

# THE WATSON COLLECTION

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## THEIR FINEST HOUR ONLINE ARCHIVE

This finding aid was produced by Dr Matthew Kidd in August 2025

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[theirfinesthour.org](http://theirfinesthour.org)

## SUMMARY INFORMATION

**Repository:** Their Finest Hour Online Archive  
([https://portal.sds.ox.ac.uk/Their\\_Finest\\_Hour](https://portal.sds.ox.ac.uk/Their_Finest_Hour))

**Title:** The Watson Collection

**Languages:** English. Some digitised objects are written in Japanese

## ABSTRACT

The Watson Collection documents the wartime and post-war experiences of Frank and May Watson, with a focus on Frank's time as a prisoner of war (POW) and May's life on the home front during the Second World War.

## BIOGRAPHICAL/HISTORICAL

**Frank Watson** was posted to Singapore with the RAF in 1941, and was caught in the Japanese advance, escaping to Java only to be captured in March 1942. Over the next three and a half years, Frank was held in a series of prison camps in Java and Japan, where he endured forced labour in coal mines and the constant threat of brutality.

**May Watson's** wartime story was lived out in the quieter, but no less testing, arena of the home front. After Frank's capture in 1942, May faced more than three years without direct contact from him. Fragments of information reached her through the official channels, but the uncertainty was unrelenting.

## SOURCE OF ACQUISITION

All materials were shared by Andrew Watson, Frank and May's son, who generously funded the digitisation and curation of the private collection for research and study purposes.

## CONDITIONS GOVERNING ACCESS

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## PREFERRED CITATION

**Example:** Project Team, Their Finest Hour (2025). May Watson's War. University of Oxford. Online resource. <https://doi.org/10.25446/oxford.29666084.v1>

## SCOPE AND CONTENTS

### Title: Frank Watson's War

Link: <https://doi.org/10.25446/oxford.29657108.v1>

#### Description:

Frank and (Lucy) May Watson married on 18 July 1938 at Rye Lane Chapel, Peckham, holding their reception in the first-floor flat that became their home. After a honeymoon in Newquay, Cornwall, they returned to Peckham. When war was declared on 3 September 1939, they were preparing to move to 45 Cloonmore Avenue, Orpington, but the declaration delayed their plans until October. Strict blackout rules left them without light after dark for a week until curtain rails and wooden shutters were installed.

Frank was called up in December 1940, and on 28 December, May saw him off at St Pancras as he left for duty with the RAF. May noted in her diary that Frank's voice broke as they said goodbye, and they both struggled to stay composed. On her first night alone, the firebombing of the East End docks lit up the sky. To keep busy, May volunteered as a Fire Watcher. Though she never had to carry out a real rescue, she and her fellow watchers kept their whistles close, ready to sound the alarm when incendiaries fell. At home, she filled her days with housework, visited town with friends, and in the evenings wrote to Frank, feeling his absence but placing her trust in God.

Frank joined the RAF in January 1941, training at Bridgnorth before being posted to Hampstead to work on barrage balloons. May maintained a daily routine, recording each day in her diary with a Bible quote. Her entries detailed household tasks, shopping, how well she slept, and when she woke up and went to bed. Writing to Frank was a duty that she took seriously, feeling ashamed if she failed to make time for it. She also read poetry, met friends, and prayed. Air raids were a constant presence, and she noted their severity, the sounds of bombing, and reports of damage.

With the arrival of spring, May's diary shifted focus to gardening and brief visits from Frank. Summer 1941 brought an almost idyllic period – cycle rides, honeysuckle gathering, seaside trips, and tennis when Frank was home. But it was short-lived. On 13 July, during a heavy storm, she noted that Frank made her his last cup of tea "for a while." They travelled together to West Kirby and spent time together while final preparations were made for departure. On the morning they left (28th July) she went to the station and was able to spend a few minutes with him before the train came and took them off to 'an Unknown Destination'. She would not see him again for nearly four and a half years.

May returned home and posted her first letter to Frank the very next day. She soon settled back into her routines – gardening, church work, socialising, shopping, housework, playing the piano, occasionally going to the pictures, and, of course, writing to Frank. By late August, her diary entries reflected a shift in mood. She wrote that she felt lonely and became "v. blue" when she stopped to think. She missed Frank

immensely, especially on Sundays. Still, she believed that the "sp[irit] of the Lord" would carry her through.

Frank arrived in Singapore on 6 October 1941, and May sent her first air mail to him the next day. Her letters to Frank mirrored her diary entries. She updated him on the state of the garden, what their friends were doing, and the antics of Tinker, their cat. She shared her thoughts on faith, admitting that she had questioned God's role in the war against "the powers of darkness", even wondering, "why doesn't God do something?", though she quickly reassured herself with an answer. She told Frank how much she missed him, admitting that it took her three months to sleep on his side of the bed, but always reaffirmed her trust in God.

At the same time, May contributed to her church and community by organising a Sunday School in her home, as the air raids made it unsafe for children to travel. With help from her neighbour, 'Aunty' Elsie, who played the piano, and a gentleman from Green Street Green Baptist Church, the Sunday School grew to 23 children. Parents' afternoons, prize days, and even outings to Goddington Park became cherished events. May worked tirelessly, commuting to Old Woking for her job with the Irish Church Missions during the week and returning to Orpington on weekends.

As events beyond Britain's shores escalated, her worries began to appear more frequently in May's diary. By December 1941, she was deeply unsettled by reports that Singapore, where Frank was based, was at action stations, writing that she "felt weak and weepy about it." Her concerns only deepened after Japan's declaration of war on 7 December. On the 9th, she admitted feeling "v. depressed" and struggling with doubt, writing that she "felt as if I wld curse God, but turned to praise by H[oly] Sp[irit]."

After news of Singapore's fall reached Britain and Frank's last telegram arrived on 20 February 1942, no further word came. In the months that followed, May searched for news of Frank's fate. Letters from the RAF Record Office in June 1942 confirmed that no information was available, citing delays caused by the fall of Java and Singapore. She also reached out to the British Red Cross and Salvation Army, who reassured her that efforts were underway to trace prisoners and provide support.

During this time, May found solace in writing. From 21 October 1942, she began composing 'letters' to Frank on a pad, though they were never sent. Her son, Andrew Watson, later reflected on this habit, believing that she may have imagined Frank reading them one day. Ultimately, they became a private ritual to help her cope with the uncertainty. Stored away for years, the letters remained untouched – a forgotten chapter of Andrew's parents' lives. Even after the war, May continued writing daily. Her lifelong diary-keeping habit seems to have offered her comfort and peace.

May's letters became a record of her daily life and thoughts. She filled them with small, everyday details – what she had eaten, daily chores, leisure activities, updates on Sunday school and church matters, and news of friends. In one entry, she described writing to Frank as "the most welcome & yet heartbreaking task of the day." A year after

Frank's last message, in February 1943, she marked the anniversary by attending a lantern lecture on Java, the last place that she knew Frank had been.

Despite missing Frank, May still found moments of joy and humour. One amusing incident involved a midnight trek to Charing Cross during a transport blackout. A kind British soldier escorted her, but upon reaching the Lyons Corner House for some food, May was unexpectedly paired with a Japanese man also waiting alone. Although initially uneasy, they struck up a conversation, and the man apologised profusely for his country's actions, offering her hope that Frank would return safely.

By June 1943, doubt had taken hold of May. She questioned whether she would ever see Frank again, writing in one letter, "I wonder whether you are really in the body, or out of it! I have a very strong feeling that the latter is true, and how often your words come back to me – that you didn't think we shld ever return to a normal married life again. Then I couldn't believe it – now I do almost." The next day, on 1 June, she wrote, "I may be wrong, but I feel you have left this life – my treasure – to enjoy eternal life with Him alone."

Then, just one day later, May's patience was rewarded. On 2 June, May received a telegram confirming that a Japanese broadcast had identified Frank as a prisoner of war in Java. For her, it was as if he had "come back to life again." Further correspondence confirmed the news, and the Red Cross provided strict guidelines for letters – 25 words per fortnight, no enclosures, and regulated content. Despite this, May wrote faithfully, sending love and encouragement. In her messages, she reminisced about their first meeting, shared family updates, described the end of a Whitsuntide holiday in Blockley, and assured Frank of her enduring hope.

In Sept 1943, the stresses of the war and worries about Frank resulted in May finding it difficult to cope and she sought refuge back in her parents' house in Blockley, Gloucestershire. However, she continued writing her unsent letters to Frank as the war progressed. During the period she was back home, she got to know several US service people who were billeted in a camp just outside the village. They disappeared – literally over night – in the lead up to the Normandy landings in June 1944.

She marked VE Day with joy, praying for their reunion and delivering a thanksgiving service at Erdington Baptist Church, where she "witnessed the wondrous love of God," moving many to tears. However, the celebrations were muted, so far as May was concerned, since the war in the Far East was still going on and Frank's future was still uncertain.

It was not until August 1945 that Japan's surrender brought the war to an end. On VJ Day, May and a friend travelled to London, standing in a downpour for two hours as Trafalgar Square filled with crowds waving Union Jacks, singing, and dancing. Moving toward Buckingham Palace, she joined the chants of "We want the King!" before seeing the King, Queen, and Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret appear on the balcony to wave to the jubilant crowd.

Finally, on 8 October 1945, a telegram arrived with the words that May had longed to see: "Am safe in Australian hands hope to be home soon." Letters of congratulations poured in from friends and family, all celebrating the long-awaited reunion. She spent the rest of October and November preparing for Frank's return, although there was still to be one further period of deep apprehension when Frank fell seriously ill in Victoria (Canada); but thanks to the care of the Canadian people, he recovered, and - on 30 November - they were reunited at their Orpington home.

Frank returned to a society eager to move on, leaving veterans like him to navigate their trauma in silence. Suffering from malnutrition and illnesses such as amoebic dysentery, he required long-term treatment, with May carefully managing his recovery while maintaining their home. Their initial conversations were fragmented, reflecting the difficulty of reconnecting after years of separation. While attending to practical matters like ration books and home repairs, they worked to re-establish normalcy, spending Christmas in Blockley and resuming church life. May resumed running the Sunday School with her neighbour 'Aunty' Elsie, and the couple shifted their faith focus to Christ Church, Orpington, where Frank became a Lay Reader. Their family grew with the birth of Dorothy in 1947 and Andrew in 1950.

#### **Item list and details:**

- FW001 - Photograph of Frank Watson, approx. 1941.
- FW002 (1-33) - Various objects relating to Frank Watson, including ID cards, medals, and objects that he brought back from POW camps.
- FW003 - Photograph, approx. 1930. Windsor. Probably taken by one of Frank's friends. He used to go on cycling holidays before meeting May.
- FW004 - Photograph, approx. 1931. Shanklin, Isle of Wight. Probably taken by one of Frank's (male) friends.
- FW005 - Photograph, 1938. Wedding day at Rye Lane Baptist Chapel in Peckham, London.
- FW006 - Photograph, 1939. On holiday (but not the honeymoon) in Dunoon, Scotland. Frank and May liked to play tennis together and continued to do so after the war.
- FW007 - Photograph, 1941. Orpington, Kent (now LB Bromley). Presumably last photo before going into uniform (on embarkation leave). Taken in back garden of Frank and May's first house.
- FW008 - Photograph, 1941. Orpington, Kent (now LB Bromley). In uniform.
- FW009 - Timeline and details of imprisonment written by Frank Watson, transcribed from the New Testament that he kept throughout the war.
- FW010 - Letters sent by Frank Watson to May Watson before and after Frank's arrival in Singapore. Period covered: 18 Jan 1941 - 3 Feb 1942.
- FW011 - Telegrams sent by Frank Watson to May Watson prior to his capture on 8 March 1942. Documents include air mail envelopes and correspondence

detailing Frank's postings in Singapore. Also includes handwritten responses from May Watson. Period covered: 16 Sep 1941 - 17 Feb 1942.

- FW012 - Telegrams and letters confirming that Frank Watson was a POW. Includes official updates from the War Office, the Red Cross, and Salvation Army, detailing his status and location. The file also contains handwritten reflections by May Watson. Period covered: Jun 1942 - Jan 1945.
- FW013 - Postcards sent by Frank Watson to May Watson during his imprisonment in Java and Japan, 1943 - 1945.
- FW014 - Collection of documents related to Frank Watson's imprisonment, including his POW Registration Card, Identification Tag, camp rosters, and photos. Also features religious writings, camp recipes, notes on POW life, news clippings, speeches, holiday cards, and records of British personnel who died in captivity. Period covered: 1943 - 1945.
- FW015 - Collection of clippings and materials on Frank Watson's capture and liberation, including a Japanese newspaper, POW journals, and articles from local and national British newspapers.
- FW016 - Telegrams from Frank Watson after his liberation, 17 August 1945
- FW017 - Letters actually sent by Frank Watson to May Watson, 10 Oct 1945 - 22 Nov 1945.
- FW018 - Collection of materials related to Frank Watson's return from being a POW, focusing on his reception in Canada.
- FW019 - Programme for a "Thanksgiving for Victory" service and a message of welcome from the King and Queen, September 1945.
- FW020 - Post-war: Subsequent letters about the war, 25 Apr 1946 - 9 Jun 1992.
- FW021 - Photograph, 1953. Frank, May, and two children: Dorothy (b. 1947) and Andrew (b. 1950). Taken in the back garden of their house in Orpington.
- FW022 - Photograph, 1980. Frank and May on holiday together in Bognor Regis after children had left home. Frank's health deteriorated in the late 1970s (Guillain–Barre syndrome).
- FW023 - Photograph, 1987. Frank, May and one of their granddaughters, Helena (b. 1977), in Blockley, the Cotswolds. May liked to be taken back to the village of her birth. By this time Frank was in a wheelchair.
- FW024 - Photograph, 1996. Frank and May on another holiday on the south coast (Worthing). This is the last photo that their son, Andrew, could find of them together before Frank's death in 1997.
- FW025 - Post-war: Donation of Bibles to Japan episode, 1957.
- FW026 - Post-war: FEPOW and COFEPOW meetings and services, including Frank Watson sermon in 1971. Also includes FEPOW Memorial Building and Java Memorial and a few later newsletters.

- FW027 - Articles by Frank Watson about his wartime experiences, published in FEPOW Forum, the official magazine of the Children and Families of the Far East Prisoners of War (COFEPOW).
- FW028 - Letters from Frank Watson to Andrew Watson, Frank and May's son, in 1996, addressing queries regarding his wartime experiences.

**Record ID:** 125428

## **Title: May Watson's War**

**Link:** <https://doi.org/10.25446/oxford.29666084.v1>

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Frank was called up in December 1940, and on 28 December, May saw him off at St Pancras as he left for duty with the RAF. May noted in her diary that Frank's voice broke as they said goodbye, and they both struggled to stay composed. On her first night alone, the firebombing of the East End docks lit up the sky. To keep busy, May volunteered as a Fire Watcher. Though she never had to carry out a real rescue, she and her fellow watchers kept their whistles close, ready to sound the alarm when incendiaries fell. At home, she filled her days with housework, visited town with friends, and in the evenings wrote to Frank, feeling his absence but placing her trust in God.

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With the arrival of spring, May's diary shifted focus to gardening and brief visits from Frank. Summer 1941 brought an almost idyllic period – cycle rides, honeysuckle gathering, seaside trips, and tennis when Frank was home. But it was short-lived. On 13 July, during a heavy storm, she noted that Frank made her his last cup of tea "for a while." They travelled together to West Kirby and spent time together while final preparations were made for departure. On the morning they left (28th July) she went to the station and was able to spend a few minutes with him before the train came and



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#### **Item list and details:**

- MW001 - Photograph, 1936. Probably taken in London. May moved to London in 1934 as a live-in clerk-typist for Jones and Higgins, a department store in Peckham.
- MW002 - Photograph, 1938. Wedding day at Rye Lane Baptist Chapel in Peckham, London.
- MW003 - Photograph, 1939. On holiday (but not the honeymoon) in Dunoon, Scotland. Frank and May liked to play tennis together and continued to do so after the war.
- MW004 - Timeline written by May Watson that covers the period from her marriage to Frank in 1938 through to the post-war years.
- MW005 - Autobiographical account of May Watson's experiences during the war.
- MW006 - Memoir by May Watson, focusing on her experiences during and after the war.

- MW007 - Diary entries written by May Watson, 1 Jan 1940 - 31 Dec 1940.
- MW008 - Diary entries written by May Watson, 1 Jan 1941 - 31 Dec 1941.
- MW009 - Letters sent by May Watson to Frank Watson after Frank's arrival in Singapore, 14 Oct 1941 - 9 Feb 1942.
- MW010 - Christmas card and letters from various individuals addressed to May and Frank Watson, 23 Sep 1941 - 28 Mar 1942.
- MW011 - Diary entries written by May Watson, 1 Jan 1942 - 29 Apr 1942.
- MW012 - Letters sent to May Watson after Frank Watson was reported missing, mid-1942.
- MW013 - Diary entries written by May Watson in the form of unsent letters to Frank Watson, 21 Oct 1942 - 20 Apr 1943.
- MW014 - Letters sent to May Watson after Frank Watson was confirmed as a POW, 3 Jun 1943 - 17 Sep 1945.
- MW015 - Diary entries written by May Watson in the form of unsent letters to Frank Watson, 22 Apr 1943 - 18 Jun 1944.
- MW016 - Diary entries written by May Watson in the form of unsent letters to Frank Watson, 19 Jun 1944 - 28 Nov 1945.
- MW017 - Sermon preached by May Watson on VE Day at Erdington Baptist Church, May 1945.
- MW018 - Postcards sent by May Watson to Frank Watson during his imprisonment in Japan, Apr 1945 - Aug 1945.
- MW019 - Letters sent to May Watson after Frank Watson's camp liberated in August 1945.
- MW020 - Letters actually sent by May Watson to Frank Watson, 22 Aug 1945 - 18 Oct 1945.
- MW021 - Letters sent to May Watson after Frank Watson was confirmed alive and well, 8 October 1945.
- MW022 - Letters sent to May Watson after Frank Watson returned home in November 1945.
- MW023 (1-18) - Various objects relating to May Watson and her children, including ID cards.
- MW024 - Photograph, 1953. Frank, May, and two children: Dorothy (b. 1947) and Andrew (b. 1950). Taken in the back garden of their house in Orpington.
- MW025 - Photograph, 1980. Frank and May on holiday together in Bognor Regis after children had left home. Frank's health deteriorated in the late 1970s (Guillain-Barre syndrome).
- MW026 - Photograph, 1987. Frank, May and one of their granddaughters, Helena (b. 1977), in Blockley, the Cotswolds. May liked to be taken back to the village of her birth. By this time Frank was in a wheelchair.

- MW027 - Photograph, 1996. Frank and May on another holiday on the south coast (Worthing). This is the last photo that their son, Andrew, could find of them together before Frank's death in 1997.

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