

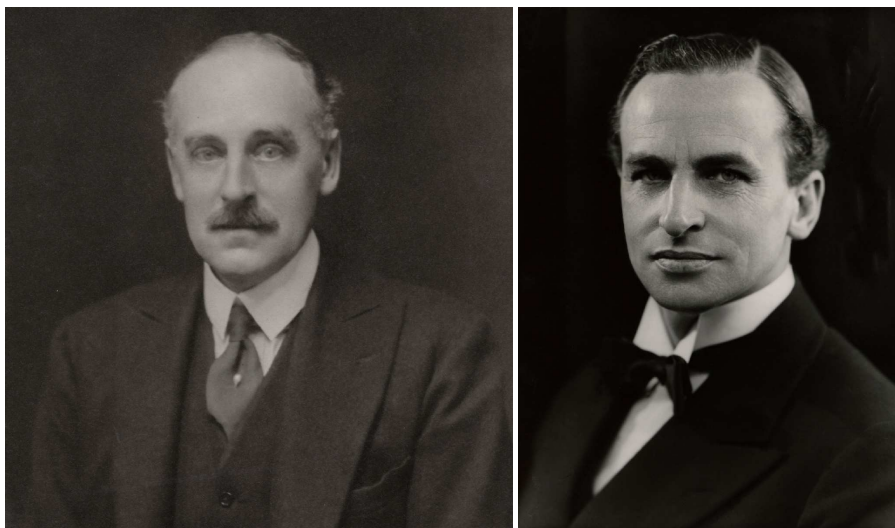
‘My Dear Archie’

Sir Edward Hussey Packe and the quest for the Air Minister’s favours at wartime Prestwold, 1944–5

Luke Danes

When thirty-year-old Edward Hussey Packe (1878–1946) inherited the Prestwold Park estate upon the death of his father Hussey Packe (1846–1908) in 1908, he cannot have imagined that he would spend the final years of his own life guiding his family’s ancestral Leicestershire seat through some of its darkest and most challenging days. Those dark days were of course the Second World War, and the challenges were those posed by the Air Ministry’s requisitioning of around a third of the estate for the construction of RAF Wymeswold. The requisitioning was not without stress, and the ensuing demolition of a pair of prized estate cottages in 1942 caused the now Sir Edward particular anger. But fate was on Edward’s side, and he had an ace up his sleeve that he was not afraid of playing: a personal friendship with the very minister against whose ministry he had a growing list of grievances, the Secretary of State for Air himself, Sir Archibald Sinclair.¹

Sir Archibald ‘Archie’ Henry Macdonald Sinclair, later 1st Viscount Thurso, (1890–1970), a wealthy landowner with vast estates in Scotland, had been the MP for Caithness and Sutherland since 1922 and the leader of the Liberal Party since 1935. In May 1940 Sinclair was appointed Secretary of State for Air in Winston Churchill’s newly formed wartime coalition, a comfortable administrative role which required him to be the RAF’s governmental figurehead whilst overseeing their chains of supply and logistics.²



Left: *Sir Edward Hussey Packe (1878–1946) by Walter Stoneman, 1932. Ref. NPG x169783 © National Portrait Gallery, London.*

Right: *Sir Archibald Henry Macdonald Sinclair (1890–1970) by Bassano Ltd, 1935. Ref. NPG x84782 © National Portrait Gallery, London.*

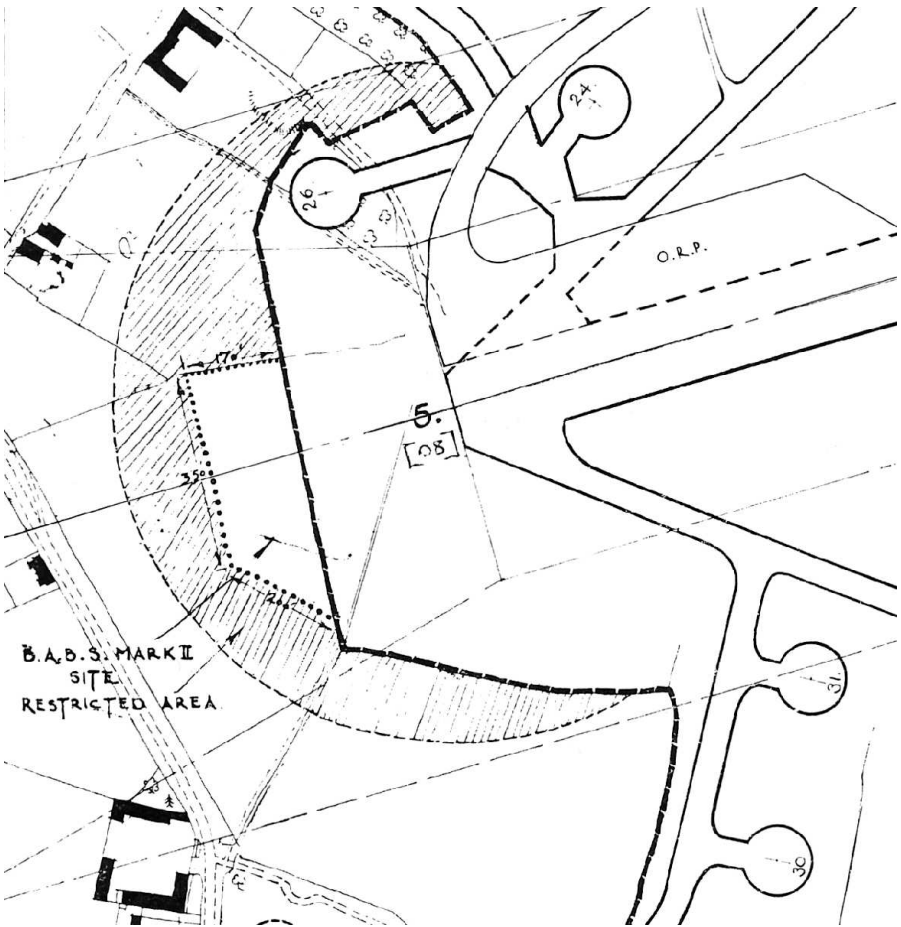
Edward and Sinclair probably first met as distant colleagues in Whitehall in around 1919. Whilst both shared the same alma mater, Eton, their paths afterwards had initially taken very different directions. Sinclair's had taken him onto Sandhurst and the Western Front, during which time he became a prominent figure on the London social scene, where his likeability, charm and good looks made him many friends in high places, including the future prime minister Winston S Churchill (1874–1965)³. When Churchill became Secretary of State for War and Air in 1919, he chose Sinclair as his personal military secretary. Twelve years Sinclair's senior, Edward meanwhile had mainly spent the years between 1900 and 1919 attached to the Admiralty, serving as assistant private secretary to a succession of First Lords. By 1919 Edward was private secretary to Sir Eric Geddes (1875–1937), and with Sinclair's appointment the two men would have been working in parallel in their respective military departments during the attempt to quash Bolshevism in Russia by means of increased British involvement.⁴

Construction of RAF Wymeswold began in 1941 and, although technically a temporary airfield, the requisite standard wartime heavy bomber layout, of three hard runways linked by a perimeter track spawning thirty-two circular aircraft dispersal points soon consumed much of the Prestwold Park estate. One of Edward's farmhouses, Gorse Farm, had been demolished, while several of the dispersal points bisected the drive into his home farm. In addition, 'some £16[,]000 worth of timber [had been] cut down', and another site which was requisitioned for a searchlight battery caused numerous wrangles.⁵ (The modern value of £16,000 would be over £640,000 as the value of the pound has increased more than forty times since 1945.)

On Prestwold Lane, just outside the airfield's western boundary, stood a pair of semi-detached estate cottages, homes to Edward's tenants, the Moore and Baguley families. Despite standing on land which had not originally been requisitioned, the cottages, which dated to pre-1884,



Sir Edward Hussey Packe's 'best' cottages in happier times, seen looking south-east along Prestwold Lane. Reproduced with the kind permission of Dr Robin Westerman.



Detail of the Air Ministry's circa 1941 site plan of RAF Wymeswold showing the proximity of Sir Edward Hussey Packe's yet-to-be-demolished cottages (centre left) to the western threshold of the airfield's main runway (centre). © Crown Copyright. Reproduced with the kind permission of the RAF Museum/After the Battle magazine.

were soon thought to pose 'an obstruction to flying' for the lumbering Wellington bombers which would shortly be using the airfield's mile-long main runway.⁶ The Air Ministry requisitioned the cottages on 4 December 1941, and they were demolished in May 1942 in readiness for the airfield becoming operational later that month.⁷



Sinclair's influence had already served Edward well, and helped to mitigate at least some of the airfield's unforgiving impact on Prestwold Hall's stately surroundings. When the original plans for the new airfield revealed its bomb dump to be 'almost touching the Head Gardener's house', Edward had written to Sinclair, who in May 1942 replied with the happy news that it had been relocated sufficiently far enough away from the Hall.⁸

Perhaps this level of successful intervention was what Edward had come to expect from his friend in his new role, but a further two and a half years of war and the stresses of the Air Ministry had taken a heavy toll on Sinclair, and by the autumn of 1944 his private secretary, Gerald S Whittuck (1912–1997), noticed that the Air Minister was exhausted, tetchy and burnt out.⁹ Sinclair's problems were no doubt exacerbated by his adherence to Churchill's erratic working hours, although it was largely by his own personal choice that he remained in the position for the duration of the war.¹⁰ Despite Sinclair's determination to complete the task he had started, others close to him at the Air Ministry had spotted his inherent weaknesses; his former private secretary, (later Sir) Ronald Melville (1912–2001), observed that the Air Minister had a tendency to get tediously entwined in issues which were not his responsibility, whilst (later Sir) Ludovic J Dunnett (1914–1997) saw that Sinclair was not a man known for either his negotiating skills or his succinct communication.¹¹ Unbeknown to Sinclair, these combined failings were about to manifest themselves in a prolonged six-month long saga which his already fragile state of mind could well have done without.



When the land on which the cottages had stood was eventually de-requisitioned in June 1944, Edward had again written to Sinclair, eager to know about the possibility of being compensated for their destruction. Although the tone of Edward's letter is not known, Sinclair's reply of 30 November was genuinely sympathetic, perhaps akin to the way in which he handled his parliamentary constituents' concerns back in Scotland. With over twenty years' experience as the MP for what was then the UK's largest agricultural constituency, Sinclair was perfectly at ease handling a variety of landowners' questions and complaints.¹² In his measured and relaxed response, and no doubt assuming that the problems at Prestwold could be swiftly dealt with, Sinclair confidently laid out the conditions for compensation, the amount of which he stressed was limited to a 'liberal' £600.¹³

Despite Edward's later lamentation of his demolished cottages as having been 'a pair of my best', it was not just their tangible physical loss that concerned him, for he would have readily accepted them being rebuilt, perhaps even if that meant on a different part of the estate.¹⁴ What equally worried Edward were the financial implications of losing the £37 annual rent that the cottages had collectively generated, and which up until the de-requisitioning had been subsidised by the Air Ministry. Now that these payments had stopped, Edward wanted answers. Unfortunately for Edward, the Air Minister did not have to rely solely on his own estates for income and was therefore perhaps unable to fully understand his friend's plight; 'of course [...] no rent would be payable' wrote a surprised Sinclair, as if that had been plainly obvious all along.¹⁵

Sinclair was unable to offer Edward further advice in relation to his War Damage insurance payments and highlighted the appeal process by means of the General Claims Tribunal, concluding his letter with the understated prediction that Edward would find it 'disappointing'. In a further expression of his sympathies, and alluding to a strong familiarity with Prestwold, Sinclair ended with a handwritten postscript: 'It makes me miserable to think of your beautiful house – it is one of the big war sacrifices – the injury to its surroundings'.¹⁶

Although grateful for his friend's sincerity and understanding, Edward was less than impressed with the figure which Sinclair had offered as compensation, along with his assertion that the Air Ministry were not legally obliged to rebuild the cottages. Edward was disheartened by Sinclair's apparent inaction and made no secret of his expectation of special treatment; 'My Dear Archie [...] I was hopeful that you would not just give me the official reply', he bemoaned in his reply of 9 December.¹⁷ Of course, the compensation was beyond Sinclair's control, governed as it was by the Compensation (Defence) Act, 1939, and reflected the cost of repairing any damage which could have potentially occurred to the cottages during their period of requisition. Although Sinclair was at pains to point out that the compensation was 'assessed [...] as generously as possible', the fact that the cottages were not merely damaged, but completely destroyed, does not appear to have mattered.¹⁸

Much of Edward's overall frustration arose from the sense that Sinclair was contradicting advice and information that he had previously been given, particularly that which he received after writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Kingsley Wood (1881–1943), in August 1941. Edward had asked why he should continue paying War Damage insurance on Gorse Farm after it had been demolished and was told that he was 'to have it reinstated in the condition in which it was when requisitioned, or else to receive compensation in lieu.'¹⁹

Communicating the similarities between Gorse Farm and the cottages to Sinclair, Edward told him that it 'quite obviously means sufficient compensation to restore it to what it was when requisitioned', telling the Air Minister in no uncertain terms, 'That is what I ask for now and I am convinced I am entitled to demand it.' But despite this increasingly hostile stance, Edward recognised that he was expecting a lot of his friend and ended his letter with a somewhat typically British apology: 'I am sorry to be such a nuisance but I ask for justice'.²⁰

In his reply to Edward on 5 January 1945, Sinclair laid out the reasons for the cottages' demolition, stating that they had been requisitioned under Defence Regulation 51 which allowed for 'the interests of public safety, Defence of the Realm, or the efficient prosecution of the war.'²¹

Since the cottages had been an obstruction, once they had been demolished the land legally had to be de-requisitioned and handed back to Edward, although ironically part of the site later had to be requisitioned again to enable the Air Ministry to erect a beacon.²²

Sinclair remained sympathetic whilst sticking rigidly to his professional remit, telling Edward that whilst he wished the Air Ministry could rebuild the cottages or provide compensation equalling their value, he was restricted by the terms laid out in the Act and had no authority to override it. 'You do not agree' wrote an unmoved and possibly condescending Sinclair, 'You are convinced that you are entitled to demand the restoration of your property [...] Parliament has not left you at my mercy. Your remedy is to appeal'.²³

Despite Sinclair's repeated advice, Edward felt particularly aggrieved that taking official action would burden him financially, pointing out to the Air Minister, or perhaps reminding him, in his reply of 17 January that 'None of this business is of my choosing'.²⁴ It was possibly the prospect of paying to solve a problem that he did not bring about himself and was entirely a victim of, that saw Edward continually badger Sinclair for an amicable solution. Clearly angered, that very same day Edward took his complaints to the national agricultural lobbying body, The Central Landowners' Association, seeking their assistance since 'Sinclair [...] merely adheres to the official ruling'.²⁵

Edward pressed Sinclair on the issue of the Chancellor's letter, claiming that even the Air Ministry's own clerks of works had told him that the cottages would be rebuilt after the war. He was also angered by Sinclair's response to the question of an adjacent water tower belonging to Hoton Rural District Council which had been demolished along with the cottages, telling the Air Minister that they were 'not in agreement' with his version of events. 'I am sorry that I am not able to accept the official views you put forward' parroted Edward, 'I repeat again all I ask for is justice'.²⁶

Sinclair did not take this undermining of his authority lightly, warning Edward in his reply of 19 February that 'I am sure you are asking me to do more than my legal powers permit.' Edward's only option, Sinclair reiterated, remained taking the Air Ministry to a tribunal. Nonetheless

Sinclair told Edward that he was 'puzzled' by the Chancellor's notion that the cottages would be rebuilt and, going beyond his remit, invited him to send a copy of the letter so that he could investigate further.²⁷ Prior to the cottages' demolition, 'every minute detail' had been carefully measured and photographed; 'Why was that done?' Edward had asked, clinging onto any shred of hope that he could.²⁸ The question may as well have been rhetorical, with Sinclair drily confirming that they 'were not taken for the express purpose of producing new cottages as replicas of the two destroyed.'²⁹

Undeterred by what he perceived as Sinclair's obstinance, and getting desperate for satisfactory answers, Edward's response of 7 March adopted a tone of frustration and impatience which was something of a personal attack on the Air Minister himself. Sinclair had previously told Edward that the land on which the cottages had stood could not be de-requisitioned until the debris had been cleared, but Edward contested that this had been adequately done, even by June 1944. Edward did not hold back, telling Sinclair that he had 'been misinformed as to the facts', with the site being left at the time of him writing littered with 'old broken up foundations, brickends [*sic*], rubbish and half the old outhouses'. The situation had deteriorated into what Edward described as 'a miserable business', with him seemingly laying the blame squarely, and somewhat unreasonably, solely at the Air Minister's door: 'A mistake has been made and I only ask you in all fairness to remedy it.'³⁰

Edward was understandably bemused by Sinclair's insistence that the Air Ministry's building survey was not to be used to rebuild the cottages, arguing that 'I cannot think why measurements and photographs should have been made if the question of replacement was not then contemplated'. He remained adamant that he should have the cottages rebuilt, unnecessarily informing Sinclair that he still held the architectural drawings, as if to make the task of doing so sound undeniably straightforward.³¹

But perhaps Sinclair's biggest mistake in inciting Edward's wrath had been mentioning his cottages' former tenants. Edward had been on cordial terms with the families, particularly estate carpenter and St Andrew's church organist Albert Moore and his wife Edith, and had

refused to ask them to vacate the cottages when requested to do so by the Air Ministry.³² Subsequently, the Air Ministry appear to have taken responsibility for rehousing the tenants themselves, much to Edward's chagrin, and this pent-up anger now boiled over into his letter; 'The tenants have never had notice to quit from me, so are still my tenants – a queer position!!' retorted Edward with a not inconsiderate degree of vitriol.³³

Whether or not he had kept Sinclair on his side does not appear to have mattered any more to Edward, for events had continually conspired against him and every glimmer of hope had been cruelly snatched away. Although the end of the war was within sight, Edward must have felt like he was living in an interminable nightmare.

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The early spring of 1945 was an intensely busy period for Sir Archibald Sinclair. Not only was he was juggling his ministerial role with leading a political party suffering from his continued absence, he was also having to manage the needs of his neglected Scottish constituency whilst spending prolonged periods apart from his family.<sup>34</sup> It is therefore perhaps little wonder that Sinclair delayed replying to Edward until 23 May, eleven weeks later.

In fact, Sinclair's reply could have waited no longer. Following both his own and the Labour parties' refusal to continue Churchill's coalition, 23 May 1945 was the final day of both the triumphant wartime government, and of Sinclair's own political career. On a day no doubt filled with emotion and activity, Sinclair dutifully replied to Edward, but despite his claim that he had 'delayed replying while full consideration was being given to the arguments which it (Edward's letter of 7 March) contains', the Air Minister's eleventh-hour response had little new to add. In fact, all that Sinclair did add was the suggestion that Edward could pursue clause 52 of the Requisitioned Land and War Works Bill if, and when, it became law.<sup>35</sup> If Edward had expected anything other than a final cold rebuff then he was sadly mistaken.

The mood had irrevocably shifted, and Sinclair's nonchalant sympathy had given way to a sense that he had been taken for granted. Sinclair

remained staunchly unchanged, and in his longest, bluntest and most matter-of-fact letter, he outrightly dismissed Edward's protestations and his suggestion that the de-requisition date was 'wrongful', telling him for the fourth and final time that he should take his complaints to the General Claims Tribunal.<sup>36</sup>

Sinclair's swansong was undoubtedly bipartite; ostensibly he was tying up loose ends and doing what he could for his friend, whilst at the same time being safe in the knowledge that Edward's problems would no longer be his responsibility after being succeeded by the Conservative minister Harold Macmillan (1894–1986). Either way, Sinclair had effectively given as much thought as he could to Edward's complaints whilst cunningly and calculatingly absolving himself from any further involvement in the affair.



The lack of a satisfactory outcome was not to matter long for Sir Edward Hussey Packe; on 11 May 1946, just less than a year on from Sinclair's final letter, he died after a long illness aged sixty-eight. The Prestwold Park estate passed into the hands of his daughter Penelope and her husband John Drury Boteler Drury-Lowe; a new era had begun, and old problems were likely quickly forgotten. Despite Edward's hopes that the airfield would be one of the first to be de-requisitioned post-war, it remained an active RAF station until 1957 before flying ceased altogether in 1970.<sup>37</sup> That same year Sir Archibald Sinclair died aged seventy-nine.

In conclusion, it is impossible not to feel sympathetic towards Edward. Due to no fault of his own his estate had been turned upside down, his land decimated and his income severely curtailed. His frustration is clear from the outset and he saw Sinclair as the key to achieving what he considered a fair and honest outcome. Edward was justifiably angry, but perhaps abused his friendship in the hope of arriving at a positive result by circumventing the official channels. Edward put Sinclair in an impossible position and clearly felt that he was able to sacrifice this particular friendship for the sake of his estate.

For his part, Sinclair could probably have handled matters better. Despite being able to assist Edward in the past, circumstances had

changed for the worse, and it is no doubt testament to his loyalty and friendship that he was able to help Edward at all. Sinclair's hands were tied and what was being asked of him was quite beyond his reach, though his hazy fusion of formal and informal language had created a scenario equally difficult for either man to navigate.

Neither Edward or Sinclair can be said to have emerged well from the dispute, though Edward's stubbornness and refusal to heed Sinclair's advice perhaps casts him in a less favourable light. It is likely that Edward over-estimated Sinclair's influence and the Air Minister simply did not wield anything like the kind of power he expected, but without knowing the true nature of the men's friendship, it is difficult to be certain. Ultimately, Sinclair's likeness to a bureaucratic obstacle whose tiresome commitment to officialdom was obstructing something which might have otherwise been easily resolved, combined with Edward's pushiness, persistence, and pedantry, had created the perfect storm from which neither man could escape.

## **Acknowledgements**

My sincere thanks to Dr Robin Westerman, Melanie Ndzinga, Joan and Peter Shaw, Gemma Read, Lisa Ollrichs (National Portrait Gallery), Judy Nokes (The National Archives), Winston Ramsey (*After the Battle* magazine), Robert Anderson, Andrew Renwick (RAF Museum) and the staff at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.

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