

**P344 Papers of the Mowat Family, Portland Arms Hotel, Lybster  
RECORDS' IDENTITY STATEMENT**

Reference number: GB1741/P344

Alternative reference number:

Title: Papers of the Mowat Family, Portland Arms Hotel, Lybster

Dates of creation: 1918-1980

Level of description: Fonds

Extent: 4 files, 2 volumes

Format: Paper, photographs

**RECORDS' CONTEXT**

Name of creators: The Mowat Family, Portland Arms Hotel, Lybster

Administrative history: The Mowat family ran the Portland Arms Hotel in Lybster from 1881 to 1982. James Mowat, who owned the Royal Hotel in Thurso, acquired the hotel in 1881. His widow Catherine took over the licence following his death in 1886. She married William Gordon Coghill in 1893.

James and Catherine Mowat had at least two children, Margaret, and John Allan.

John Allan Mowat and Mena Gordon Innes Shearer married at the Royal Hotel, Tain on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 1903.

They ran the Portland Arms Hotel together from 1918 to 1945. They had six children; Margaret Jane, James, Doris Clair King (who died in infancy), John Allan King, Robert Innes and another daughter.

John Allan Mowat served in France in the First World War with the Fifth Seaforths. Later he became a Lieutenant in the Volunteer Force.

He was the 'father' of Caithness County Council, representing Lybster for many years. He was also a member of the Education Committee and chairman of the Southern district Council.

As well as a hotelkeeper he was a

valuator, auctioneer and successful farmer. He served as President of the Latheron branch of the British Legion from its inauguration until his death.

John Allan passed away in 1941 aged 62.

His wife Mena was the daughter of Mr and Mrs Alexander Shearer, The Mill, Thrumster. As a hotelier she was well known for her hospitality and kindness. She was a committed supporter of Lybster Free Church. Mrs Mowat died in 1945 aged 63.

John Allan and Mena Mowat's eldest son, James, was posted to northern France with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps in January 1940. In May the German Blitzkrieg attack on France and the Low Countries began. James' company was hit by the German Army on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May. He managed to escape and was sheltered by the French Resistance for over a year before making his way home to Lybster. His family were unaware of his fate until they received a letter from James in June 1941. Original documents relating to this period as well as an account of his experiences are included in this collection.

James Mowat took over the Portland Arms in 1945 after the death of his mother. However, his experiences in France had taken a toll on his health and he died in 1951 aged 44.

Robert Mowat was the youngest son of John Allan and Mena Mowat. He served as a sergeant gunner in the RAF in World War Two. Robert (Bert) took over the Portland Arms in 1953 from his brother James' widow Jean. Alongside his wife Elizabeth, he ran the hotel until 1982, when it was sold to Mr G. Henderson and passed out of the Mowat family for good.

Custodial history:

Deposited by Robert Mowat

## **RECORDS' CONTENT**

Description:

Papers of the Mowat family of the Portland Arms Hotel, Lybster. Includes

diaries, correspondence, personal and business papers, photographs, and material pertaining to James Mowat's experiences in France during World War Two.

Appraisal:

Accruals:

## RECORDS' CONDITION OF ACCESS AND USE

Access: Open

Closed until:

Access conditions: Available within the Archive search room

Copying: Copying permitted within standard Copyright Act parameters

Finding aids: Available in Archive search room

## ALLIED MATERIALS

Related material:

Publication:

Notes:

Date of catalogue: October 2022

| Ref.          | Description  | Dates                   |
|---------------|--|-------------------------|
| <b>P344</b>   | <b>Papers of the Mowat Family, Portland Arms Hotel, Lybster</b>  | <b>1918-1980</b>        |
| <b>P344/1</b> | <b>Diaries</b>   | <b>1933-1945</b>        |
| P344/1/1      | Diary of Mena Mowat, Portland Arms Hotel, Lybster (1 volume)   | 5 Oct 1933-18 Nov 1943  |
| P344/1/2      | Diary of Mena Mowat, Portland Arms Hotel, Lybster (1 volume)   | 19 Dec 1943- 4 Jul 1945 |
| <b>P344/2</b> | <b>Photographs</b>   | <b>c.1920-c.1945</b>    |
| P344/2/1      | Black and white photograph of John Allan Mowat with 'Craigie Winalot', champion Clydesdale stallion (1 item) | c.1920                  |
| P344/2/2      | Black and white photograph of a group of men in front  | c.1930                  |

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|               | of the Portland Arms Hotel, gathered for Mr King's presentation. George King was a County Councillor, Factor to the Duke of Portland and member of the Education Authority (1 item)   |                         |
| P344/2/3      | Black and white photograph of No 10005 Unit R.A.O.C. James Mowat is in the middle row, far left (1 item)  | c.1939                  |
| P344/2/4      | Black and white photograph of Mrs C. Coghill, seated in front of the Portland Arms Hotel. Mrs Coghill and her first husband James Mowat bought the Portland Arms in 1881 (1 item)   | c.1945                  |
| P344/2/5      | Black and white photograph of James Mowat in front of the Portland Arms Hotel (1 item)  | c.1945                  |
| <b>P344/3</b> | <b>Correspondence</b>   | <b>1939-1944</b>        |
| P344/3/1      | Part of a letter from James Cormack to James Mowat. James Cormack worked at Nottingham Mains Farm before emigrating to New Zealand c.1930 (1 item)  | May 1939                |
| P344/3/2      | Letter from James Mowat, stationed in France, to his grandmother Mrs Catherine Coghill at Nottingham Mains Farm (1 item)  | 26 Apr 1940             |
| P344/3/3      | Christmas Greetings sent to Mrs Mowat from Major Lewis Middleton of the Royal Engineers from overseas (2 items)   | c.1940                  |
| P344/3/4      | <p>Message from Donald Fraser, sent via the Red Cross Message Bureau, British Legion, Aberdeen, to the Prisoners of War Wounded and Missing Department. The message is addressed to MacLeod, St Pierre, Les Auchel, Pas-de-Calais, France. The message reads 'Hope you are all well. All safe and well with us. Mam and Dad visited Dunbeath and found old folks in good health.'</p> <p>Reply reads 'Overjoyed with news, that you are all safe, well. Also Grandma Grandpa. Hope to get more news. Everything alright with us. Love to you all.'</p> <p>[This may be a message to Mackay MacLeod, originally from Dunbeath, who emigrated to Canada and served with the Canadian Forces in the First World War. He married a French woman and settled in Calais. Mr MacLeod helped British soldiers escape following the fall of France in 1940. We know from James Mowat's account he met with MacLeod. Mr MacLeod was arrested and sent to a concentration camp, where he died in August 1944. See P344/4/13 for an account of James Mowat's meeting with</p> | 17 Nov 1941-14 Apr 1942 |

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|               | MacLeod]<br>(1 item)   |                    |
| P344/3/5      | Telegrams and cards sent by Robert Mowat to his family from various overseas postings (8 items)  | 1942-1943          |
| P344/3/6      | Christmas Greetings sent to Mrs Mowat from her son, Sergeant Robert I. Mowat, RAF India (1 item)   | Dec 1943           |
| P344/3/7      | Letter addressed to James Mowat from the Central Ordnance Depot offering him a post as an assessor in the Scales Department, with a list of the Duties of an Assessor and Conditions of Service (3 items)  | 8 Jan 1943         |
| P344/3/8      | Letter from Paddy, Slim, George and Blondie to Mrs Mowat at the Portland Arms. The RAF servicemen of 260 Squadron were stationed at Skitten Airfield and frequented the hotel during their time there. The letter thanks Mrs Mowat for her hospitality and kindness. Sent from the Middle East (3 items) | c.1943             |
| P344/3/9      | Letter from Bernard Matheson to Mena Mowat thanking her for the kindness she showed him during his stay at the Portland Arms Hotel (1 item)  | 30 Jan 1944        |
| <b>P344/4</b> | <b>Papers pertaining to James Mowat's disappearance in France during World War Two, his experiences with the French Resistance and his homecoming (see also P344/1 for James' mother's diary entries covering this period)</b>   | <b>1940-c.1985</b> |
| P344/4/1      | Letter from John Allan Mowat to his son James Mowat. The letter was returned with the envelope stamped 'Addressee Reported Missing' (3 items)  | 17 May 1940        |
| P344/4/2      | Letter from the R.A.O.C. Record Office to James Allan Mowat informing him that his son, James Mowat, has been reported missing (1 item)  | 24 Jul 1940        |
| P344/4/3      | Memorandum on the steps taken to trace missing personnel (1 item)  | Jul 1940           |
| P344/4/4      | Letter from Ted Webb to his aunt Mena Mowat sympathising over the news that James is missing (1 item)  | 26 Aug 1940        |
| P344/4/5      | Letter from Corporal H.E. Timms to James Mowat's parents. Corporal Timms served with James and describes their friendship and his memories of James. There are also two transcriptions of the letter with contextual notes on the latter part of James' life. (original letter is very fragile) (1 item) | 1940               |

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| P344/4/6      | Map of Spain and southern France given to James Mowat by the French Resistance on leaving France (1 item)  | 1941             |
| P344/4/7      | Handwritten list of names and addresses in France and the U.K. (1 item)  | c.1941           |
| P344/4/8      | Newspaper clipping headlined 'Lybster Man Escapes from Nazis'. Brief account of James Mowat's escape (1 item)  | c.1941           |
| P344/4/9      | Letter from Harold Henderson of the Royal Hotel, Thurso, to Mena Mowat expressing his pleasure at the news James is alive and well (1 item)  | 7 Jun 1941       |
| P344/4/10     | Letter from Alexander Sutherland, City of Edinburgh Police, to John A. Mowat expressing his delight that James is alive and well (1 item)  | 8 Jun 1941       |
| P344/4/11     | Letter from George Cochrane, Audruicq, Pas de Calais, to James Mowat. The letter contains a translation of a French newspaper article on the French Resistance's sheltering of James Mowat and his subsequent return to France to visit those who helped him (4 items) | 1945             |
| P344/4/12     | Handwritten timeline of the events of news of James Mowat's being discovered alive, from the first letter received by his mother to his safe return, 5 Jun 1941-9 Nov 1941 (2 items)   | n.d.             |
| P344/4/13     | Typed and bound account of James Mowat's experiences in France (1 item)  | c.1980           |
| P344/4/14     | Newspaper clipping headlined 'The French Connection'. Account of the enduring friendship between the Mowat and Cavignaux families, after the latter sheltered James Mowat from German Forces (1 item)  | c.1985           |
| P344/4/15     | Handwritten inventory list, taped to an envelope, listing some of the items in this collection pertaining to James Mowat and his time in France (1 item)   | n.d.             |
| <b>P344/5</b> | <b>Various</b>   | <b>1918-1943</b> |
| P344/5/1      | Order appointing John Allan Mowat Second Lieutenant in the 1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion Caithness and Sutherland Highland Volunteer Regiment (1 item)   | 28 Aug 1918      |
| P344/5/2      | Mowat Brothers, Coal Merchants bill heads. One contains details of livestock sales (2 items)   | c.1940           |

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| P344/5/3 | Order of Service for the memorial service of Sergeant Stuart G. Dunn of the Royal Canadian Air Force (1 item)                      | 1941       |
| P344/5/4 | Receipt made out to Mrs Mowat, Portland Arms, from Daniel Sutherland, 125 High St, Wick, for a set of 8 carved oak chairs (1 item) | 7 Jan 1943 |
| P344/5/5 | Print with verse about Jerusalem (1 item)  | c.1943     |