

## Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Wood & Selsdon Wood

The following account was written by Cecile Griggs. She studied a number of documents from FSW and Croydon Council archives, then went by train to the RSPB at Sandy, Beds to study 2 folders they hold about Selsdon Wood. Finally she verified the funeral arrangements with the Troches a Territet cemetery near Montreux.

Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Stotesbury Wood was born on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1865 at Dehra Dun, the valley lying between the Himalayas and the Sivaliks, the eldest of eleven children. His paternal grandfather, Captain H.E. Wood had been an officer in the 3<sup>rd</sup> King's Own Light Dragoons and had fought in all the Sikh Wars. His maternal grandfather had run away from home in Ireland and enlisted in the Indian army, serving during the Indian Mutiny.



Harry, as he seems to have been called, attended a school in India run by his uncle until he was fifteen, when he was sent to King William's College on the Isle of Man. He decided to study medicine and entered Edinburgh University in 1883, passing his final examinations in 1888. He then came down to London to be coached for a place in the Indian Medical Service, succeeding at his second attempt. After spending the summer of 1891 at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Netley, Hampshire, he embarked on the troop ship *Crocodile* for Calcutta, holding the rank of captain. His first posting was to Manipur, where he spent seven and a half years. He was transferred to the 44<sup>th</sup> Ghurkha Rifles, which later became the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Ghurkhas, a regiment which was to sustain huge losses in the Great War. These were happy years for Harry Wood, who spent all his leave indulging his passion for hunting and fishing. There were occasional hunting trips to Burma, too, where his brother was stationed.

In 1898, however, Harry Wood was given a civil appointment in Assam. His duties here were onerous as his appointment included the governorship of a large prison and the administration of a great many hospitals in the district, in addition to his private practice. In 1901 he married Florence Laura Emily Skinner, an Englishwoman who had come out to India with her brother. This was to be the beginning of a long and happy marriage with a wife whom he describes as a comrade, "a real pal", who shared the dangers and excitement of big game hunting in India and who tramped many thousands of miles with him both through the forests and savannahs of India and later through the many European countries they visited.

In 1913 Henry Wood was on leave in England, where he studied at Moorfields Hospital, but was ordered to return to India in August 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War. At the end of 1915, after many years of civil employment, he reverted to military duty and was posted to Mesopotamia where he spent two years before being transferred back to India and put in charge of a large new war hospital. Then, after four years' military duty he was offered another civil post in Assam. He retired in 1922, and after travelling all over India he and his wife bought a house in the North Cachar Hills in Assam. Here the Woods were able to devote their energies to creating a garden full of English flowers, fruit trees, jacquerandas and orchids. But after Mrs Wood suffered a life threatening illness the Woods left India in 1927, with much regret. Once they reached England, however, they decided not to buy a house but to be "tramps abroad", and indeed they travelled in many countries throughout Europe walking and observing wildlife.

Lieutenant-Colonel Wood wrote three books, the first on hunting in India *Shikar Memories* published in 1934; the second a detailed account of the animals and birds of India, *Glimpses of the Wild* published in 1936; and finally his memoirs *Milestones of Memory: a Plain Tale of Service*,

*Sport and Travel in the East and West* published in 1950. Inscribed on the frontispiece of *Glimpses of the Wild* is an extract from Henry van Dyke's poem, "God of the Open Air". The same extract is engraved on a stone in front of the bird bath in Linden Glade, Selsdon Wood.

Henry Wood grew up surrounded by the virgin forests of India which teemed with wildlife from bears and panthers to all kinds of butterflies and birds, "a perfect paradise of flowers and ferns". There he led an outdoor life and developed a love of nature. In the Indian Medical Service he spent all his spare time hunting and fishing, never happier than when in the jungle far from the haunts of man, amid the forests, mountains and rivers. In later life however he came to regret his early passion for hunting, saying "one feels a sense of remorse for all the animals and birds slain by rifle and gun". In his retirement in Assam his garden became a haven for wildlife: "I never allowed a bird, beast or butterfly to be touched on our ground, and, in consequence, had all kinds of birds nesting."

Lieutenant Colonel Wood estimated that he and his wife had walked over 9,000 miles on the Continent and took great pleasure in the rare and interesting birds and animals they encountered. Caught in France when War was declared in 1939 they fled to the country they loved best, Switzerland. Apart from the kindness and hospitality shown to them by the Swiss, "the chief joy of Switzerland to me is its wealth of bird-life and its tameness compared with its state in France or Italy. The chaffinches and sparrows in Interlaken town will sit on one's hand to feed", wrote Henry Wood.

The Woods spent the War years in Switzerland, and settled there. This was where Lieutenant-Colonel Wood died on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1956 in his 91<sup>st</sup> year, at the Hotel Mont-Heuri Sur Territet-Montreux in the Canton of Vaud. He had survived his wife by only ten months.

At the official opening of Selsdon Wood Nature Reserve and Bird Sanctuary on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1936 visitors were invited to inspect the Memorial Bird Pool "kindly presented by Col. H.S. Wood, I.M.S. and Mrs Wood, of Kensington". It appears that Lieutenant-Colonel Wood first suggested putting up a Bird Bath and Drinking Fountain as a Memorial to himself and Mrs Wood in correspondence with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in 1930. He wished his ashes and those of his wife to be scattered on the ground at or near the foot of the Memorial after their deaths. Lieutenant-Colonel Wood's idea was that the Memorial should be in a permanent bird sanctuary, preferably Selsdon Wood. He proposed to leave the Society a legacy in his will on condition that the Society would undertake to keep the Memorial in good order and condition.

The Woods seem to have had no particular connection with Selsdon, indeed it seems that at the time of first making his proposal Henry Wood had not actually visited Selsdon Wood. But there had been a well-publicised appeal to raise funds for the purchase of land for the Reserve, with articles and correspondence appearing in *The Times* and elsewhere on a fairly regular basis. As a member of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Lieutenant-Colonel Wood may also have read reports about the proposed Selsdon Wood bird sanctuary in the Society's magazine, *Bird Notes & News*. He and his wife had such a deep love of nature and concern for wildlife that this was surely a project which would have appealed to them.

Lieutenant-Colonel Wood certainly intended to visit Selsdon Wood shortly after his initial letter to the RSPB in 1930. Mrs Lemon of the RSPB wrote to him with directions about getting there in a letter dated 9th December 1930. At the same time she wrote a letter of introduction for him to Mr Westell, the RSPB Watcher at Selsdon Wood, saying that Lt-Col Wood was anxious to visit Selsdon one day that week to select a site for the Memorial. I'm not sure whether or not Lt-Col Wood did so, as time was tight - he was due to go abroad, and it's possible he had to change his plans. A visit certainly occurred later, because in a letter to the RSPB dated 9<sup>th</sup> November 1935 he states "I had the pleasure of seeing the Sanctuary the other day with Mr Malcolm Sharpe\* who is taking great interest in my project". Subsequently the Minutes of the Joint Management Committee of Selsdon Wood Bird Sanctuary‡ record that at a meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1936 the Committee resolved to accept the offer by Colonel Wood to provide a Memorial fountain; to agree

to the scattering of ashes, and to undertake that the proposed fountain be properly maintained. The Committee also accepted a quotation from a Mr Edwin Smith amounting to £120 to provide a water supply to the Bird Bath.

In the event, it was to be many years before the deaths of Lieutenant-Colonel Wood and his wife in Switzerland in 1956, and their ashes were not scattered in Selsdon Wood but, with the agreement of Henry Wood's niece, interred in the Troches a Territet cemetery near Montreux. In accordance with his love of animals and birds Henry Wood left half of his residuary estate to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and half to the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals.

\* Malcolm Sharpe was Chairman of the Committee created to preserve Selsdon Wood.

‡ From 'SELSDON WOOD NATURE RESERVE An illustrated history', June 1986 - 'The Management Committee consisted of 9 members — 3 appointed by Croydon Council, 3 by Coulsdon and Purley and 3 by The National Trust. As necessary, officers from both the Local Councils attended; Croydon's Town Clerk acted as Clerk to the Committee, whilst Coulsdon and Purley's Surveyor acted as Surveyor to the Committee — clearly a joint arrangement.'

The memorial and fountain illustrated are situated in Linden Glade. Unfortunately the water supply and subsequently the pond, were discontinued by Croydon Council due to cost and vandalism.