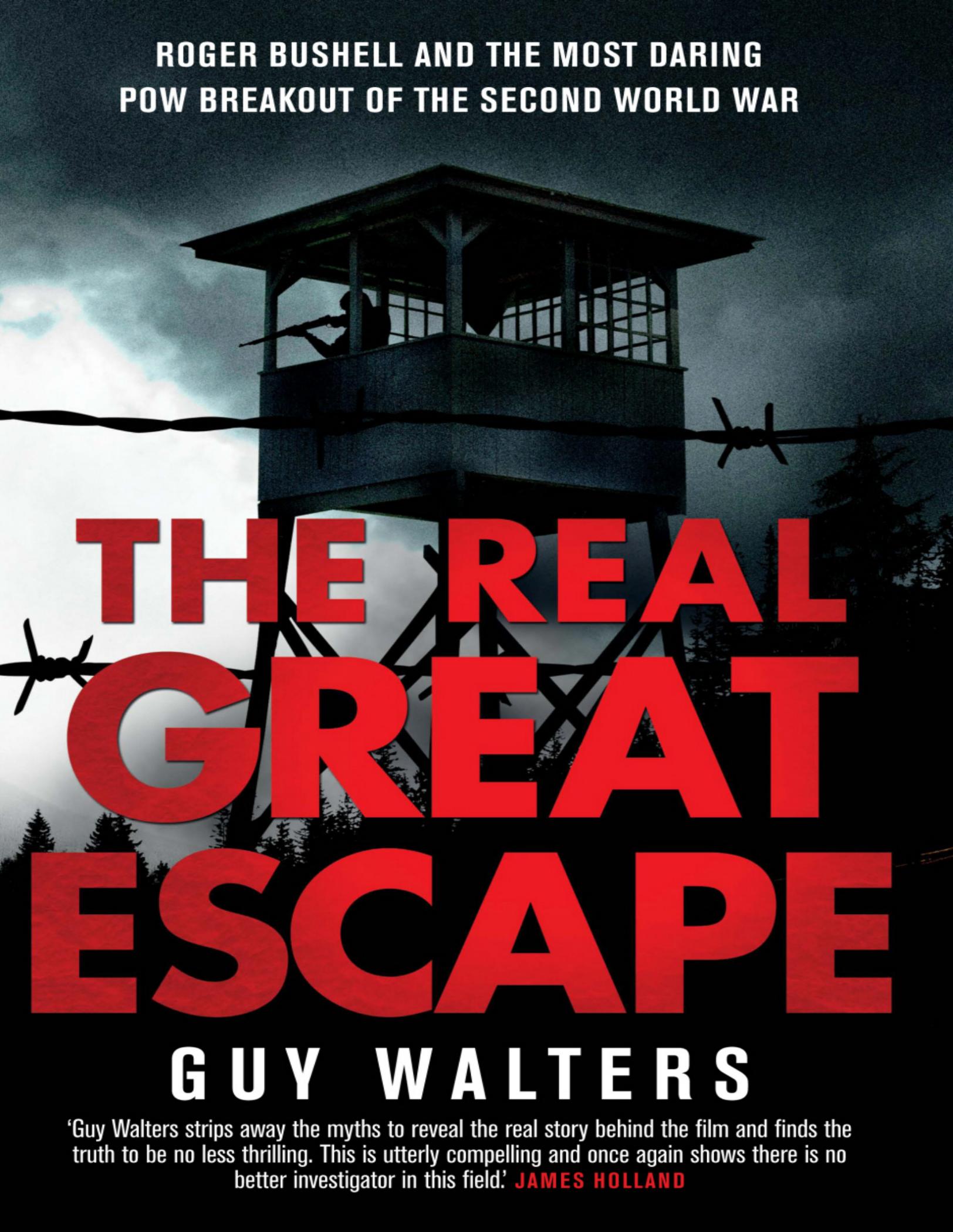


ROGER BUSHELL AND THE MOST DARING
POW BREAKOUT OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR



THE REAL GREAT ESCAPE

GUY WALTERS

'Guy Walters strips away the myths to reveal the real story behind the film and finds the truth to be no less thrilling. This is utterly compelling and once again shows there is no better investigator in this field.' **JAMES HOLLAND**

About the Book

In early 1942 the Germans opened a top-security prisoner-of-war camp in Lower Silesia for captured Allied airmen. Called Stalag Luft III, the camp soon came to contain some of the most inventive escapers ever known. They were led by Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, code-named 'Big X', who masterminded an attempt to smuggle hundreds of POWs down a tunnel built right under the noses of their guards.

The escape would come to be immortalised in the famous film *The Great Escape*, in which the ingenuity and bravery of the men was rightly celebrated. The plan involved multiple tunnels, hundreds of forged documents, as well as specially made German uniforms and civilian clothing. In this book Guy Walters takes a fresh look at this remarkable event and asks the question, what was the true story, not the movie version? He also examines what the escape really achieved, and the complex nature of the man who led it. The result is an authoritative and ground-breaking re-evaluation of the most iconic escape story of the Second World War.

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**THE REAL
GREAT
ESCAPE**

GUY WALTERS

This book is for
Richard and Venetia Venning

Successful escape routes

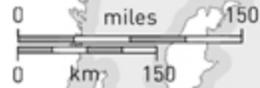


Key

- Vanderstok's (19), overland route
- Vanderstok's route by air
- Müller (43), and Bergsland's (44), overland route
- · - Müller and Bergsland's route by sea
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The number in brackets is the escapee's 'exit number' - see table on pages 308-12

Unsuccessful long-distance escape routes

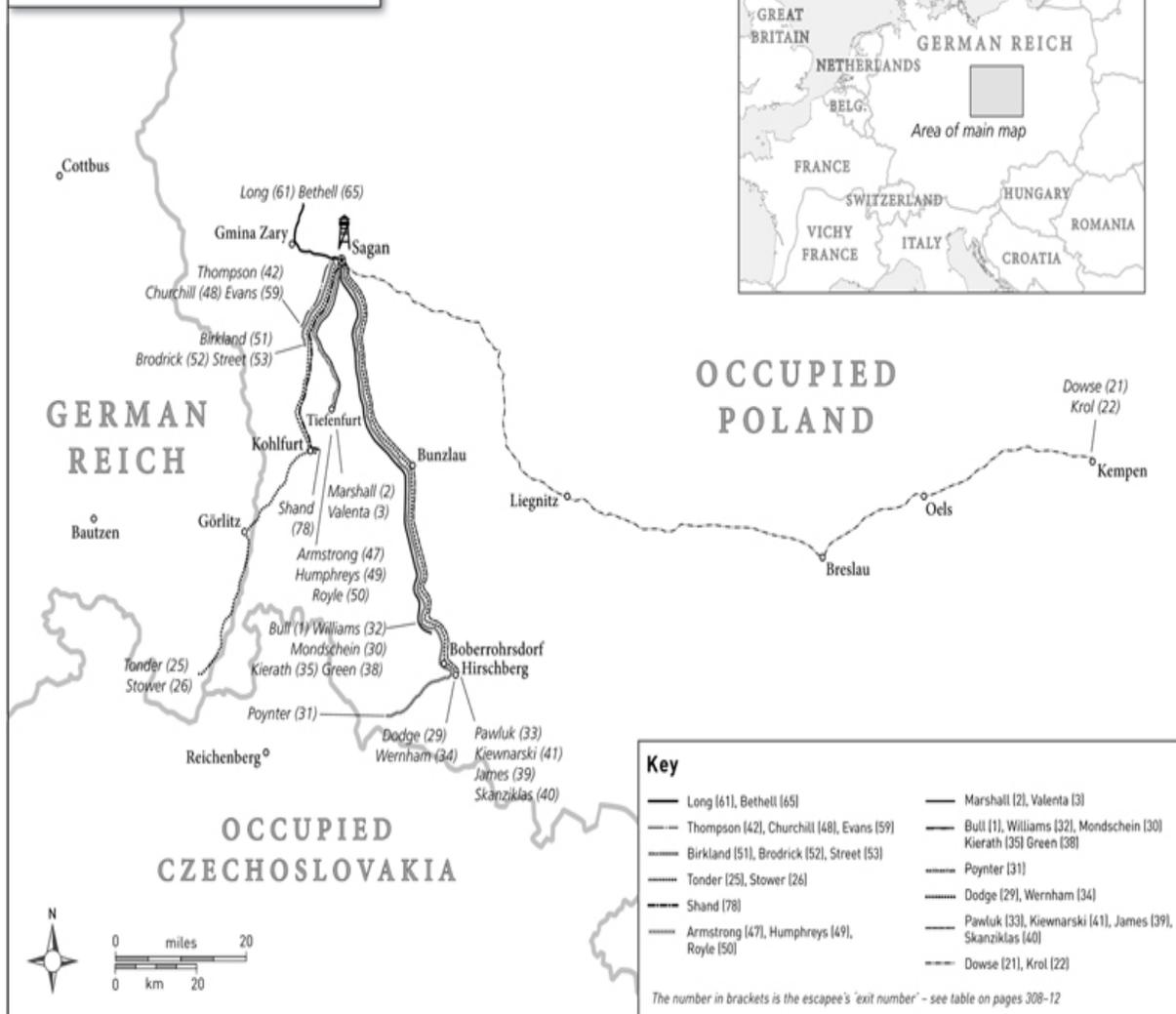


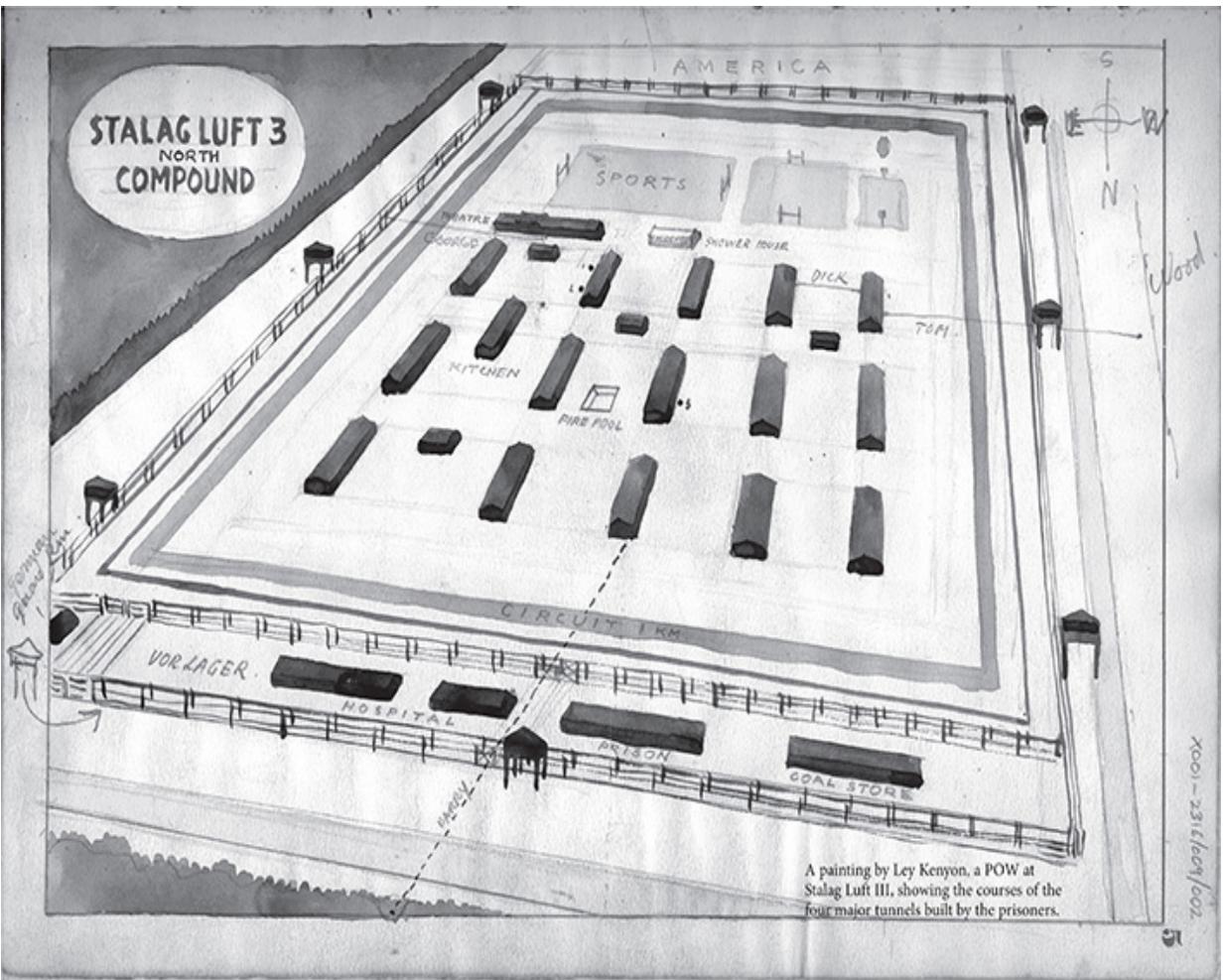
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| · · · · · | Hayter [58] | | |

The number in brackets is the escapee's 'exit number' - see table on pages 308-12

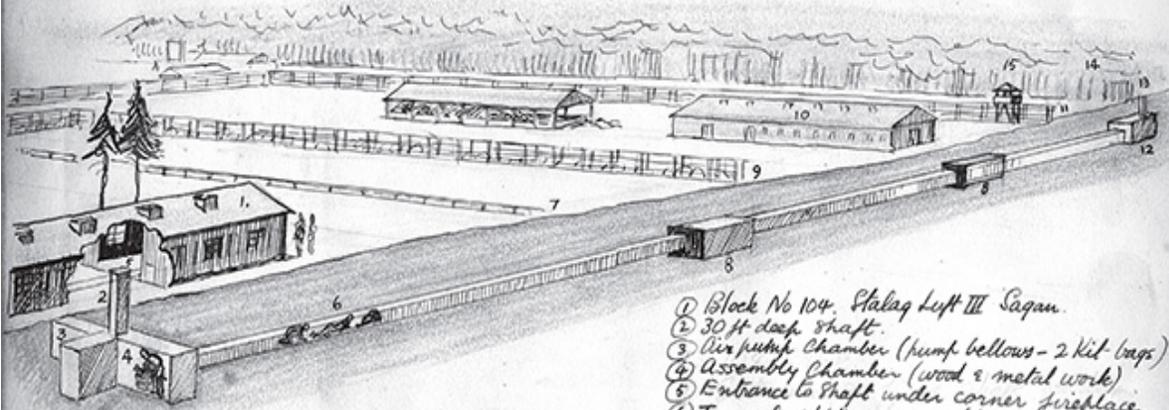
Unsuccessful short-distance escape routes





A painting by Ley Kenyon, a POW at Stalag Luft III, showing the courses of the four major tunnels built by the prisoners.

76 OFFICERS ESCAPED Breaking two Records for both World Wars.
 Longest tunnel (320 feet in length) breaking German record in Canada
 and Greatest number of men to escape at one time.
 50 Officers were shot by the Germans whilst attempting to evade recapture
 or attempting to re-escape.



- ① Block No 104. Stalag Luft III Sagan.
- ② 30 ft deep shaft.
- ③ Air pump Chamber (pump bellows - 2 Kit bags)
- ④ Assembly Chamber (wood & metal work)
- ⑤ Entrance to Shaft under corner fireplace.
- ⑥ Tunnel - 2'6" square with wooden rail track & hand car pulled by ropes for displaced sand & human transit.
- ⑦ Warming Rail round camp.
- ⑧ 2 Half way chambers for pulling cars.
- ⑨ Barbed wire round camp (Sound detection)
- ⑩ Luftwaffe Prison building.
- ⑪ Outer barbed wire.
- ⑫ Assembly Chamber.
- ⑬ Exit Shaft.
- ⑭ Pine Woods. (Exit 20 feet inside)
- ⑮ Observation box on Road passing Camp.

Introduction

THE NARRATIVE of the Great Escape resonates through our culture as persistently as the score of the film. Just as most can complete Elmer Bernstein's entire tune if they merely hear its opening B flat and E flat, many of us can relate the tale denoted by simply the two words 'great' and 'escape'. The story of the film, for those who missed it last Christmas, is that of a group of Allied prisoners of war imprisoned in a German camp set deep in a forest in occupied Lower Silesia. Hungry to get back to the fight and eager to prove as much of an annoyance to their captors as possible, the POWs mount an audacious plan to tunnel out of the camp in order to secure the escape of some two hundred prisoners. Led by an ambitious RAF officer called 'Roger Bartlett', himself a veteran escaper and a survivor of torture by the Gestapo, the prisoners execute their plan with the utmost ingenuity, not only building three tunnels, but also producing perfectly forged passes and brilliantly tailored civilian clothes. Finally, the night of the escape arrives, and when the tunnel is broken, the POWs are shocked to find that it falls some 50 feet short of woods. Because of this, and other mishaps, fewer than eighty manage to break free from the camp, which is nevertheless a brilliant achievement. However, of these, only three manage to make it home, and the remaining escapers are recaptured as they flee through various parts of the Third Reich. At the end of the film, as fifty of the POWs are supposedly being driven back to the camp, they are invited

to stretch their legs in a field, whereupon they are all shot dead on the order of a vengeful Adolf Hitler.

As films based on actual events go, the outline of *The Great Escape* is reasonably faithful to the true story of the mass breakout of prisoners from Stalag Luft III in what is now Poland in March 1944. Although a few of the *dramatis personae* are drawn on real personalities, many are necessary composites in order not to over-burden the movie with characters. 'Roger Bartlett', as played by Richard Attenborough, is perhaps the most accurately drawn, based on a Squadron Leader Roger Bushell, who did indeed play the leading role in organising the escape. Many of the details of how the civilian clothes and documents were produced are reasonably accurate, although the results in the film are distinctly more accomplished than their real counterparts. The relationship between the Germans and their captives is also well observed, and rings true to the reminiscences of the men who were there. However, as is to be expected, there is much in the film that is either sensational (a certain motorcycle chase comes immediately to mind) or simply wrong: the weather is exceptionally fine in the film, whereas at the time it was freezing and thick snow lay around.

From a historical point of view, the film contains two great failings. The first is tone. Much of the movie is comic, and although it is this quality that helps to make the film a classic, it does a disservice to the grimness of the real tale. It is in that depiction of the grimness that the second fault lies: the film places too little emphasis on the murders. Not only does it portray the men's executions incorrectly, but *The Great Escape* - quite necessarily for a jaunty blockbuster - fails to dwell on these killings. This ignores the fundamental fact that it is the execution of 'the Fifty' that distinguishes the real story of the Great Escape from the numerous other mass breakouts conducted by Allied

POWs from German camps. Ultimately, this is a story as much about a terrible crime as it is about heroism and ingenuity. If this seems wilfully mawkish, then it is worth noting that the other mass breakouts - no less great, no less ingenious - have all been forgotten. It is undoubtedly the murders that set this story apart.

The purpose of this book is to ascertain the real story behind the escape. Of course, there have been other books about it, not least those by Paul Brickhill, himself a former 'Kriegie' - the POW slang for POW, derived from the German for 'prisoner of war' - at Stalag Luft III, who wrote two accounts of the breakout: *Escape to Danger* in 1946, and *The Great Escape* in 1951. Both are suitably exciting, but what they lack is objectivity and analysis. Furthermore, as he wrote them shortly after the war, Brickhill was not able to draw upon the vast amount of material contained in archives in Britain, Germany and the United States. As a result, his books contain many errors, many of which are forgivable, but some of which are clearly the result of needing to make the story commercially appealing. Many of the histories that followed Brickhill's have built upon his somewhat shaky foundations and, as a result, the errors have been magnified, and many new ones have been inserted. Previous historians of the escape have relied far too heavily on the book that came before, and, with two exceptions, very little attention has been paid to the wealth of primary sources. Not one of these books offers a fresh perspective, or even raises any pertinent questions. As a result of the clumsy application of too much varnish, the true story of the Great Escape has been almost totally obscured.

Historians always like to claim that their work is a 'new history', and I do not claim to be exceptional. This *is* a new history because I have attempted to strip back all those layers of varnish. The best tool for that process is archival work, and I have been surprised - but not shocked - at the

enormous disparities between the documents and the histories. What has also raised my eyebrows is the ubiquity of downright fabrication in the memoirs of some of the escapers themselves, which cannot be explained away as the product of faltering memories. Trying to resolve the differences between those memoirs, histories, interviews and wartime files has nevertheless proved to be an enjoyable task, not least because that is the job of the historian.

After removing the varnish, the next task is the restoration, and it is during this process that big questions need to be asked. In the case of the Great Escape, there are several. What was the real purpose of the breakout? What did it achieve? What was Roger Bushell's motivation? What warnings did the POWs receive before they broke out? Was it really the duty of an officer to escape? How many men actually wanted to escape? How much assistance did the POWs receive from their German captors? Who were the men who carried out the executions of the fifty escapers? Was it right that these men were hanged after the war? Does the escape really deserve a place in our national consciousness? In short, was the Great Escape really that great?

Such questions may make some suppose I have approached this subject with a preformed iconoclastic agenda, but they should be assured that I did not. My only object was simply to tell the story from scratch, as if the film and all those other books had never been released. This history, therefore, is based as much as possible on primary sources, and what those sources reveal is a very different tale to the one that we are used to. In addition, as well as presenting a narrative of the escape itself and examining the life of Roger Bushell, these pages tell the story of the murders that followed, and scrutinise the decisions taken by the men who pulled the triggers. After all, the story of the Great Escape is as much theirs as it is

that of the escapers. Some of the conclusions I draw will doubtless cause discomfort, but my findings are based on evidence and not prejudice. Readers should also be aware that my approach emphatically does not make me a killjoy. The real Great Escape you hold in your hands is just as exciting and absorbing as the almost fictional version you currently have in your head. The only bad news is that nobody escaped on a motorbike, but then you probably already suspected as much.

Guy Walters
Mead End
January 2013

Chapter One

‘A man of fate’

WITHOUT ROGER BUSHELL there would have been no Great Escape. Certainly, tunnels would have been dug, wires would have been cut, passes would have been forged and all manner of escape activities would have taken place, but what Bushell provided was truly dynamic leadership, organisational genius and vaulting ambition - an ambition that ultimately overleaped itself. Bushell was a giant personality - a combination of charm, egotism, humour, recklessness, intelligence, devilry, arrogance, softness and magnetism. His story and that of the Great Escape are entwined so securely that it would be foolhardy to attempt to separate them. To reach an understanding of why the escape took place, one has to examine Bushell's motivation, and to do that, one needs to learn about the man.

Bushell was born on 30 August 1910 near the mining town of Springs, some 30 miles east of Johannesburg in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Coal had been found in the area in 1887, although it was the subsequent discovery of gold that would secure the town's expansion and enrichment. The first gold mine was established just two years before Bushell's birth, and by the late 1930s, the area would become the largest gold-producing area in the world, boasting eight working mines.¹ Bushell's father, Benjamin, was a mine manager, and he had migrated with his wife Dorothy from Britain to South Africa to take advantage of

the prospects offered by Springs. At the time of Bushell's birth, the family was living very comfortably, and Dorothy had given birth to a daughter called Rosemary.

Shortly after his birth, Bushell fell sick and was close to death. For a week he lost much weight, and the nursing sister, who was a Roman Catholic, insisted on holding an impromptu christening in the Bushells' home. Either through divine intervention or nature Bushell recovered, and soon developed into an affectionate and wilful child, who delighted in being able to spit vast distances, burning his sister's dolls, and playing with a mongrel called Rubbish that had been found on a tip.

Roger did, however, have a softer side, which was hardened at the age of eight and a half when he was sent to board at Park Town prep school on Mountain View hillside to the northeast of Johannesburg. Park Town was a turn-of-the-century mansion originally built for a mining engineer, and it had more than forty rooms, including a huge entrance hall and a minstrels' gallery. As well as participating in the normal prep-school activities, Bushell might have taken part in something more extracurricular: tunnelling. Running inside an upstairs wall that spanned the length of the school was a tunnel that the boys used for holding secret midnight feasts. It must have come as a shock when, on one occasion, they found that a master had left a bin inside the tunnel with a sign asking the tunnellers to use it for their litter. The Park Town tunnel would certainly not be the last that would feature in Bushell's life.²

After prep school, Bushell's parents sent him to Wellington College in Berkshire in southeast England at the beginning of 1923, where he joined a house called The Wellesley. Dorothy took him over to Britain, and although Roger would have been accustomed to being away, the thought of boarding nearly 6,000 miles from home must

have been tough to bear for both son and mother. Dorothy was no doubt partially satisfied by the letter she received from his housemaster two weeks after his arrival. 'Don't worry about him any more,' he wrote. 'He has already organised the new boys in the House and is very fit and full of himself. I know the type well. He will be beaten fairly often; but he will be much liked and perfectly happy.'³ The housemaster's words were prescient, and accurately captured much of Bushell's character, not only as a schoolboy, but also as an adult. Throughout his life, Bushell certainly attracted punishment, but it never seemed to undermine his likeability. It is a measure of his charisma that both schoolmasters and Germans alike were usually minded to forgive him any transgressions.

As his teenage years passed, Bushell would start to reveal the strength of personality that would later see him establish one of the most redoubtable escape organisations of the Second World War, or indeed of any war. Like many strong-minded and headstrong teenagers, Bushell was something of a rebel, and he was no respecter of authority or regulations. Furthermore, he also had a good imagination, and he was inclined to express his ideas rather firmly. Although he could be arrogant and tiresome, he seems to have remained reasonably well liked and was no bully. One housemate, two years Bushell's junior, recalled how he once cut in front of Bushell in order to get to the entrance of The Wellesley. 'I remember particularly his reaction,' the boy would recall six decades later. 'A good-natured grin and "Good God. What ignominy. Beaten by a squealer!"'⁴

By all accounts, Bushell had a satisfactory school career. Regarded as being 'vigorous and well known', he became a house prefect, played rugby for the First XV and was an adept Scout. However, he did apparently 'detest' cross-country running, which hardly made him exceptional. After

passing his School Certificate A in English, History and Physics-and-Chemistry, Bushell briefly studied at Grenoble University on the advice of a master, where he learned to speak French. According to one report, Bushell had an 'amazing capacity as a linguist', and as we shall see, his facility with languages would be of immense use in his career as an escaper; but at the time, there was no obvious application for his talent.⁵

Unsurprisingly, Bushell's father wanted his son to join him in the lucrative mining industry, and, in November 1926, Roger had applied for a place at Pembroke College, Cambridge, to read for an Engineering Honours degree.⁶ However, Bushell was not keen to follow in his father's footsteps down the mines for the simple reason that he was claustrophobic. The fact that Bushell suffered from this anxiety disorder seems extraordinary when one considers the nature of the escape by which he would make his name.

As we shall see, claustrophobia stopped many men from escaping under the ground, and the fear of confinement in the narrow, dangerous tunnels built for the Great Escape was even felt by those who did not suffer from such anxieties. But for claustrophobes, going down the tunnels was an especially terrifying experience, and for Bushell to have overcome this fear shows a remarkable strength of character and will. As Dorothy had observed, Bushell was not a person who felt no fear, but he would force himself to face it and to overcome it. That is surely the hallmark of courage.

In 1929, Bushell went up to Cambridge, where, instead of reading engineering, he decided to study law with a view to becoming a barrister. Such a choice of career was appropriate, as Bushell possessed a forceful nature, an analytical mind, a theatrical bent and plenty of charm. Now aged nineteen, he also cut an impressive physical figure. He stood at a burly 5 feet 10 inches, boasted a head of

thick black hair, had an easy smile and, most notably, arrestingly light-blue eyes. Although not conventionally handsome – Bushell would never be a beauty – women certainly found him attractive. Thanks to the lucrative mines of Springs, he was well heeled, and was able to indulge in the then glamorous sport of skiing, which he had discovered at the age of fifteen when he went to Mürren in Switzerland with a group of school friends. Today, we would call Bushell an alpha male, and, like many such characters, he enjoyed the company of women. He had many girlfriends, most of whom were wealthy, and some of whom were married. Either up at Cambridge, or up on the slopes, Bushell found himself a world away from the relative hickdom of Springs. He drove in the same manner in which he skied – recklessly – and would incur huge bills at his tailor’s, which would be passed on to his father. The difference between the two men started to yawn, and father and son would often argue.

While Benjamin Bushell was a no-nonsense, largely self-made man who had worked hard for his fortune, his son was turning into what might have looked a somewhat reckless and spendthrift boulevardier. Wellington, Cambridge and his father’s wealth had enabled Roger to run – and, indeed, ski – in faster and more socially elevated circles than that inhabited by his own family, and Bushell might have regarded his father as being less sophisticated than his smart new friends. Although it would be unfair to label Bushell a snob, he was perfectly capable of looking down his nose, a trait that was perhaps inherited from his mother.

Bushell’s upward social mobility was exemplified by his taste for skiing, a sport which was largely reserved for those with capacious wallets. Throughout the early 1930s, Bushell was a dominant figure amongst the Alpine fraternity, his position secured by a combination of sporting and social prowess. ‘He was one of the great characters of

St Moritz,' wrote the famous skier and mountaineer Arnold Lunn, 'and uncrowned king of the fashionable Italian skiing centre, Sestrières, within a fortnight of his arrival, not because he broke the record on the most popular of the Sestrières runs, but because the cosmopolitan clientèle of Sestrières were captivated by his boisterous charm.' Lunn, who did not particularly like Bushell, acknowledged that the word 'charm' was too 'weak a word to describe Roger's magnetism'. Lunn ascribed his appeal to the fact that Bushell expressed himself in forthright terms. 'I remember once hearing (from a distance) Roger describing to a sympathetic group in the Palace lounge the precise nature of the "lousy skiing" which had lost him an important slalom,' he recalled. Lunn approached Bushell and suggested that he might adopt a 'slightly less robust turn of speech', whereupon Bushell exclaimed, 'Christ, Arni! I *never* swear!'⁷ In fact, Bushell loved swearing, and was famous for it. But despite Lunn's misgivings, he had to admire the young man's social chutzpah. Lunn recalled one Anglo-Swiss post-race dinner in which the Swiss captain, Victor Streiff, paralysed by shyness, was unable to make a speech. He was heckled to speak, but he remained silent. 'Then Roger arose,' Lunn later wrote, 'and standing just behind Victor, made the speech which Victor should have made, in Bernese-German as accurate and far more fluent than Victor's. He condoled with the British team on their narrow defeat and in a few well-chosen words congratulated their team captain, Roger Bushell, on a fine performance.'⁸

However, Bushell was much more than a charming blue-tongued lounge lizard: he was in fact a superb skier. In 1931, he won the long-distance race at the British Ski Championship meeting at Wengen in Switzerland.⁹ In 1932, he won the Varsity Slalom.¹⁰ In 1935, in St Moritz, Bushell came fifteenth in the World University Ski Championship, a

ranking that he might have found disappointing. According to most accounts, Bushell's skiing style was not unlike his driving - fast and reckless. 'He used to take one course straight down at uniform, maximum speed, swearing like a trooper,' wrote one observer.¹¹ Predictably, Bushell's daredevilry on the slopes would result in injury. In a cross-country race in Canada in 1932, he suffered a bad fall and the tip of one of his skis tore open a gash in his right cheek and injured his right eye. For reasons that are unclear, Bushell refused to have the wound dealt with in Montreal, and he returned to Britain with half his face in bandages. He was finally operated on back in London, where the surgeon found that the gash had become infected. Although the operation had been a success, for the rest of his life his eye permanently drooped in a somewhat sinister fashion.

Bushell graduated from Cambridge in 1932 with a third-class degree, which is perhaps indicative that he put pleasure before study. Furthermore, he had missed the Lent term of 1931 for reasons that are unknown, and the skiing accident had seen him miss the Lent term of 1932.¹² Nevertheless, this poor result did not stymie his chances of becoming a barrister, and he joined the chambers of G. D. Roberts, KC, from where he was called to the Bar in 1934. Bushell quickly established a reputation as an able criminal barrister. Over the next five years, he both defended and prosecuted fraudsters, murderers, thieves and sexual offenders, including a soldier accused of molesting a fourteen-year-old girl.¹³ In one of his last cases before the war, in July 1939, Bushell prosecuted an autogiro test pilot for flying dangerously low over houses in Hanworth to the west of London.¹⁴ Acting for the prosecution in such a case must have been anathema to Bushell, who maintained his love of motorised daredevilry. Ironically, he once had to prosecute a young music teacher called Marion Cunningham, who was accused of refusing to stop for a

police car, and was chased nine miles from Hendon Central to South Mimms. Cunningham covered the distance in eleven minutes, during which for half of the time she had not put on her headlights. Bushell described the chase in court as 'remarkable', although he must have said the word with an inner grin, as such driving was very much his own style.¹⁵

Had it not been for the war, there can be little doubt that Bushell would have risen to the top of the profession. In December 1937, the *Empire News* marked him down as a 'fledgling to watch' after he had made an 'eloquent and successful plea at the Old Bailey'.¹⁶ Bushell's style of advocacy appeared to be as aggressive as his driving and skiing. Although such a style can alienate juries, it seemed to do Bushell no professional harm. It showed that beneath his charm lay an acidulous nature, which he did not hesitate to display. At the resolution of one case, in which he had successfully defended a London gangster on a murder charge, the defendant wished to shake hands. 'I don't shake hands with murderers,' Bushell replied. 'I only do what I'm paid to do.'¹⁷ By the outbreak of war, Bushell was regarded, according to his head of chambers, G. D. Roberts, as a 'familiar and popular figure in the Criminal Courts', for whom 'nothing was too much trouble'. Roberts also noted that Bushell had 'every desirable quality' to make a success at the Bar, and he managed not to allow any of 'manifold outside interests to interfere with his steady determination to make good'.¹⁸

As well as skiing, one of those interests was flying. In 1932, Bushell joined the RAF Auxiliary and Reserve Volunteers, and was assigned to 601 Squadron, which had been dubbed the 'Millionaires' Squadron' owing to its formation in October 1925 by a group of wealthy young amateur aviators. Bushell was invited to join the squadron by Lord Knebworth, with whom he had made friends while

skiing.¹⁹ Bushell would have felt at home amongst his fellow pilots, many of whom had modified their RAF uniforms with red silk linings and had a penchant for motorcycle polo. The squadron car park in Northolt, west London, featured some of the finest sports cars of the day, which were mostly used to get their owners back to White's club after a hard Saturday in a Hawker Hart. Although Bushell was not a member of the exclusive White's,²⁰ being a member of 601 carried a similarly weighty social cachet, and Bushell's fellow pilots included the likes of Max Aitken, the son of Lord Beaverbrook; Sir Philip Sassoon; fellow skiing fanatic William Rhodes-Moorhouse; the Conservative MP Loel Guinness; Brian Thynne, whose great-grandfather was the 3rd Marquess of Bath; Rupert Bellville, reputedly the first Briton to practise as a bullfighter and who would later fly with Franco's air force;²¹ Bushell's flatmate Michael Peacock; and Anthony 'Rex' Hayter, who would be a fellow Great Escaper. Photographs taken of the squadron are pure Bertie Wooster, depicting dashing young men variously nicknamed 'Boylo', 'Reggie', 'Jacko', 'The Doc', 'Hobbie', 'Bobbie', 'Nono', 'Parko' and 'Gillo' flying in a variety of aircraft, such as Avro 504s and Westland Wapitis. Sometimes, the photographs show the pilots with their canine companions, and in one shot from 1934, a black West Highland terrier perches on Bushell's lap. The presence of the likes of Noël Coward and David Niven in some of the pictures only adds to the sense of high society.²² The 601 'breed' was summed up well by Max Aitken. 'They were the sort of young men who had not quite been expelled from their schools,' he wrote, 'whom mothers warned their daughters against - in vain - who stayed up far too late at parties and then, when everyone else was half dead with fatigue, went on to other parties.'²³ Perhaps predictably, many of the members of 601 married each other's sisters, which caused Bushell to observe drily, 'If

this sort of thing goes on much longer, this squadron will be as in-bred as an Austrian village.'²⁴

Pictured wearing dark glasses, and holding either a cigarette or a pipe or even a rifle, Bushell fitted in with the 'Millionaires', combining Old-World polish with just the right measure of New-World roughness. 'With engaging eloquence to suit the occasion he could charm a jury or outclass a sailor in profanity,' observed Tom Moulson, a fellow member of 601. As well as being renowned for being able to 'spit an incredible distance', Bushell's charisma soon acquired him celebrity status throughout the Royal Air Force. By all accounts, the young barrister-cum-pilot revelled in his fame. 'The trouble with Bushell is he's always hiding his light under himself,' one senior officer punned. Bushell's capacity to hold his drink also drew some comment. 'He looks the sort of chap who, if you turned a tap on, would run out.'²⁵ As well as roister-doistering, Bushell also appeared to enjoy dallying with the opposite sex. On one occasion an earring was found in his plane, which caused much mirth among his fellow pilots. However, it was Bushell's facility with the bluest of language that really earned him his reputation. Fellow pilots would be ordered about over the air with the foulest of terms, which burned the ears of those hearing the transmissions on the ground. Among them was a radio amateur, who wrote to the squadron that although he enjoyed listening in when it was airborne, 'I am sorry to say that when Red Leader [Bushell] comes on the air I have to send the children out of the room.'²⁶

Bushell was undoubtedly a more than competent airman, but he would also take the kind of risks that saw him entered into squadron legend. During the weekend of 15 August 1936, 601 Squadron was holding its summer camp at Lympne Aerodrome above Romney Marsh in Kent. Although it was only two miles away, Bushell and his fellow

pilots often flew down to the nearest pub, the Botolph's Bridge Inn, where they would land on a small field nearby. That evening, an 'eager and thirsty' Bushell was heading down to the pub in a single-seater Aeronca C-3 owned by Max Aitken. Just as he was about to land, Bushell had to swerve to avoid a sheep, and he overshot the field. The Aeronca, which only weighed 569 pounds, careered through a hedge, knocked the head off a signpost that read 'To Dymchurch', and smashed into pieces on the road directly in front of the pub. 'Bushell stepped unscratched from the wreckage,' recalled Tom Moulson, 'apologised to Aitken with a deep bow, and began immediately to auction off the Aeronca's remains to the gathering crowd of spectators.'²⁷ The Aeronca - or what was left of it - was won by a Mrs Ann Davis, who composed a poem based on the plane's registration.

G one is Max's aeroplane
A rtful Roger is to blame
D own at Botolph's Bridge one night
Z ero was his cruising height
Z oomed too low - out went the light!

Bushell's crash even made the pages of the *Daily Mirror* the following Monday, although the report merely stated that Bushell had overshot the airfield.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, the 'To Dymchurch' sign was claimed as a prized trophy, and was shown with the squadron's silverware.²⁹

As such a giant character, Bushell was undoubtedly a member of London society, which was exemplified in July 1935 by his being made godfather to the daughter of his fellow pilot, Peter Clive. The christening took place at St Peter's in Eaton Square, and attending the service was Lady Georgiana Mary Curzon.³⁰ Although it is not clear whether this was the first time Bushell and 'Georgie' had met - it is more likely that they had done so at the Clives'

wedding in May 1934³¹ – it was around this time that the two became lovers. The story of their relationship is a tragic one, and it shows that the South African-born Bushell – with a father who managed mines – was never wholly accepted by some members of the aristocratic set with whom he associated.

Georgie was quite a catch – tall, willowy, with dark hair and ivory skin, she was beautiful, and, furthermore, extremely aristocratic. Eight months older than Bushell, she was the daughter of Francis Curzon, the 5th Earl Howe. Educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, Curzon had seen action at Gallipoli during the First World War, and in the 1918 General Election he successfully stood as the Conservative candidate for Battersea South, a seat he held until 1929, when he succeeded to his father's peerage. His great passion was motor racing, and while he was an MP, he founded the British Racing Drivers' Club and spent much of the 1930s racing. His greatest sporting achievement was winning the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1931, a race in which he participated six times.³² Between 1935 and 1938, Curzon was aide-de-camp to George V, an office that exemplifies the height of the family's social elevation.³³ If further proof of Georgie's place in society were required, one only has to consult the guest list of a dance hosted for her by her parents in London in July 1928, which included at least one duke, four duchesses, three marquesses, three marchionesses, thirteen earls, fifteen countesses, and ten viscounts.³⁴

Like many attractive women from her background, Georgie was recruited by the cosmetics firm Pond's to advertise its famous cold cream and tissues. The combination of lineage and beauty was considered irresistible to potential customers, especially those in the United States. By the time Bushell met her, Georgie had featured in several magazines, including *Picturegoer* in

1932, in which 'the charming debutante, Lady Georgiana Curzon ... guards her youthful loveliness with Pond's two creams'.³⁵ In the *New Yorker* magazine in September 1931, she appeared alongside her mother to promote Pond's Tissues, which were, the pair claimed, 'the best way to remove cold cream we ever found'.³⁶ In February of that year, Georgie was accompanied by Lady Alexandra Haig, Lady Louis Mountbatten and various other aristocratic beauties in a full-page advertisement in several American newspapers to sell the Pond's range. 'If debutantes had time to write up diaries,' Georgie is quoted as saying, 'the name of Pond's would certainly occur in every page ... Pond's Method is a blessing! It is so quick and simple it makes it easy always to look your best.'³⁷

Doubtless Georgie did not take the copywriters' gush seriously, but the advertisements do capture how she was perceived. 'Her flower-like face, her charm, have made her one of the most popular members of the aristocratic younger set,' read the copy in an advertisement placed in the *Straits Times* of Singapore. Describing her as 'gay ... glamorous ... lovely', Pond's naturally attributed her 'flawless complexion' to the 'faithful use' of Pond's Two Creams.³⁸ It is a measure of Georgie's success as a model that she featured in advertisements for products other than cosmetics and in countries other than Britain and the United States. Magazine readers in Poland were able to see her promoting a Cadillac, in which it was claimed that Georgie was 'one of many Cadillac owners among the aristocratic spheres', along with luminaries such as the Emperor of Japan, the Shah of Persia and the unlikely figure of the 'Prince of Bedford'.³⁹

Although little is known of the relationship between Bushell and Georgie, it seems that the two were much in love. A photograph shows them sitting on a lawn, arms around each other and beaming at the camera. They made

a good-looking couple. However, it appears that the union may have been kept secret, with Bushell telling neither his parents nor his close friends.⁴⁰ Secret or not, the relationship did not end in marriage, possibly because Georgie's father supposed that Bushell's background was not suitably grand to allow him to be his son-in-law. On 28 October 1935, *The Times* announced that Georgie was engaged to be married to Lieutenant Home Kidston of the Royal Navy, whose late brother, Glen, was a motor-racing friend of Earl Howe. The couple had only met two years before, during which Kidston had spent much of his time in New Zealand. Kidston and Georgie had written to each other frequently, and, in Kidston's words, 'got to love each other to the extent I wanted to come home to England to be with you again'.⁴¹ Georgie's father evidently thought Kidston a suitable match, and pressured him to return from the southern hemisphere to marry his daughter. However, it appears that some of Georgie's friends were wary of Kidston, with at least one doing all he could to prevent Kidston from coming home. Nevertheless, at some point in 1935, Kidston did return and proposed to Georgie. 'I did not feel that I could do anything other than carry out what was expected of me and get married,' Kidston later wrote. Just a few days before the wedding, Kidston shared his anxieties about his forthcoming marriage with a friend, telling him 'that I thought that perhaps I was making an awful mistake about the whole thing and that it would be better to call it off'.⁴² However, as Kidston observed, 'things had gone so far that this course seemed impossible' and the couple married on 27 November at Holy Trinity Church in Penn Street, near Amersham in Buckinghamshire. The wedding, which was attended by numerous aristocrats and racing drivers - including Raymond Mays, who had competed in that year's German Grand Prix - was filmed by Gaumont British Newsreels, and