

Officers and Ranks in the Great War: the Kekewich and Maskell Brothers



Over the last four years members of the Ashdown Forest Research group have been researching the men who fell during the First World War and who are commemorated on the war memorials at Forest Row, Hartfield and Coleman's Hatch.

The studies we have written have looked at the lives of the men before the war, what they did during the war, the circumstances of their deaths, their family and local connections, and how their names came to be recorded on the war memorials and in local remembrance books.

These men's deaths would of course have been devastating for their families. But some families suffered multiple losses. In our cohort there were nine cases where two or more brothers died in the war, and two cases where the men who died were brothers-in-law. In all, 24 men – a fifth – fell into this category.

In this article I'd like to look at two local families from opposite ends of the social spectrum – one inhabiting the loftier strata of society and one from a much humbler, agricultural background – which both lost sons during the war and compare their contrasting lives and careers.



The **Kekewich brothers** were the sons of a wealthy London metal broker, Lewis Pendarves Kekewich, and his wife Lilian (née Hanbury), a member of the Truman's beer dynasty. The family lived in the grand surroundings of Kidbrooke Park, Forest Row (*below*), with 11 servants, from 1909 until 1916, when a decline in the metal trade brought on by the war forced the family to move back to London.



As befitted such a family, all four sons went to Eton and naturally were considered officer material. They all fought in the war. One was seriously injured and survived but the other three – pictured above – died.

The first to die was the youngest, **John Kekewich**. He enlisted with *The Buffs* (the East Kent Regiment) at the outbreak of war. A year later, his battalion moved to northern France

where John, now a captain, lost his life in 1915 leading an assault during the Battle of Loos, the first large-scale British offensive of the war. He and his men had been pinned down by heavy shelling and machine gun fire. He was left wounded in No Man's Land, refusing assistance from his men because it would be too dangerous to rescue him. In the 55 minute advance, 24 officers and 610 other ranks were lost; just one officer survived. John's body was never found. He was 24.

The next brother to die, **George Kekewich**, was a metal merchant who was admired in Forest Row as the village scoutmaster. He enlisted with the City of London Yeomanry, nicknamed *The Rough Riders*. He served in Egypt, defending the Suez canal and patrolling the railway in the Sinai peninsula, Gallipoli and Palestine where, now a captain, he died of wounds on 28 October 1917 following an onslaught by Turkish soldiers. He was 28 and was buried at Beersheba military cemetery.

The last to die was the eldest. **Hanbury Kekewich**, also a metal merchant, joined the Sussex Yeomanry before the war as a second lieutenant. During the war he served in Gallipoli and in Egypt, defending the Suez canal. By 1917, recently married with a newly born daughter, he was a captain and second-in-command of a battalion in Palestine. On 6 November he led his company of about 600 men in an attack on Turkish lines in defence of Gaza. They came under heavy fire and he died with 125 others. So, nine days after his brother George had died, he too was killed in action in Palestine. Hanbury was 32. Like his brother, he was buried at Beersheba.

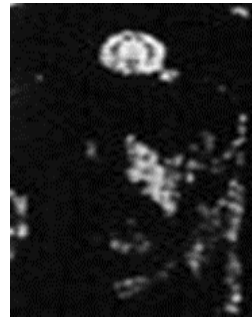
The **Maskell family** by contrast came from a much humbler background. Their father, Henry, was a farm labourer who had married in Wadhurst in 1880 and his wife, Naomi, eventually bore him thirteen children – though, unfortunately, three had died by the time of the 1911 census. They moved from place to place across Sussex – from Wadhurst to Heathfield, Mayfield and finally Hartfield – as Henry sought work, and their children were born in these different places. Two of their sons – who all served as privates in the army – were to die on the Western Front in close proximity to each other and in a short space of time, while a third survived the war.

George Maskell, born in Heathfield in 1882, was the second-born son. He was an unmarried former farm labourer turned miller who lived with his parents at Hartfield. Having enlisted at Tunbridge Wells in the Royal Sussex Regiment he joined the 9th battalion and in August 1914 sailed to France with the British Expeditionary Force. Just over a year later he was killed during the Battle of Loos. He fell, aged 33, on 25 September 1915 – just a day before John Kekewich lost his life in the same battle. Like John, his body was never found. Both their names are recorded on the war memorial at Loos.

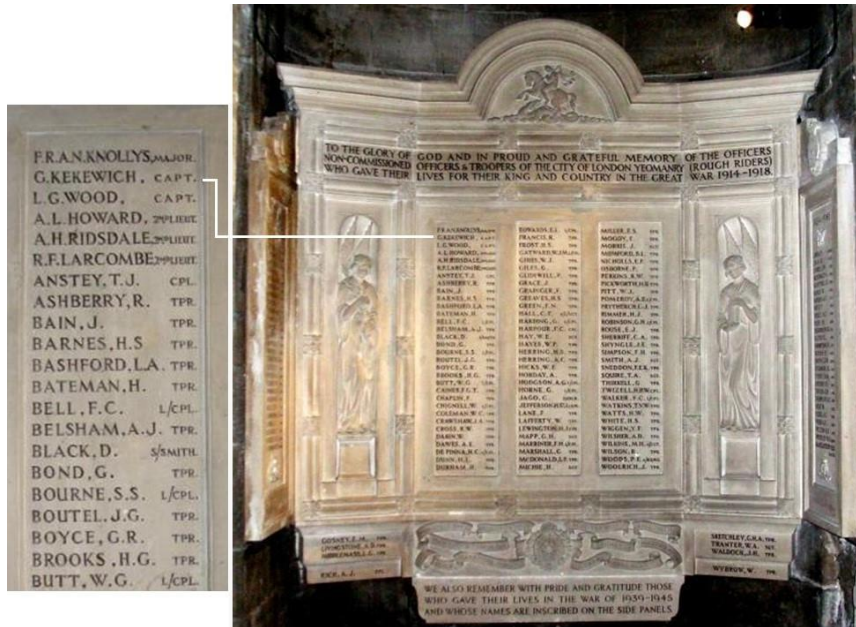


Forest Row War Memorial

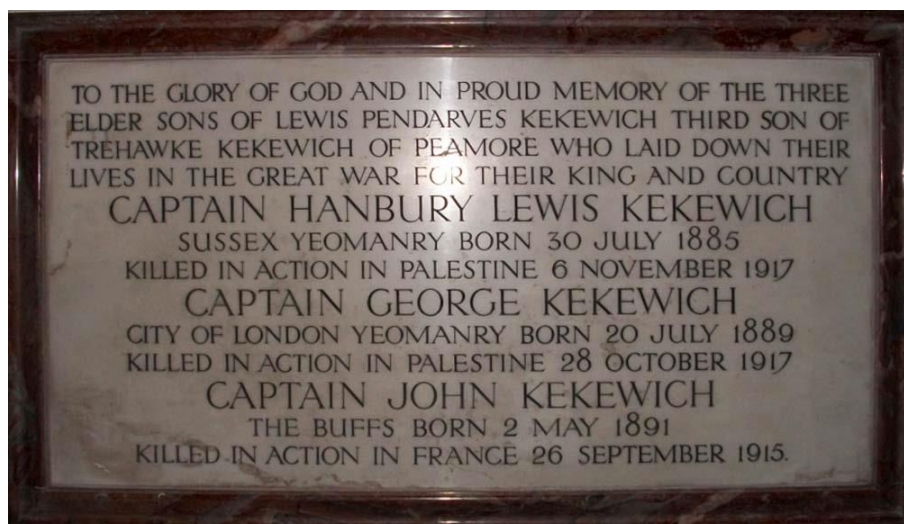
The second brother to lose his life, **Mark Maskell** (pictured right) was born in Mayfield in 1888. A farm labourer, he enlisted at Dover and joined the Northamptonshire Regiment. He was killed in action on the Somme, and like George his body was never found. Mark was 29, and he is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.



Henry Maskell died in East Grinstead in 1915 at the age of 59. Perhaps he might just have been spared the heartbreaking news of the death of two of his sons, who perished on the Western Front within the space of 13 months.



There is a strong contrast in how these two sets of brothers are remembered in memorials and rolls of honour. The names of the Kekewich brothers are found inscribed on the face of Forest Row's war memorial, but they appear on numerous other memorials as well. George Kekewich is remembered in a grandiose memorial to the City of London Yeomanry at St. Bartholomew's, Smithfield (above), on the Lord's Cricket Ground Roll of Honour (the brothers were members of the MCC), on the Eton College war memorial and on Hove Library's World War I memorial. Hanbury and John are similarly remembered. The plaque shown below is dedicated to the memory of the three brothers at St. Martin's Church, Exminster, Devon, where the family's ancestral estate lay. Besides these memorials there are many documents available to



researchers, online and in record offices, including press reports, that describe in detail the activities and exploits of the brothers and the rest of their families, accompanied by copious photographs.

By contrast, the Maskell brothers are only remembered on the local war memorial at Hartfield and by an inscription on memorials at the battlefields on the Western Front where they fell. There are no gravestones to testify to the sacrifices they made because their remains were never recovered. In terms of portraits, we have only a dark, blurred photograph of one of the brothers, Mark. We have to piece together their modest lives from relatively fragmentary information.

More than 100 case studies have been published so far by the Ashdown Forest Research Group. By Armistice Day on Sunday, 11 November – the centenary of the end of the war – we will have completed the entire project. The group's studies are being published online and may be accessed via the Conservators' website at <http://www.ashdownforest.org/enjoy/history/AshdownResearchGroup.php> where you can also find out more about the group and its contact details.

MARTIN BERRY

This is an amended and extended version of an article published in the Autumn/Winter 2018 edition of Ashdown Forest News. In particular, it has been revised to reflect the fact that the reference in the original article to a third Maskell brother dying in the war, Harry Maskell, was incorrect. It has come to light that the Harry Maskell identified on the war memorial at Hartfield at the beginning of our research, and who was the brother of George and Mark Maskell, in fact survived the war, and it was another Harry Maskell, a relative who lived near the Maskell brothers in Hartfield, who died in the war and is commemorated on the war memorial.