







The air force personnel seemed to have plenty of free time, which led them to feel homesick—a sentiment they expressed in their letters. To help pass the time they created a certificate called the Beachcomber.



The International Association of Beachcombers certifies that:

Mr D E Thorley

is Grade A Beachcomber material: he is highly skilled at lying on the beach and doing nothing but watch the girls go by, he will pick up almost anything he can find on the beach, he is an expert toe wriggler, and sand-flea-bite-scratcher, a master at avoiding work, able to grow scraggy whiskers, unafraid of anything in a bottle and always needs a haircut.

David rarely discussed his time on the island, except to mention the land crabs. It's likely he wanted to put out of his mind both the reason he was there and his experience witnessing the detonation of the H-bomb, now referred to as Operation Grapple X.

While David was stationed on Christmas Island, seven nuclear tests took place, following three earlier ones. The first test after his arrival occurred on 8 November 1957, when Valiant XD824 dropped a device offshore that caused structural damage to the RAF base which was 24 miles away. The United Kingdom's last

atmospheric nuclear test happened on 23 September 1958. David returned to England soon after and completed his service 26 April 1960 at RAF Strubby, Lincolnshire.





David returned to Stoneleigh and began work at Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft (AWA) in Baginton. He was a founder member of the Stoneleigh Male Voice Choir and sang a solo verse at the first carol service in Stoneleigh Church. He had a fine tenor voice and a deep love of music.



Shirley and David had grown up together in Stoneleigh and, during their teenage years, would join village friends for Sunday walks from the white bridge, up Job Lees' Hill (Motslow Hill) to Stareton, finishing with lemonade at Mrs. Boots' shop.



His relationship with Shirley developed, leading to their marriage at Stoneleigh Church on 29 September 1962. The couple initially resided in Stoneleigh with David's mother; however, after ten months, due to the unavailability of properties for purchase or rent in Stoneleigh, they moved to Finham, while continuing to spend considerable time in Stoneleigh.



David and Shirley were married for 28 years and had two daughters. He was a devoted family man who loved playing with them and dressing up for fun. He also enjoyed recording his daughters. The couple were regulars at the Victory Hall, now the Village Hall, particularly for whist drives and dance nights, and David was always first on the dance floor. His parents, George and Lizzie, ran the village dances and scattered Lux soap flakes on the old floor to make it smoother and more slippery for dancing.

In the 1970s, David, who was interested in making tape recordings, was asked by the then vicar, the Reverend Neville Beamer, to record some of the services. Shirley still has many of these recordings, including some made when his daughters were young.

David died of a burst aorta on 5 June 1990, aged 53, the same age at which his father passed away.

It remains unclear whether his premature death was related to his time on Christmas Island. His father had served in World War I; however, no definitive conclusions can be drawn from these circumstances.

During 2023 the Ministry of Defence announced that service personnel who had been involved in nuclear weapon tests and trials around the world would be awarded a medal. There had been a lengthy campaign urging recognition of this service following the many medical conditions and deaths that had been attributed to these trials.



Shirley told her daughters that their dad served on Christmas Island. They applied for his medal, and in January 2024, Shirley received it 66 years after his service. The medal is now displayed in a frame alongside his photograph as a lasting tribute to his service.

Interestingly, Robin Bussell, who now lives in Stoneleigh, was awarded a medal for being on Christmas Island during the same period as David. Shirley discussed this with Robin, and their insights were featured in the July/August 2024 issue of the Stoneleigh and Ashow News. Robin recalls, *"Well, I served on Christmas Island at the same time and I, too, have a medal! I was sent ashore from HMS Warrior to Port Camp for a short spell. One of my tasks was to collect the mail from "Main Camp" (the airfield where David worked). I may have passed him in my RN Land Rover"*

Shirley, family and friends are immensely proud of David who was a quiet unassuming man. Shirley says, "He was my husband, my Stoneleigh Sweetheart, best friend, lover, and now my hero."



Sources

Shirley Ball née Edmunds

www.jetsofthecoldwar.co.uk/operation-grapple

Stoneleigh and Ashow News July/August 2024

www.britannica.com