

Forest Row Men who died in the Great War

A casual reader of any village war memorial would assume that the list was complete, local, and represented families who had lived in the area for generations. In fact, research into the World War I War Memorial at Forest Row shows that this was far from true. Also, the Memorial and Book of Remembrance in Holy Trinity Church are not exhaustive, as other war dead are buried in the local cemetery. The Memorial Book is a thing of beauty, written in an elegant hand, in red and black ink, recording each man's name, rank and number; regiment; where, when and how killed; parents' names; birthplace; where buried; and the name of the informant.



Only 24 of the 65 men remembered were born in the parish; of these, a mere 11 had spent most of their lives in the village before going to war. Another 10 were born in nearby parishes: Withyham, Hartfield, Horsted Keynes, East Grinstead and Felbridge. These were Albert Victor Brand, Raymond Cox, Thomas James Draper, Frederick Robert Edwards, Archibald Frederick Gladman, Frederick Holmwood, Albert Mills, James Simmonds, Philip Tomsett and Frederick Percy Webber.

The 11 purely local men were: Edward James Luxford, house painter; Albert Mitchell, golf caddie and cousin of Abe Mitchell the famous golfer; Harry Page, builder's labourer; Cyril Charles Robinson, clerk at Magnet's Works, and son of the butler at Ashdown Park; Robert Charles Robson, himself a butler; brothers Alfred Jesse and William Thomas Sands, messenger boy with the General Post Office and apprentice draper respectively; Jack Frederick Sippetts; Albert Ernest Standen Tomsett, an apprentice at the cycle works; Albert James Upton and Eric Gordon Waters, electrical engineer.

With recruiting handled by local landowners, it might be expected that these men would belong to local regiments; in fact only two joined the 1/4th Royal Sussex Regiment - Alfred Sands, and Albert Standen who was subsequently attached to the 4th Tank Corps. Two others (Jack Sippetts and Harry Page) joined Hampshire and Surrey regiments - relatively local - but of the rest, Edward Luxford - who had served in the army in the 1890s - re-enlisted as a member of the Royal Garrison Artillery; Albert Mitchell joined the 1st Middlesex Regiment and William Sands a Warwickshire regiment. Albert Upton had become a soldier before the war and was recorded (1911 census) at Aldershot as a Gunner in the First Cavalry Brigade of the Royal Horse Artillery, while Robert Robson had emigrated to Canada in 1911 and so enlisted in the Royal Highlanders of Canada. Most of these men served as private or gunner, although Jack Sippetts was a sergeant at the time of his death. The only two

officers born locally were Cyril Charles Robinson, a lieutenant with the 59th Squadron Royal Air Force, and Eric Gordon Waters, who was in the Hants Carabiniers with No. 6 Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps*.

Of those in the ranks, the majority were born in the South-east. Only George Gregory, George Simpson, and Albert Henry White were born elsewhere – in Reading, Devizes and Cricket St. Thomas, Somerset respectively. Gregory's father was living in Highgate Road when the memorial was mooted, Simpson's mother at Quorndon, and White's father at Bower Hill, Plaw Hatch, all in Forest Row. These examples help to explain who was commemorated where. The decision lay, naturally, with the surviving members of the families, who would choose to have their nearest and dearest remembered in places where they themselves were living or had family ties.

Within the officer class, only Lieutenant Eric Gordon Waters had spent his life in Forest Row (Cyril Robinson was in London by 1911). He was the son of a local builder, James Waters, and his wife Elizabeth Ann. There were several siblings who joined the family business which finally ceased trading at the end of the last century. Mid-Sussex Timber now has the site. Eric must have been something of a dare-devil, a prerequisite for anyone willing to join the RFC in those very early days of aviation. This is perhaps borne out by an article in the *Chelmsford Chronicle* in 1915, in which he was fined £3 for dangerous driving, apparently having cornered a Chelmsford road sufficiently fast to end up on the wrong side, narrowly missing a cyclist. No doubt this spirit of derring-do would have been an asset flying over Poperinghe in Belgium, where he was killed in action in January 1917.

Captain Wilfred Herbert Cecil Brownlow was born in India, and educated at Summerfield School for Gentlemen's Sons in Oxfordshire. He probably never lived in Forest Row, but his parents, Cecil and Minnie Brownlow, had settled there on retirement from the army. The *Kent and Sussex Courier* recorded his last words:

'Tell them I died with a smile on my face.'



Some men had memorials in several places. Gerald Nolekin Horlick, Major in the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars, died of malaria in the Military Hospital in Alexandria, Egypt in July 1918. He was born in Brooklyn, USA, son of Sir James and Lady Margaret Horlick, but lived mainly in London, although schooled in Buckinghamshire. Before the war, he had been Assistant Manager of the family firm, Horlicks Malted Milk Co. At the time of his death, his parents were living at

Kidbrooke Park, which explains his inclusion on the Forest Row Memorial. However, the family's principal home was at Cowley Manor in Gloucestershire, and Sir James contributed funds to reconstruct and enlarge the organ in Gloucester Cathedral as a memorial to his son. A third memorial is at Cowley, and yet another exists in the treble bell at Elkstone church in Gloucestershire, paid for by members of his family and inscribed with his name. As if all this wasn't enough, when his brother James' son - also named Gerald - was killed in the Second World War, the memorial he put up in St. Mary's Slough for his son also included his long dead brother.

In more than one instance, siblings appear on the memorial. Alfred and William Sands, for example, were both sons of Thomas and Mary Sands. The former died of wounds in the Dardanelles in 1915 and was buried at sea. The latter survived until 1917 when he was killed in action north-east of Ypres. Oliver and Michael Lawrence

were both sons of General the Honourable Sir Herbert Alexander Lawrence and his wife Isabella (granddaughter of the Earl of Harewood). The father, a career soldier, rose to become Chief of General Staff, British Armies France, 1918-19. It was he who unveiled the Forest Row memorial in 1920. Oliver,



2nd Lieutenant in the City of London Post Office Rifles, was killed in action at Festubert in France in 1916, while Michael, Captain in the Coldstream Guards, died of wounds following the Battle of the Somme just over a year later.

However, the family which lost the most sons was the Kekewiches, who lived at Kidbrooke Park between 1909 and 1916. At first glance, this seems an exotic, maybe foreign name, but in fact the family originated in Lancashire, moving to Cornwall in the 16th and London in the 18th centuries. Hanbury Lewis, the eldest son of Lewis Pendarves and Lilian (née Hanbury) chose an army career, and in 1911 the *London Gazette* noted:



Sussex Yeomanry; Supernumerary Second Lieutenant Hanbury L. Kekewich is restored to the establishment. Dated 2nd December, 1910.

He served mainly in Egypt, but must have spent some time in the Dardanelles region as in 1915 he sent a seed home from Mudros (a port on Lemnos, used by the allies) which ultimately grew into a

tall tree. He was a captain by the time of his death in action at Beersheba in Palestine in 1917. A month later, tragedy struck again as George, the next son, who had joined up at the outbreak of war, died of wounds, also at Beersheba. The third son, John, had been missing in action since the Battle of Loos in 1915. His story is perhaps the most poignant, as his engagement to Stella Munday, of Wilderwick, East Grinstead, had only been recently announced. John, educated at Eton like his brothers, went to Alberta to ranch after leaving Sandhurst, and then to Penang in 1913. He returned to England when war broke out and was commissioned. He was promoted to captain in 1915, only a few months before his death. The *Western Times*, reporting his death in 1917, said:

[He] is known to have been hit in the thigh and disabled. He refused to let his brother officers try to get him back to the British lines, saying it was too dangerous... Later a sergeant found him, but Captain Kekewich again refused help... Since then there has been no news of him, and it is feared that he was subsequently killed.

The parents were left one son, Sidney, who, although badly wounded, did survive the war. His three brothers are commemorated on the Lords Cricket Ground MCC Members Roll of Honour, as well as at other places relevant to the family.

Another pair of men who might seem to be related are the two Fishers: Edward Montagu Prinsep and George Kenneth, both from high status families. One of Edward Fisher's brothers was Minister of Education; another an admiral, and his father was a noted historian and tutor to the Prince of Wales. Previous generations had held high office in the church, including a Bishop of Salisbury, and a web of family relationships connected Edward to a number of influential and well-known characters; one of his father's first cousins, for example, was Virginia Woolf. George was the son of George Carnac Fisher, Bishop of Southampton and later Ipswich. Earlier generations had been employees in the Indian Civil Service, and before that, naval officers, including, co-incidentally, a rear admiral. Despite these similarities, however, there seems to be no connection between the two families.



More touching, maybe, are the stories of ordinary folk, such as Albert Mitchell. He was one of nine children born to Arthur and Susan Mitchell and belonged to a family who had lived on the Forest for decades as foresters, labourers and farmers. His father paid £18 for the conveyance of land on which by 1895 he had built a house named *Forest View*. This was near the 14th green on the golf course, and almost certainly a more comfortable family home than the wooden

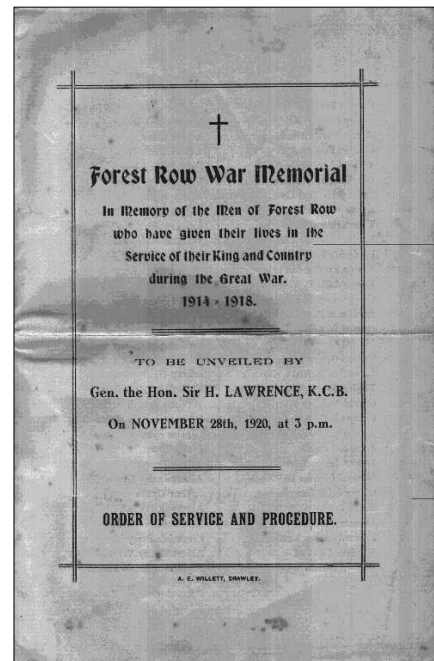
cottage his mother grew up in where she and her 9 siblings slept in a large, round bed, feet to feet. She recalled her own father Abraham Edwards playing the fiddle for the children to dance to – simple family pleasures. When the Ashdown Forest Golf Club was formed, Albert took up the game, playing initially with makeshift clubs fashioned from wood from the Forest. Three of his brothers became golf professionals, as in 1912, he himself did at the Nevill Golf Club in Tunbridge Wells.

Albert enlisted as a private in the West Kent Yeomanry in February 1915 but transferred to the Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment 1st Battalion) in 1916 and was posted to France. He was wounded the same year at the Battle of the Somme. After convalescing in England, he returned to France in 1917 only to be killed in action at Meteren on 19th April, 1918 aged 33.

The War Memorial which brings these disparate characters together was unveiled at Forest Row by Sir Herbert Lawrence, K.C.B. (mentioned above) on November 28th, 1920 at 3 p.m. The order of service exhorts people to:

Remember the Men who Died for England

After the service, the scouts formed a lane along which people could walk to lay wreaths. The memorial, designed by Ernest G. Gillick and of Portland stone, was erected at the centre of the village green, which had been levelled in preparation and shaped to form a shield.



Further information on Forest Row War Dead can be found at <http://www.ashdownforest.org/enjoy/history/AshdownResearchGroup.php>

*RFC until April 1918, then RAF

Pam Griffiths, AFRG, July '14