

**BLYTH TOWN COUNCIL**  
**Community Development Committee**  
**Date of Meeting – 30 June 2026**

**Blue Plaque Scheme**

**Colonel Henry John “Tod” Sweeney – Blue Plaque Nomination**

Recommendation

The committee agree to recognise Colonel Henry John “Tod” Sweeney MC with the award of Blue Plaque status.

Proposed: Cllr N Rolls

Seconded: Cllr D Nicholson

Ward

Croft

Risk Management

A blue plaque and installation costs approx. £600, there is budget provision for this. Permission is pending from Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church for the installation of the plaque at the proposed location.

Crime Prevention

None.

Public Sector Equality Duty

None.

Objective

To recognise and celebrate Blyth’s Armed Forces heritage and acknowledge the contribution by one of the town’s most distinguished military figures.

Report

A nomination for a Blue Plaque has been submitted by Cllr Rolls, seconded by Cllr D Nicholson. The motion is attached as Appendix 1.

It is being proposed that a Plaque is installed at Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church, Waterloo Road.

Colonel Henry John “Tod” Sweeney MC was born in Blyth on 1 June 1919 and spent his formative years within the Waterloo Road area. A member of the parish of Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church, he later attended Douai School and entered Douai Abbey, Berkshire, as a novice monk before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Following the outbreak of war, Sweeney joined the British Army and became a platoon commander in the 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire

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Light Infantry. On the night of 5 June 1944, he took part in the airborne glider assault on Pegasus Bridge and Horsa Bridge during the opening stages of the Normandy landings. The following day, he rescued a wounded corporal under heavy enemy fire and was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry.

His military service continued throughout the Normandy campaign, the Ardennes, the Netherlands, Operation Varsity and the Allied advance into Germany. Following the Second World War, he served in Palestine, Cyprus, Brunei, Borneo and Germany, and later represented Britain at the United Nations in New York. He eventually rose to command the Royal Green Jackets before retiring from military service in 1974.

Following retirement, Colonel Sweeney continued a life of public service as Director General of Battersea Dogs & Cats Home. He was held with such high regard that in 1985 he was the subject of the TV show 'This is Your Life' which was watched by millions. He died in 2001.

The proposed location at Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church is considered historically appropriate as it formed part of the educational, spiritual and community environment that shaped Colonel Sweeney's early life. Permission would need to be agreed with the Diocese

The installation of a blue plaque would provide lasting civic recognition, contribute to Blyth's developing heritage interpretation, strengthen Blyth's Armed Forces heritage and complement the Council's dedication to the Armed Forces Covenant and commitment to Armed Forces Day.

### **Blue Plaque Suggested Wording**

Colonel Henry John "Tod" Sweeney MC

1919 – 2001

Spent his formative years within the Waterloo Road area. A member of the parish of Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church.

Former Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Royal Green Jackets. Director General of Battersea Dogs Home.

### References

[H.J. Sweeney 1939-45 \(2001\) - NEWMP](#)  
[Lieutenant Henry John Sweeney](#)  
[Sweeney, Henry John "Tod" - TracesOfWar.com](#)  
Telegraph (2001) - [Colonel Henry 'Tod' Sweeney](#)

**Elisa Mullen**  
**Democratic Services Officer**  
**23 June 2026**

# The Boy From Waterloo Road

## Henry John “Tod” Sweeney and the Long Road Through War



Before the medals and the uniforms, before the roar of aircraft over Normandy and the chaos of war, there was simply a boy walking through Blyth beneath cold Northumberland skies. Henry John Sweeney was born on 1 June 1919 into a town built on coal, salt air, and hard work. The Blyth he entered was not a quiet place. Steam cranes loomed above the docks like iron giants. Coal wagons rattled endlessly through the streets toward waiting ships at the harbour. Men disappeared before dawn to the pits and quayside while women carried households upon tired shoulders with little complaint and even less rest.

Yet beneath the smoke and industry there was warmth too. Old Blyth lived through its people. Streets were close-knit and alive with familiarity. Shopkeepers stood in doorways greeting neighbours by name while children chased one another between terraces blackened by coal dust and sea winds.

Young Henry grew up among those streets around Waterloo Road, where the town seemed to breathe with its own rhythm. In the mornings, the smell of hot pastry drifted from Shy's pie shop into the cold air while workers stopped for breakfast before long shifts on the docks. Nearby stood Soulsby's Drapers with its polished windows and respectable frontage, where families bought school clothes, church attire, and gloves for bitter winters. There were market traders shouting across crowded streets, fishermen hauling crates from the quay, and church bells rolling across the rooftops above the constant hum of industry.

At the centre of that world stood Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church.



To a child of industrial Blyth, the church must have seemed almost like another world. Outside lay smoke, labour, noise, and hardship. Inside there was silence, candlelight, incense, and the echo of Latin prayers rising beneath stone arches. The Benedictine priests who served there carried with them traditions older than the town itself, linking Waterloo Road to Douai Abbey and centuries of English Catholic history.

Among them was Rt Rev Thomas Ambrose, the priest who guided the parish through much of Henry's childhood. He had once been Abbot of Douai before arriving in Blyth, and it is difficult to imagine that he did not know the Sweeney family personally. In those days priests knew every child of the parish. They baptised them, educated them, and watched them grow into adulthood beneath the gaze of the church.

Perhaps Ambrose saw something in young Henry before anyone else did. Perhaps teachers at the parish school noticed a quiet discipline in him, or a seriousness uncommon in boys his age. Whatever they recognised, a path slowly opened before him that led far beyond the streets of Blyth.

That path took him to Douai School and eventually into Douai Abbey itself, where he entered as a novice monk.

It is strange now to imagine the future soldier living within monastery walls, rising before dawn for prayer and walking silent corridors lit by candlelight. Before the war, Henry Sweeney intended to dedicate his life to God. Long before he ever commanded men in battle, he had already learned obedience, discipline, patience, and calmness through the Benedictine life.

Yet while the monastery shaped his spirit, Blyth had already shaped his character. The toughness of the docks, the resilience of working families, the dignity of ordinary people surviving hard lives all of it settled quietly into him. Between the church and the streets, the boy from Waterloo Road became something stronger than either world alone could have created.

Then, in September 1939, the world changed.

War swept across Europe with terrifying speed, tearing young men away from the futures they had imagined for themselves. Henry removed the robes of the novice and entered the British Army instead. Soon he volunteered for airborne service, joining the glider infantry of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

The glider troops were among the bravest soldiers of the war. They flew into battle inside fragile wooden aircraft with no engines once released. There were no second chances in glider landings. Every descent into enemy territory carried the possibility of death before a single shot had even been fired.



On the night of 5 June 1944, Henry Sweeney climbed aboard one of those gliders bound for Normandy.

Inside the aircraft there would have been silence and fear, broken only by the creaking of wood and the sound of breathing in the darkness. Somewhere below waited occupied France, German guns, and the uncertain hours ahead.

Hours later, his platoon helped seize Pegasus Bridge and Horsa Bridge in one of the opening actions of D-Day itself. The operation would become legendary. The following day, under heavy enemy fire near Escoville, Henry risked his own life to rescue a wounded corporal from his platoon. For that act of courage he was awarded the Military Cross.



Many men would have been broken by what followed. Yet Henry continued fighting across Europe through the bitter winter campaigns of the Ardennes and the Netherlands before crossing the Rhine during Operation Varsity and advancing into Germany itself. He witnessed Europe torn apart and rebuilt through war.

Still, his journey did not end there.

In the years after war, Henry “Tod” Sweeney carried the same sense of duty that had first been shaped in the streets of Blyth and beneath the arches of St Wilfrid’s. He served across a changing world from Palestine and Cyprus to the jungles of Borneo eventually rising to command the Royal Green Jackets and later representing Britain at the United Nations in New York. Yet for all the distance he travelled and all the honours he earned, there remained something unmistakably rooted in the boy from Waterloo Road. After retiring from the Army, he devoted himself once again to service as Director General of Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, spending his later years not in search of glory, but quietly caring for others in the same steady manner that had defined his life from the beginning. When he died in 2001, a memorial service was held at Douai Abbey, bringing his story full circle from the church and streets of Blyth to the Benedictine world that had first shaped the man he became.

# **Proposal for the Installation of a Heritage Plaque**

## **Colonel Henry John “Tod” Sweeney MC (1919–2001)**

### **A Son of Blyth**

#### **Introduction**

This proposal seeks formal heritage recognition for Colonel Henry John “Tod” Sweeney MC, a distinguished British Army officer born and raised in Blyth, whose service during the Second World War and beyond placed him among one of the town’s most remarkable yet largely unrecognised historical figures.

Despite playing a role in one of the most significant military operations of the twentieth century — the airborne assault on Pegasus Bridge during the D-Day landings of 6 June 1944 — there is currently no known formal civic recognition of Colonel Sweeney within Blyth itself.

This proposal recommends the installation of a commemorative heritage plaque at:  
Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church

as the most historically appropriate and meaningful location connected to his early life, education, and formation.

#### **Historical Background**

Henry John Sweeney was born in Blyth on 1 June 1919 and spent his formative years within the Waterloo Road area during Blyth’s industrial peak.

At that time, Blyth was a thriving coal and dock town whose tightly connected communities shaped generations through hard work, resilience, education, and civic identity. The streets surrounding Waterloo Road, the Market Place, and the docks formed the social world in which Sweeney grew up.

Central to his early life was Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church, which during this period was served by Benedictine clergy connected directly to Douai Abbey.

This Benedictine connection played a major role in Sweeney’s development. He later attended Douai School and entered Douai Abbey as a novice monk before the outbreak of the Second World War changed the direction of his life.

Following the outbreak of war, Sweeney joined the British Army and eventually became a platoon commander in the 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

On the night of 5–6 June 1944, he took part in the airborne glider assault on Pegasus Bridge and Horsa Bridge during the opening stages of the Normandy landings. The success of this operation became one of the defining moments of D-Day and remains internationally recognised military history.

The following day, near Escoville, Sweeney rescued a wounded corporal from his platoon under heavy enemy fire and was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry.

His military service continued throughout:

- \* the Normandy campaign,
- \* the Ardennes,
- \* the Netherlands,
- \* Operation Varsity across the Rhine,

\* and the Allied advance into Germany.

Following the Second World War, he continued serving in:

- \* Palestine,
- \* Cyprus,
- \* Brunei,
- \* Borneo,
- \* Germany,
- \* and at the United Nations in New York.

He later commanded the:  
Royal Green Jackets

before retiring from military service in 1974.

Following retirement, he continued a life of public service as Director General of:  
Battersea Dogs & Cats Home

He died in 2001.

### **Why Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church is Historically Appropriate**

The proposed plaque location is not based solely on proximity, but on historical significance.

Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church formed part of the educational, spiritual, and community environment that shaped Henry Sweeney during his early life in Blyth. The parish's Benedictine links to Douai Abbey directly connect the church to Sweeney's later education and monastic formation.

The church therefore represents:

- \* the origins of his personal development,
- \* the wider Benedictine educational tradition within Blyth,
- \* and the role community institutions played in shaping future generations.

The location would also contribute to preserving and interpreting an often-overlooked part of Blyth's wider social and educational heritage.

Cultural, Educational and Civic Value

The proposed plaque would provide:

- \* a lasting act of civic recognition,
- \* an important addition to Blyth's developing heritage interpretation,
- \* educational value for schools and younger generations,
- \* and a meaningful connection between Blyth's industrial past and its future aspirations.

As Blyth increasingly develops around:

- \* engineering,
- \* higher education,
- \* renewable energy,
- \* and technological innovation,

stories such as Henry Sweeney's provide younger generations with a strong sense of local identity and civic pride.

His life reflects:

- \* discipline,
  - \* education,
  - \* resilience,
  - \* leadership,
  - \* and public service,
- all values that remain relevant to Blyth's future development.

The proposal would also strengthen Blyth's Armed Forces heritage and complement future:

- \* D-Day commemorations,
- \* Armed Forces Day activity,
- \* heritage projects,
- \* and cultural initiatives.

## **Proposal**

It is proposed that Blyth Town Council:

- \* supports the principle of formally recognising Colonel Henry John "Tod" Sweeney MC through a commemorative heritage plaque;
- \* enters into discussions with Our Lady and St Wilfrid Church regarding the suitability of the proposed location;
- \* and explores partnership opportunities with:
  - \* local heritage organisations,
  - \* Armed Forces groups,
  - \* military history associations,
  - \* schools,
  - \* and community stakeholders.

Subject to consultation and approval, a future unveiling could potentially align with D-Day commemorations in June 2026.

## **Closing Statement**

Colonel Henry "Tod" Sweeney's story is not only the story of a decorated soldier.

It is the story of how the streets, schools, churches, and communities of old Blyth helped shape a man who would go on to take part in one of the defining moments of modern history.

This proposal offers Blyth an opportunity to recognise one of its forgotten sons and preserve an important chapter of the town's heritage for future generations.