

Researching the Men of Ashdown Forest who Fell in the First World War :

A Case of Mistaken Identity

In the last edition of Ashdown Forest News, Martin Berry wrote about the work that the Ashdown Forest Research Group has done in researching the men of Ashdown Forest who fell in the First World War and who are commemorated on the war memorials at Forest Row and Hartfield. He highlighted the contrasting examples of two families from opposing ends of the social spectrum that had lost three sons in the war – the upper-class, Eton-educated Kekewich brothers from Forest Row, and the humble Maskell brothers from Hartfield. Since that article was published, we have discovered that one of the Maskell brothers we wrote about – Private Harry Maskell – was not in fact a brother, but a cousin. How could this be? Pam Griffiths, who produced the original case study on Harry Maskell, has written the following article about the painstaking detective work she has since carried out to unravel the complex family relationships that led to the mistake being made. It is also possible that the wrong man is commemorated on Hartfield war memorial.

OK. I hold my hands up; I got it wrong, and I apologise. The only excuse that I have is that I think somewhere along the line when the Hartfield War Memorial was recut in 2014, the name of Harry Maskell (as it was submitted to the stonemasons) morphed into H.W. Maskell. So when I began to research this man I had two initials, along with a rank and regimental number - Private G/607; a battalion – the 7th, Royal Sussex Regiment; a date of death – 1 August 1916; and a place of commemoration – Thiepval Memorial.



One face of Hartfield War Memorial – showing Pte H W Maskell

Armed with this, I searched the census returns. The only Harry Maskell in Hartfield was the son of Henry and Naomi Maskell of Butcherfield Cottages. Harry's place of birth tallied with a GRO entry for a Harry Walter Maskell in 1896. This had to be the right man, younger brother of George and Mark Maskell, also on the memorial. Consequently, I decided that the meticulously kept *Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects* must have made a rare mistake in listing his sole legatee as a mother named Alice. Other sources record the death of Henry and Naomi's son Harry as on 1 August 1916, and this link came up repeatedly when searching for Harry. Moral – never trust an *Ancestry* hint.

Still convinced that I was on the right track, I decided that the entry on the Hartfield History Group website was only partially correct. It reads as follows:

Private Harry Walter Maskell, G/607, 7th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment), was born in Ticehurst in 1896. He lived at Bolebroke Cottages, Hartfield. He was killed in action on 1st August 1916 near Thiepval, Somme, France age 19 and has no known grave and is listed on the Thiepval Memorial: Pier and Face 7 C. He was the son of William (1863) and Alice (1865) Maskell. His pre-war occupation was a Baker.

Initially, I believed that everything was right apart from the parents' names. It took a lot more digging before I got to the whole truth. Harry Walter Maskell was born in the Ticehurst Registration District (the census returns give the parish as Wadhurst, which is in Ticehurst RD), but he was not the son of William and Alice, and did not die in France. This honour belongs to his second cousin, also named Harry (he appears as such in 1911 but in 1901 as Henry George), who was born in Mayfield. As an aid to clarity, I shall now refer to them as Harry W – born in Wadhurst, son of Henry and Naomi – and Harry G born in Mayfield, son of William and Alice.

Henry (Harry W's father) was the son of James Maskell while William (Harry G's father) was the son of Trayton Maskell. James and Trayton were brothers, sons of Thomas and Elizabeth Maskell of Heathfield.

Harry G's birth was registered in the Uckfield RD. He was baptised as Henry George Maskell on 3 May 1896 at Mayfield, where, according to the 1901 census, he spent his early years in Fletching Street with siblings Ernest, Ellen and John. Grandfather Trayton was head of the household in 1901. There were two older siblings on the 1891 census, Kate and Fred. By 1911 the family had moved to Burnt Oak Cottages, Waldron and been joined by two further children, Arthur and Emily. William was an agricultural labourer and no doubt moved around to find work. Harry G clearly had another career in mind, and is recorded in 1911 as a baker, despite only being 15 years old. According to *Soldiers who died in the Great War*, Harry G enlisted at Eastbourne as Pte 607, 7th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment. The same source lists his date of death as 1 August 1916. Unfortunately, no attestation papers survive to fill in the gaps. His medal record does survive, although someone has written 'erbert' beside the initial H, making him Herbert Maskell. This shows him to have arrived in France on 31 August 1915.

In the meantime, Harry W was growing up in Hartfield. His father was also an agricultural labourer, and the home at Butcherfield Cottages (near Bolebrook Mill and Perryhill Farm) must have been bursting at the seams in 1901 as it includes nine children apart from Harry W, namely Leonard, George, Leicester, Mark, Rose, Joseph, Archie, Bert and Daisy. The older children had been born at Heathfield and Mayfield; the younger at Wadhurst and Hartfield, suggesting that this family too had a peripatetic lifestyle. The 1911 census shows the family still at the same address, but one son is a grinder at the mill and another is a carpenter and joiner. Harry W, aged 14, is a telegraph and newsboy. Harry W's birth had been registered in the 3rd quarter of 1896, which explains why he was only 14 when the census was taken on 2 April 1911. Four years later, his father died; (his mother survived until 1958, and is found on the 1939 Register living with son Archie in Tunbridge Wells). At this point, all the usual sources for tracing Harry Walter Maskell go cold until his name turns up on the Hartfield War Memorial.

However, just to compound the confusion, I then discovered the war service record, much damaged unfortunately, for a Harry Henry Maskell, labourer, of Hartfield, living at Sackville Cottages. He was designated Private G/8850, 3rd Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment. He gave his age as 19 years 4 months, which given an enlistment date at Chichester of 12 January 1916 would accord perfectly with someone born in the autumn of 1896, as we know Harry W was. Harry W didn't use his given second name in the census returns, and his father, Henry, had died in 1915. Did he, I wondered, decide to adopt the name Henry in honour of his father?

This man, whom I shall now refer to as Harry H, survived the war, but not unharmed. Only parts of his record are legible, but it seems likely he was wounded in October 1917, resulting in the amputation of an arm. On 19 March 1918 he is listed as awaiting fitting of a prosthetic limb. He passed through several hospitals, including Queen Mary Roehampton, before being discharged as no longer fit to serve. He was awarded the Silver War Badge, given to men discharged honourably through incapacity. One page of the record is a receipt from the Army Record Office on 3 January 1921, so he certainly survived the end of the war.

Still uncertain whether I was following a red herring, I followed Harry H through to the end of his life. He married May Wesson in the Tonbridge Registration District in 1924, and two probable children have been identified: Dennis – registered in Tonbridge in 1927 and Anthony – Thanet, 1928. The 1939 Register shows Harry H living in Rochester working as a telephone operator. It gives his date of birth as 9 September 1896, fitting nicely with a civil registration when he was a few weeks old. His death is registered in the Maidstone district in 1968, and May's in the same district in 1976.

Even the fact that Harry H became a telephone operator seemed to fit with the young Harry W's occupation as a telegraph boy, but there were still too many loose ends. However, it was a fortuitous run of newspaper articles which finally clinched it. I am grateful to my Ashdown Forest Research Group colleague, Martin Berry, for

pointing me in the right direction via a British Legion article on Mayfield¹. This confirmed Harry G's parentage and birth in Mayfield, and also gave his enlistment date as September 1914. Searching the newspaper archive further proved to be something of a gold mine.

Under the heading MAYFIELD, on 4 September 1914, the *Kent and Sussex Courier* listed H. Maskell as one of the local men who had enlisted. By the following year, though, Harry G's parents had moved again, as another article in the *Kent and Sussex Courier*, dated 22 October 1915, states:

Mr and Mrs Maskell, of Birchenden Cottages, Groombridge, have received an intimation that their son, Pte Henry Maskell, of the 9th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment, has been wounded. Pte Maskell, who is 20 years of age, is now in hospital in Newcastle-on-Tyne, where he underwent a successful operation on Monday for a severe gunshot wound in the hip. In a letter home he says he is "going on nicely."

The item finishes by noting that Henry had enlisted the previous September, that the family had lived in Mayfield until two years before, and that the father had been employed by a farmer named Eaton.

Two newspapers reported Harry G's death, both in the 18 August editions. The *Surrey Agricultural Express* reported him under a Mayfield heading, describing him as the second son of Mr and Mrs Maskell:

Harry came home some months ago, wounded, returning to his regiment, the Sussex, about eight weeks ago. His eldest brother, Fred is also in hospital wounded. Another brother, Ernest, is out doing his bit.

Under HARTFIELD, the *Kent and Sussex Courier* adds dates for his wounding – 25 September – and return to France – 12 July, gives his age as 20, and states that before joining the army he had worked for Mr Eaton at Hooper's Farm, Mayfield. It says that Fred is suffering from shell-shock and that Ernest was mentioned in dispatches. As a final codicil about Harry G, the Mayfield Roll of Honour² notes that he worked for Lesters the Bakers in Mayfield and is additionally commemorated on the Eridge Green Parish Church Memorial.

To return now to Harry W. He was also reported in the *Kent and Sussex Courier*. A short report proves finally that he and Harry H are the same person. It will be recalled that Harry W's father died in 1915, leaving Naomi a widow. It will also be recalled that two of his brothers, George and Mark, had been killed. Harry H was discharged following the amputation of an arm. The report, dated 26.10.1917 reads as follows:

¹ <http://counties.britishlegion.org.uk/media/5414961/august-2016.pdf>

² <http://www.roll-of-honour.com/Sussex/Mayfield.html>

HARTFIELD
PTE. H. MASKELL

Private H. Maskell, son of Mrs Maskell, of High-street, Hartfield, was wounded on September 26th, and has had his left arm amputated. He also sustained a broken leg. He is in the hospital in Orpington, and is progressing favourably. He is the seventh son of Mrs Maskell in His Majesty's Forces. Two of his brothers – George and Mark – have been killed.

As a final irony, when the *Kent and Sussex Courier* recorded the names of the fallen at the unveiling of the Hartfield War Memorial on 15 October 1920, it omitted several names. Despite the fact that his parents were now living in the village, one of these was Harry George Maskell.

Someone must have proposed the name Harry Maskell for addition to the Hartfield Memorial in 2014. If anyone can shed any light on this, please get in touch with the Ashdown Forest Research Group at info@ashdownforestresearchgroup.uk.

Pam Griffiths

Ashdown Forest Research Group

Note: All the WWI case studies written by the Group may be viewed on its website at <http://www.ashdownforestresearchgroup.uk>



Harry Walter aka Harry Henry Maskell
1896-1968