

In 1884 she modelled a “Highland Mountaineering Costume” at the International Heath Exhibition. It was made of dark blue cloth with gaiters, knickerbockers and a skirt that reached only to the knees. She was Hon. Sec. of the Somerville Club for Women which promoted equality, irrespective of class and also a supporter of women’s suffrage.

Despite the healthy life-style she died at Sibdon aged 60. 633 Victoria Crosses, made by her family firm, were awarded during the First World War. Four went to Shropshire men born in Madeley, Stanton Lacy, Dudmaston and Oswestry.

7 To the right of this grave is a group of three identical graves

It’s easy to imagine why the vicar and his wife Anna Maria chose to be buried here rather than in Ealing, to which they had retired. I permitted myself the reflection that father, mother and daughter must have enjoyed a delightful family life in this idyllic spot. The Craven Arms History Group has a remarkable shot of the family with their new, very posh, motor car. They look very happy.

On a subsequent visit I met the head gardener of Sibdon Castle – he told me that until he took over a few years ago, these graves were engulfed by rhododendrons. Clearing the graves meant life had one more delightful revelation ... these simple graves with the low borders are easily overgrown and, with the years, even the

soil inches up the sides. Mrs Biggs had a long life and, although widowed by the First World War, I trust a fulfilled one. She died aged 85 in 1962 and left in today’s money a million pounds.

Her grave is the left-hand one of the three. I scabbled away with fingers and nails like a mole. What I found was worth any amount of damage to my hands “In loving memory of my husband GW Biggs RE who died on active service abroad 1918”

The trail that began with the war memorial at Halford and the words TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF MY HUSBAND WILLIAM GEORGE BIGGS ... was over. She was married for ten and a widow for almost forty-five years. The vicar’s daughter who married a railway fireman had remained true to the end.

What a dedication.



8 Return the way you came

The ‘companion’ walk, including the Halford Lychgate War Memorial, can be found on

www.shropshiresgreatoutdoors.co.uk/route/war-walks-on-the-home-front-craven-arms/

Written by **Keith Pybus**. • Artwork by **MA Creative Ltd**
VC medal photograph courtesy of the **Shropshire Regimental Museum**, Shrewsbury Castle



Discover more about World War 1 in Shropshire at:
www.shropshireremembers.org.uk
www.shropshiresgreatoutdoors.co.uk/walking/war-walks/



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War Walks on the Home Front



Walk 10 Sibdon Carwood: Two Indomitable Women by Keith Pybus



www.shropshiresgreatoutdoors.co.uk

Sibdon Carwood Two Indomitable Women

Distance: 1 mile.

Grade: Easy

Terrain: Meadow paths and a surfaced driveway.

This expedition first began on the other side of Craven Arms with the War Memorial Lychgate at Halford, grid ref SO 436 833.

This quest was sparked off by this dedication “To the Glory of God and in loving memory of my husband William George Biggs and of the other dear lads ...”

Some three years later this walk was devised to reveal, like the best cliff-hangers, how Miss Hilda Mary Baxter daughter of the vicar of Sibdon with Halford came to marry a railway fireman and how her love for him not only leapt the yawning class gap between them but proved inextinguishable.

Start

① The walk begins at a point on Watling Street SO 424 828 just before the intersection with the Clun Road – this forms part of the Shropshire Way.

Alternative Route

For those who want a more strenuous walk: start from the lay-by at Wart Hill on Long Lane Craven Arms SO 401 846 distance 3 miles but a demanding descent and ascent on the Shropshire Way over Hopesay Hill along Oldfield Wood following the Shropshire Way. Just before Sibdon Carwood take the right of way past Sibdon Castle Farm through a farm gate to an often-hidden waymark indicating a short path on your right to the churchyard of St Michael. Resume at point 5 below.

From the outset we are introduced to the delights of Sibdon Castle estate. The Flemings had money from their sugar plantation in Antigua. The family had lived there since at least 1744. Lord Lyttleton writes of the house being “built in a taste much superior to that of a mere country Squire.” Fleming and his descendants had planted “all the hills about him with groves and clumps of trees that, together with an admirable prospect seen from it, renders it a place which a monarch might envy.”

② The right-of-way runs along the line of the hedgerow for three fields on your left (two and a half on your right). Follow the waymarks through the farm gate on your left and at a slight angle up the field. There is a small ditch running down the centre.

Look for another modest post with waymark and a plank over the ditch. Head for the large tree which should bring you close to the stile. Cross the lane to two stiles on the opposite side.

Walking across these fields even in winter is a rare treat, as the parkland trees are at their ‘architectural’ best without leaves.

③ The route continues half left until you meet the kissing gate and the carriage drive of Sibdon Castle. The drive is accompanied by a fine avenue of oaks. Do not continue on the Shropshire Way but take the drive to your right through the white gates. Although this drive is private the right-of-way follows its course.

The first building on your left is something of a jig-saw. Both the ‘Venetian window’ and the former entrance have been blocked. No wonder even the listing admits “Believed to have been built as a dovecote.” Of brick and sandstone rubble with a plain tile roof, it dates from the C17 with C18 alterations.

④ Passing this lodge, on the left the wall supports a series of fruity treats: a fig tree and some espaliered apples and pears. The garden wall develops pretensions.

It thinks it is a castle. Someone liked the battlements of the house so much; they decided to continue the theme along this wall. When the owner died in 1905, in today’s terms he left £13.6million.

⑤ After the topiary cock the right of way turns towards the church. Please respect the privacy of the owners of Sibdon Castle. The right-of-way bisects their lawn, but press on unafraid to the church of St Michael. It was built around the time of the major works on Sibdon Castle in 1741 and the tower added around 1800.

Henry Fleming Baxter, born in Ludlow, younger brother of the Lord of the Manor, was curate here until 1885, when he became Vicar of Sibdon with Halford (Patron Lord Windsor Clive). He continued in this office until sometime after 1901. By the 1911 census Henry had retired to 2 Grange Park, Ealing. It is from this address that Hilda Mary, their daughter born 1876, married William George Biggs at All Saints Church, Ealing.

⑥ Go to the right round the church until you see the headstone pictured below. It is dedicated to the wife of the owner of Sibdon Castle.

Maria Jane Baxter nee Hancock was born in 1847, the eldest daughter of Charles Hancock a society jeweller. Shortly after Maria’s birth he opened a shop in New Bond Street, London: soon after he received the Royal Warrant. In 1856 the company was assigned the honour of designing and making the Victoria Cross to be made from a captured Sebastopol cannon. The company still produces the medal from the last vestiges of the cannon, which appropriately is kept under guard in Shropshire at Donnington.

After her marriage to Herbert Fleming-Baxter, the couple moved from Sibdon to a 25-roomed house built for them in Hampstead called “The Towers.” Maria campaigned for improving the health of women. It wasn’t healthy for women to squeeze themselves into rib-constricting corsets.

