

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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Saffron Walden in the First World War

©Robert E. Pike

Over several years, Robert Pike, author of *The Victor Heroes* about the town's war memorial, has contributed a number of articles to the *Journal* about Saffron Walden during WW1. Some of these have been gathered together here, and are reprinted with his permission.

Press We to the Field

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Saffron Walden War Memorial. Photograph ©Gordon Ridgewell.

'Saffron Walden during the First World War' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 8 (2004), No 14 (2006), No 16 (2008), No 27 (2014)

At 11 o'clock on the evening of 4 August 1914, soon after its troops had invaded Belgium's neutrality, Great Britain declared war on Germany.

Having made this momentous decision, Britain had no troops on continental Europe, and no British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F). Alone among the combatants, Britain had no conscripts to call upon, only a purely professional army consisting of a mere six divisions. It was, therefore, not until 12 August that the first troops of a hastily-formed B.E.F crossed the Channel.

On 21 August near St. Symphorien, east of Mons, a twenty-year old British soldier, Pte. John Parr of 4th Middlesex Regiment, went on his bicycle to scout out the environs. He never returned. He is buried in St. Symphorien Military Cemetery, undoubtedly the first British casualty of the Great War. The following day, three miles north-east of Mons, a squadron of British troops saw a group of German troops, distinctive in their field-grey uniforms, and fired at them – the first shots fired in battle by British troops on the continent of Europe for almost one hundred years. These defining moments preluded the next four years of warfare of a scale and ferocity never known before, leading to the deaths of an estimated 935,000 British and Empire men, 159 of whom came from Saffron Walden.

In August 1914 this incomprehensible toll of human suffering would have been dismissed as obscenely impossible by the population of every involved nation, the belief being prevalent that, 'it would be over by Christmas'. Indeed, the news of its first casualties did not reach the citizens of Saffron Walden until the war was some four weeks old, and then from an unexpected arena.

At sea, Great Britain was regarded as the great maritime super-power with the Royal Navy expected to play a decisive role in the war. 'Everybody quite mad with delight at the success of our first naval venture,' a British admiral wrote to his wife after three German cruisers were destroyed in the Heligoland Bight. But, as on land, where the use of artillery was to revolutionise, at such a terrible cost, the soldiers' war, in the same way at sea, it was not the great sea-battles between huge dreadnought battleships, with the exception of Jutland in 1916, but the threat of the U-Boat that changed the face of war.

Thus, the dubious, but tragic honour of being the first local casualty belongs to William Gilbey who was born in Braintree on 18 March 1887, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Gilbey who later moved to 11 Mill Field, Ashdon Road, Saffron Walden. In March 1902, aged fifteen he joined the Royal Navy as a Junior Seaman attached to H.M.S *Warspite*. On attaining

the age of eighteen Gilbey signed on for twelve years and was attached to H.M.S *Impregnable*. Over the next eleven years he saw service in a range of ships, including a Dreadnought, Cruisers and Light Cruisers. Oddly, in October 1907, his record states that he was 'recovered from desertion and sent to H.M.S Pembroke and sentenced to forty-two days'. This aberration does not seem to have affected his record as in 1908 his character is described as 'Very Good'.

During this period of service he married Florence, who later went to live in Bermondsey. On 1 October 1913 he joined H.M.S *Pathfinder* classed as a light cruiser/destroyer in the 'Scout' class launched in July 1904 and completed in 1905 at 2,940 tons armed with nine four-inch guns. On 5 September 1914, the cruiser was off St. Abb's Head a promontory off the east coast of Scotland, near the Firth of Forth. The captain was Francis Martin-Leake, a brother of the first man ever to win two Victoria Crosses, Arthur Martin-Leake, and had a complement of 264 men. Three days previously a German submarine the U 21, which was designed to intercept Royal Navy warships escorting troop convoys to France, had, undetected, entered the Firth of Forth and penetrated the sea defences. It cruised around until 4.30 p.m. on 5 September when it fired a single bow torpedo at a range of 1,600 yards at H.M.S *Pathfinder*, striking it square on, puncturing and igniting a boiler. This in turn sprayed red-hot shrapnel through the bulkhead into the ship's magazine causing the forward magazine to explode. The ship went down in four minutes. At the time the men were relaxing on the mess decks and were caught by the full explosion. Only fifty-six survived and William Gilbey was not one of them. Thus the first British naval ship ever to fall victim to an enemy submarine contained Saffron Walden's first fatal casualty of the war. William Gilbey is commemorated on Chatham Naval Memorial, Panel 22. He was aged 27 at the time of his death.

This sinking of a seemingly invincible Royal Navy vessel shocked the country as a whole, and Saffron Walden in particular where the public perception was, as yet, unaware of the scale of the casualties in Belgium from the Retreat from Mons and the Battle of Le Cateau. This sense of complacency was about to be shattered as the news of the deaths of local men, from the whole spectrum of society, began to trickle through.

Arthur Sharp was born and enlisted in Saffron Walden, but resided in Littlebury where his name appears on their Roll of Honour, and had been a regular soldier for some years, rising to the rank of Sergeant in the 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards. After the outbreak of war, the 2nd Battalion set sail from Southampton on 12 August for Le Havre, arriving the following day. By a circuitous route, the Battalion eventually arrived in the outskirts of Mons on 23 August where they became involved in the

famous retreat of the 'Old Contemptibles', pursued by a German army of some 380,000 men – the British had less than 36,000!

As 1 September broke, the battalion had retired to Villers-Cotterets to take up positions on the main road running east and west through the Rond de la Reine. At 6.30 a.m. some German cavalry showed themselves, rapidly disappearing under a hail of British bullets. All was then quiet for a while, orders being received to hold the position till 1 p.m. 'in order to enable the rest of the Divisions to halt and have dinner'!

At about 11 a.m. the enemy mounted a serious and concerted attack, necessitating a counter-attack, charging with the bayonet, by No. 4 Company. This had the desired effect but resulted in heavy casualties. Shortly after this the order came to withdraw, but fortunately the Germans did not press them, as they had evidently lost heavily, too. The Battalion's casualties were three officers and 161 other ranks.

It seems likely that among the casualties was Arthur Sharp, although there is some mystery here as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists his date of death as 12 September when the Battalion were miles away from Villers-Cotterets at Courcelles. However, as Sharp is buried in the Guards' Grave, Villers-Cotterets with the casualties of 1 September, it seems logical to assume he was wounded and subsequently died in the same action. A possible explanation is that he succumbed to his wounds, was buried in Villers-Cotterets Communal Cemetery, where three graves were moved to the Guards' Grave after the Armistice. Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that the tragic telegram was delivered to his widow, Daisy, at her home in Kent some time after.

From a very different social background was Second-Lieutenant John Reynolds Pickersgill-Cunliffe, but as an officer in the same Battalion of the same Regiment as Arthur Sharp, he was to share the same battle experiences only to die two days later in horrific circumstances. Cunliffe's name appears on the Little Chesterford Roll of Honour, where his family had a home, although his parents' London address was Chelsea. He entered the Guards in 1913. Cunliffe had, along with his Battalion, since Mons spent weeks in retreat, holding the vastly superior enemy at bay in valiant rearguard actions until they crossed the River Marne where the German advance was thwarted. Crossing the Aisne on 14 September they reached the tiny village of Soupier where they engaged the enemy at La Cour de Soupier Farm. A detachment under Cunliffe ran into the enemy and were taken prisoner. When the remainder of the advance guard came forward the Germans abandoned their prisoners, but 'as they withdrew an officer was seen to shoot Cunliffe as he lay wounded on the ground. This was vouched for by other men of his platoon who had been taken prisoner

when the Germans advanced and were abandoned by them when they retired.' The German officer concerned was immediately shot by advancing Coldstream.¹ On Thursday 17 September the Battalion buried John Pickersgill-Cunliffe and two other officers in the small Communal Cemetery up the hill above Soupir where he lies today. He was aged 19.

September ended with two more local casualties who share the same date of death, 29 September 1914, and the same regiment, the 9th (Queen's Royal) Lancers, but whose deaths both tragically illustrate the harsh realities and fortunes of war.

By 22 August the B.E.F comprised four infantry divisions, and one cavalry division, and for the cavalrymen of the 9th Lancers the experiences of the first two months of the Great War read like a litany of military honour. On this date they had taken up position just across the Belgian border, south of Mons. Heavily outnumbered they were ordered to retreat and as we have seen with the infantry spent the next two weeks in retreat, becoming involved in the major rearguard action of Le Cateau: 'It is said by some that through the course of the entire war never were British troops as heavily outnumbered'.²

Various actions followed: Nery, the Battle of the Marne, where its success was offset by the Allies' cautious approach allowing the Germans to retreat northwards, to the Battle of the Aisne where there were signs that the German army was in disarray. On 29 September Private Albert Edward Roberts, who lived in Littlebury, was in billets in Longueval on the Aisne when it was heavily shelled, killing him and eighteen of his comrades. They are all buried in Longueval Communal Cemetery. On the same day Shoeing-Smith William Saward was also killed. He was the son of William Henry and Alice Lewis Saward of 5 Ingleside Place, High Street, Saffron Walden. Very little else is known of William Saward, except that he was born in Plumstead and lived in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire; he was a farrier who was mobilised in Hertford immediately war was declared and rushed to Belgium as part of General Allenby's 2nd Cavalry Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division.

It is possible that both Saward and Roberts had been involved in the saving of the guns of the 119th Battery Royal Field Artillery, for which a Victoria Cross was awarded to Captain Francis Grenfell and the cavalry charge by the 9th Lancers at Quievrain (not for nothing were they nicknamed 'The Delhi Spear men'). This action was described as 'a modern version of Balaclava', with the same results, but fortunately both Saward and Roberts survived.

Saward's body was never found, so whether he died as a result of the same shelling as Roberts we shall never know. His name appears on La Ferte-sous-Jouarre Memorial near the River Marne which he had crossed in victory some six weeks earlier, one name among 3,740 officers and men of the B.E.F killed in the fighting of August, September and early October 1914 and having no known grave. He was 20 years of age.

September saw a great change in the nature of the First World War; by the middle of the month the mobile warfare of the early weeks had all but ceased. German entrenchments in front of the Chemin des Dames were the first of what soon became the static, continuous 400-mile Western Front. It also marked a change in the perception of the war in the minds of people in Saffron Walden, as everywhere. By the end of 1914, which on the Western Front ended in relative peace, apart from desultory shelling and sniping, six local men had died. The ramifications on friends, family and local society were immense. No-one believed anymore that the war would end in the foreseeable future, it would be a long, painful and taxing business. There would be many more men who would never come home, not to mention those who did, but with physical and psychological scars. They could not fade away – they were the legacy of a war that ended only with their deaths or the deaths of those who loved them. Saffron Walden and the surrounding villages, the world in microcosm, would never be the same again.

How can we atone for the lost millions and millions of years of life, how atone for those lakes and seas of blood ?... What can we do ? Headstones and wreaths and memorials and speeches and the Cenotaph... no, no, it has got to be something in us... Somehow we must atone to the dead... The reproach is not from them, but in ourselves.³

*The title of this article comes from a patriotic poem, *Men Who March Away: Song of the Soldiers*, by Thomas Hardy, reflecting the early euphoria of the War when people shared a sense of certainty of an early victory, righteousness of the cause and pride in our fighting forces: '*Press we to the field ungrieving/in our hearts believing/ Victory crowns the just*'.

Notes

1. Craster, D. M. (ed.), *Fifteen Rounds A Minute: Grenadiers at war* (1976).
2. Lucy, J. F., *There's A Devil in the Drum* (1938).
3. Aldington. R., Prologue to *Death of a Heron* (1929).

The Somme Anniversary

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(updated with minor changes)

On 1st July 1916 began the longest and most costly land battle in British history – the battle of the Somme. On the first day alone British casualties were 19,240 killed; 35,494 wounded; 2,152 missing – a total for one day of 57,470, a figure never exceeded before or since.

Four men from Saffron Walden were among the dead of the first day: Pte. Charles E. Andrews, Pte George Cornell, Pte. Sydney Barker and Cpl. James J. Halls. To remember and honour the sacrifice and memory of these men and the countless thousands from all sides who suffered, here is James Halls' story.

James Halls attended the Boys' British School in Saffron Walden. On leaving he became a telegraph messenger for a short time before enlisting in the Regular Army in London before the war. One of five children, James' father had been a former local postman, dying of enteric fever whilst with the 2nd Norfolk Regiment in the South African war. His mother, Elizabeth lived at 13 Museum Street, but James was now married and lived in Johnson's Yard.

The 1st Rifle Brigade were mobilised at Colchester and spent a few days preparation at Harrow School before being rushed to France at the end of August 1914. In late December James had been slightly wounded in the foot, but in May 1915 he was in trenches near Mousetrap Farm in the Ypres Salient. It was a group of buildings surrounded by water on high ground north of Wieltje overlooking St Julien and the valley of the Steenbeck. On the 13th there was intense bombardment and the enemy attacked bidding for control of the remainder of the Frezenberg Ridge. The Regimental History states: `

Halls of B Company (and another corporal) were cut off from the company for nine hours by the destruction of our trenches. They had held out in their post and by their accurate shooting had defeated all attempts by the enemy to dig in on the right front.

In a letter home, James wrote more modestly and graphically:

We were in position with a farm on the right known as 'Shell-trap'. We were shelled heavily from dawn till 3 pm receiving heavy losses, resulting in me and Corporal 'Sonie' (Sunnuck), a Canadian, not killed or wounded. When the shelling stopped the Germans started coming up. 'Sonie' and I crept up the trench and fired on them. Three times this happened. During the day we lost 170 men.

For this action both James and Cpl. H.E. Sunnuck were awarded the DCM. The *London Gazette* 5 August 1915 states:

For conspicuous gallantry on 13th May 1915, east of Ypres. When the end of his trench had been blown in, Rifleman Halls remained on the spot with an N.C.O. under heavy fire for nine hours firing on the enemy.

On receipt of the DCM, James was promoted to corporal. A further letter of August 1915 to his mother shows the character of the man:

We are now back from the trenches for ten days rest, the first time we have been out of the sound of the guns during nine months I have been out here. This is Sunday and quite a treat to hear the old French bells ringing in the village church, which is about half a mile away. Since I last wrote we have taken part in a charge and captured a length of German trenches and eighty prisoners. Last Sunday we had orders to attack the German trench in front of us, but I hadn't the heart to write and let you know, and I am glad I didn't now, as, thank God, I came out of it quite safe, all but a cut on the face with a small piece of shrapnel, but I scarcely felt that in the excitement. Our artillery started the bombardment at 5 o'clock on Tuesday morning and it only lasted an hour, but it was terrible, and at one minute past six we gave a yell, jumped out of our trenches and rushed towards the Germans. By five minutes past six there wasn't a German in their first line trench, except prisoners who were begging for mercy, no doubt thinking we would shoot them straight away, as perhaps they deserved, but that is not our way. We made them work to build up the trench instead, which they were only too eager to do. We lost heavily, especially by bombs and grenades, but our shells must have done terrible work, for the Germans were lying in heaps blown to pieces, but I will not try to explain how horrible it was. I'd like to be able to forget. They left everything behind them, scores of rifles, helmets and equipment etc, and you ought to have seen our boys smoking their cigars, of which we found plenty. They shelled us pretty heavily during the day and tried hard to rush us out of it again, but we stuck it until we were relieved at night very tired and parched, but glad we had done what was wanted of us. They put some gas shells over during the night, the only way of revenge they can get, but it was no go. It was a sad roll call the morning after we were relieved, but it would have been a lot worse hadn't it been for our artillery keeping them back and stopping them from massing. Don't worry about sending me parcels as long as I can get a smoke nothing else matters. P.S. I know you will congratulate me, Mother, on having won the D.C.M for something I did in May. I shall probably get a furlough, so look out and cheer up.

Soon after this James got his home leave, but not in the way he would have wished. He was wounded in the foot and was in hospital in Folkestone for two months, before convalescing at home for three more weeks. He was back in France for the 'Big Push'. His battalion were to attack the Redan Ridge. They moved off at 7.29 am and were immediately held up by intense fire front the Ridge and the Quadrilateral. Also the enemy wire was uncut, but by 10 am they had entered the German lines. B Company was in the first wave that rushed these trenches and engaged the enemy in close-quarter fighting and bombing, but they were steadily driven back.

Meanwhile, Mrs Halls had received a postcard from James saying he was all right. Tragically as she read it he was already dead. On entering the German trenches he had been shot in the chest. On 21 July his family received official confirmation of this from the regimental headquarters. James Halls is buried in the cemetery where during the days before the battle mass graves had been dug to receive the casualties. Little did they envisage the terrible numbers there would be. It is quite possible that he and his battalion had marched past these very graves on their way up to the front-line. Today he lies with over 1,100 of his comrades. The inscription chosen by his family reads: 'His memory is as dear today as in the year he passed away'.



Corporal James John Halls, D.C.M. (5093) 1st Rifle Brigade, killed in action 1st July 1916, aged 20 and buried in Sucrerie Military Cemetery, Colincamps, France, Plot 1 Row Grave 16. ©Robert Pike.

As dusk fell on the first day of the greatest battle the world had ever witnessed, the countless dead and dying lay out in no man's land. Few realised that the battle would continue until winter set in on 18 November 1916. Ninety years later in France, on the same day as the start of the battle, at the huge Monument to the Missing at Thiepval, in the presence of the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, these men and their former enemies were remembered. I laid a wreath on James Halls' grave and remembered him and his comrades.

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Walden Place VAD Hospital

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Saffron Walden Voluntary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) Hospital was open and ready for occupation from April 1915, in a large house set amongst imposing grounds, Walden Place. It was the property of W.T. Tuke, and was lent by Mr F. Tuke for the duration of the First World War. It had accommodation for 50 patients in twelve wards. Each ward comprised four rooms of six beds, two rooms of five beds, three rooms of four beds and two rooms of two beds. In addition there was a massage room, a dining-room, a smoke room, a small billiard room and two linen rooms. Photographs show that the patients wore a rather basic hospital 'uniform' of jacket with wide lapels, trousers and their own service cap.



Injured servicemen recuperating in the grounds of Saffron Walden V.A.D. Hospital (Walden Place) during WW1. ©Saffron Walden Town Library.

Professional staff included Matron Winter, who was qualified to give massage to the patients. Dr J.H. Swanton and Dr J.A. Browne attended, with Dr John Atkinson, Medical Officer and pharmacist, who was Assistant County Director for the Saffron Walden Division of the Red Cross. His wife, Mrs Dorothea Atkinson of The Grange, Saffron Walden, was Commandant. Commandant Atkinson enrolled in October 1914, and with immense hard work over the winter, the nursing and auxiliary staff were ready to receive the first convoy of 50 wounded and sick men on 16 May 1915, transported by the RASC. From that date for almost four years until the last man was discharged on 31 March 1919, four months after the signing of the Armistice, the hospital was never empty or even temporarily closed.



Red Cross V.A.D. nurses who worked part-time at Walden Place in WW1 – Commandant, Mrs. Dorothea Atkinson, is seated. The names of most of the other nurses pictured are given in the original photo, in the Stacey Albums, ©Saffron Walden Town Library.

A large number of Red Cross volunteers worked at the hospital. Some interesting documents survive which paint a vivid picture of staffing and morale. Out of 126 ladies who went in for exams to nurse at the hospital, 20 qualified and worked for under a month, 40 qualified and worked for over 40 days, 26 qualified and worked for over 160 days, one left to work in military hospitals and 17 worked from beginning to the end. The high standards are apparent in a confidential report dated 18 October 1917 which praises the success of the establishment in glowing terms:

A good home lent by Mr. F. Tuke for the purpose of a Hospital. Administrative accommodation is poor. The Staff work under considerable difficulties, bravely surmounted. This hospital is in good order. The wards are rather crowded, but are happy and comfortable. All operations are done at the General Hospital. The laundry is a special feature, everything is washed on the premises and very well done. Perfect harmony exists between trained and untrained workers. The kitchens are small but well managed. Cooking is admirable and well served. 50 Beds – a very large proportion of stretcher cases. All space is used for wards. Trained staff – 1 Matron – Mrs. Winter who lives near. She has a nursing home and practises massage. 2 day sisters, 1 night sister – all most satisfactory. Massage – this is done by the Matron. V.A.D.s – 20 come on various days and at various times – in two daily shifts. All are unable to give full time. A number of them are billeted. Paid help – 4 scrubbers, 1 paid V.A.D. night nurse, 1 laundress.

Some of the casualty lists have survived and from them it is possible to draw a representative picture of the workings of a typical V.A.D. Hospital. Convoys of men seemed to arrive from May 1915 on a once-monthly basis in numbers ranging from 13 to 46, suffering from a wide range of wounds, injuries and illnesses.

It is apparent from four surviving pages of casualty lists, kept in Saffron Walden Museum, that the hospital was exclusively for other ranks from all

regiments. Analysing the intake of 28 September 1917, there were a total of 28 British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F) men; three Canadian Expeditionary Force (C.E.F.) and four Australian Imperial Forces (A.I.F.), a total of 35 admissions. A column headed 'Disease or injury' reflects a wide range of disability: from the expected 'G.S.W.' (Gun Shot Wound) and 'S.W.' (Shell Wound) to various parts of the anatomy, to albuminuria (albumin in the urine), fractured tibia, gassed, fractured leg, bleeding piles, P.U.O. (a type of fever) amputated right arm, sprained ankle, concussion and debility. Other lists show soldiers suffering from bronchitis, amputated foot, rheumatism, amputated leg, nephritis, bronchial pneumonia, Gaw foot, trench fever, nervous debility, pleurisy, appendicitis, cystitis, emphysema, gastritis and V.D.H. (venereal disease). The final list surviving is simply headed: 'Ex. H.S. St. Denis, No. 20 Ambulance Train,' and is undated. Only page one is here and contains 35 names from the B.E.F. These lists, which comprise 134 names, had to be sent to the War Office, so the pages must be duplicates, and are quite a rare archive.

In spite of volunteer nurses, the hospital must have cost a lot to run, but local fund-raising helped pay for costs. A little accounts book entitled 'Red Cross Hospital, Saffron Walden: Donations & Subscriptions' lists the sums given, ranging from a shilling to £50. Donors were mostly individuals, but also churches, schools, businesses, pubs and villages – in 1917 residents of Ashdon held a whist drive, which raised £4 6s in aid of the hospital. A concert brought in £2; a Sunday School contributed a guinea; the Co-op gave £5; a collection among the Langley Primitive Methodists produced £8 16s. Clearly the good work of the Red Cross in Saffron Walden V.A.D. Hospital was being well-supported right across the district.

The statistics also survive for the V.A.D. Hospital. The number of soldiers received by direct line of ambulance trains between May 1915 and March 1919, was 1,012; from transfer from other hospitals, 89 making a total of 1,101 men. Altogether 603 were discharged cured and fit for duty, 497 were transferred to special hospitals and convalescent camps and one man died. Photographs were regularly taken and many of these can be found in the Stacey Albums in Saffron Walden Town Library. These do not show patients' names but over 130 of the men's names can be found on the few casualty lists surviving. The archives form a record of what went on in many hundreds of such hospitals all over the country, where pain, illness and death were fought against by doctors, nurses and auxiliaries, many of them working in a voluntary capacity and dealing with often horrific wounds and trauma. In Saffron Walden V.A.D. Hospital, they found a peaceful, happy community in beautiful surroundings, far from the horrors of war.

'Worthy of Laughter or Tears?' – Armistice 1918

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Victory celebrations in the Market Place after the end of the First World War. Illustration by kind permission of Saffron Walden Town Library.

Just east of Mons, in Belgium, and not far from where the first shots of the Great War were fired, at two minutes to eleven on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, a German sniper shot and killed a Canadian soldier. He was probably the last of over eight and a half million soldiers to be killed in the Great War; soldiers who died at the rate of 5,600 each day of that dreadful conflict.

Some 25 miles to the south-west the 1st Essex Regiment found themselves at Bethencourt, near Le Cateau; one officer and 51 other ranks only remaining from those present three and a half years earlier at the landings on Gallipoli in April 1915, of which only one lance-corporal had served continuously with the battalion throughout the war!

For the 10th Essex Regiment, 'when the last gun fired (they) were on parade drilling with an ingrained habit as if to prepare for the next war and the culminating moment of the years of effort scarcely disturbed the routine of the day'.¹

In Rouen, France in the first days of November, the last two Walden soldiers to die in the war, Peter ('Dick') Housden, aged 18 and, four days later, 19-year-old George Pearson, were both tragic reminders of the

¹'Saffron Walden during the First World War' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 8 (2004), No 14 (2006), No 16 (2008), No 27 (2014)

devastating effect the war had had, not only on their families both already scarred by its consequences, but on the community too.

The Housden's eldest son Harry, a gunner in the Royal Field Artillery, had been wounded and was in a Leeds hospital; Frederick, the second son, with the Essex Regiment, had been captured at Mons in 1914 and suffered the privations of a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany for four long years. In addition, George had served as a bombardier with the Canadian forces, but had thankfully survived unscathed. Further tragedy, however, was to strike - on the day Dick was buried, his mother was called to Sheffield to be at the bedside of Frederick's dying wife, Beatrice, another victim of the influenza pandemic.

For the Pearsons, George's brother, Charles had been killed in October 1914, leaving a widow and two children. Immediately his elder brother Joseph joined up and disappeared without trace on the Somme in 1916. He left five children fatherless. Finally, three days before George died, perhaps sensing that after so interminable a time her third son would not recover, his grief-stricken mother, Sarah, passed away. The fourth son, Herbert, serving with the Wiltshire Regiment, survived to come home to what was left of his family.

In Saffron Walden, as everywhere the end did not bring great rejoicing, too many people had gone, too many were still lost, too many would never recover. The mood was reflected in Thomas Hardy's poem:

Calm fell. From heaven distilled a clemency;
There was peace on earth and silence in the sky:
Some could, some could not shake off misery:
The Sinister Spirit sneered, "It had to be!"
And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, "Why?"

Although the war was over, the deaths caused by it were not. With a population of something over 6,000, the town sent over 1,000 men to the war, one in six of the population, and one of every six of those men had his name inscribed upon the memorial; many a soldier posted missing was not confirmed dead for some considerable time afterwards and many lingered on ill in mind and body for months, or even years. Because of this it was decreed that the official date of the ending of the Great War was to be 31 August 1921. Indeed in Saffron Walden on 11 November 1918 the roll of honour had still five more names to be added to it.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the town struggled to return to normality and to come to terms with the losses which finally totalled 159 on the war memorial. Gradually men began to arrive home discharged from their units; prisoners-of-war, many in need of treatment after their

privations in German camps, and of course there were the wounded, the sick, the mentally scarred, widows, orphans, all needing support.

Various celebrations took place. On 15 January 1919 a reception was given by the Mayor and Corporation to 'the Repatriated Prisoners-of-War belonging to the Borough'. The programme contained such items as 'Old Faggots' sung by Mr C. E. Day, a waltz from the 'Bing Boys' Orchestra and a recitation by Lt. W Adam. On 21 February 1919 a 'Victory Ball' was held in the Town Hall: Gents 6 shillings, Ladies 5 shillings, with 'an efficient Quadrille Band in attendance'. In July 1919 there followed a 'commemoration of Peace'.

However, for most people the establishment of a suitable memorial to the Fallen was paramount. In the minutes of the Council meeting dated 27 November 1919 various suggestions were mooted, including 'a monument at the top of the High Street arranging for the reception of a captured German gun'. Among other ideas were 'the building of houses for the Working Classes, and 'the utilisation of Fry's Gardens and neighbouring fields as a cricket, tennis and sports ground'. Eventually it was decided to build the war memorial we see today at the top of the High Street, 'a monument that shall stand from generation to generation as a token of grateful remembrance and a symbol of the devotion of those who died for their country', the probable cost to be £800 or £900.

When the concept of a memorial thus became a fact, relatives and friends were encouraged to examine a list on three framed parchments in the parish church to see if their loved ones' names were included. The roll of honour was to embrace Saffron Walden and the hamlets of Swards End, Little Walden and Audley End, and to comprise of men whose home was in Saffron Walden when they joined His Majesty's Forces and men whose parents resided here and who had gone away to work, but had not established a home for themselves elsewhere. In August 1919 the names numbered 134.

The war memorial was the last and most splendid of a number of memorials created to remember these men in Saffron Walden. Designed by the architect, T. J. Weatherall of Loughton in 1920, it was constructed by the firm of Whitehead & Day of Saffron Walden. Two of the late Mr Osborne Whitehead's sons, Archibald and Osborne, are included on it. In addition there had been the painted board which once stood in the market square on the Victorian fountain, the names being added as news of a death arrived (to be seen in the parish church until November 1996 and now in the museum), with the names of 132 officers and men in seemingly random order. There was and is the illuminated roll of honour in the Town Hall council chamber, and there was an Oddfellows roll of

honour in their Lodge Room. The Boys' British School roll was unveiled on 11 November 1919 with 75 names on it, and the Comrades Club opened. There is also a memorial in the Friends' School, but this contains the name of only one man on the town memorial.

On Saturday 7 May 1921 at 2.30 p.m. Saffron Walden came to a standstill and men, women and children gathered silently at the top of the High Street to see the unveiling of the town's war memorial by General Lord Horne, G.C.G, K.C.M.G, G.O.C. Eastern Command. On it were finally inscribed the names of 159 men who fought in the so-called Great War and who died in all the different theatres of that terrible struggle, and some of wounds in England itself, and it was this white war memorial that focussed people's grief and their need for praise and remembrance. On that bright May afternoon the address spoke of, 'The victor heroes (who) rest in many lands, but here the symbol of their glory stands'.

But what of 'the Glorious Dead?' Enter Saffron Walden Cemetery by the left-hand gate, and under a magnificent tree just in front of the chapel, you will see the solitary white headstone of the one hundred and fifty-ninth - and last - man from our town to die in the Great War. One who 'marched away' but, unlike so many of his comrades, rests here at home and not in 'some corner of a foreign field'. His is a common enough story of suffering and great pain, of courage and sacrifice, but symbolises our inherent need to remember.

Arthur Grime was born in Leytonstone, the son of Mrs Ada Ann and the late Thomas Grime. At some stage Mrs Grime came to live in Saffron Walden, at 4 New Road, and Arthur went to the Boys' British School. After leaving school he went to live in Harrow and obtained employment there. With the onset of war Arthur enlisted at Marylebone, first in the Middlesex Regiment before joining the London Irish Rifles on 12 December 1915. In June 1916, he went to France and survived the actions at High Wood and Flers Trench.

However, in September 1917, Mrs Grime received the news that Arthur had been wounded four or five times when a shell burst near his dug-out and was in hospital near Windsor. Most of the wounds were superficial, although the wound in his left leg was quite troublesome. On returning to France, Arthur was wounded for a second time in August 1918. An explosive poisonous bullet shattered his left thigh - the same leg that had been hit before. This time it was much more serious. Over the next 16 months, Arthur experienced great suffering. He endured 19 operations all to no avail. On Friday 12 December, the day after the last of these operations in the Kitchener's Military Hospital, Brighton, his pain ceased

forever. It was the fourth anniversary of his joining the London Irish Rifles and he was 24 years old.

His body was brought home on the following Wednesday and was laid in the Roman Catholic Church. The next day Arthur was buried in the town cemetery and now lies beneath a Commonwealth War Graves Commission standard white headstone with the inscription, 'Lord, All Pitying, Jesu Blest. Grant him Eternal Rest'. Ironically Arthur's name does not appear on the Boys' British School memorial board completed on 11 November 1919 - he was still alive.

Ninety years ago the Great War and the story of the human suffering it embedded in the fabric of a small East Anglian market-town came to a formal end. For those who lost a loved one, a light had been extinguished, never to be rekindled. Many of those who did return had physical and psychological scars. These could not fade away - they were the legacy of a war that ended only with their deaths or the deaths of those who loved them. 'What can the world hold afterwards worthy of laughter or tears?'



Arthur Grime's gravestone in Saffron Walden Cemetery.

Statistics still astound - 743,000 British dead alone, but are meaningless - it is the individual tragic tale that resonates in our mind and the familiar images and echoes of that conflict still reverberate in our consciousness, casting a shadow over 90 years later, and will, perhaps, forever.

One of the writers of the war, Richard Aldington, summed up the predominant mood, in his Prologue to the novel *Death of a Hero*.

How can we atone for the lost millions and millions of years of life, how atone for those lakes and seas of blood?... and speeches and the Cenotaph... no, no, it has got to be something in us.... Somehow we must atone to the dead... The reproach is not from them, but in ourselves.

In subdued and beaten Germany, a failed painter and former corporal in the German Army commenting on the huge loss of life caused by the war ominously wrote:

'But that's what young men are there for!'

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'Look up and swear by the green of the spring that you'll never forget'

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As a child I lived in the same house as my maternal grandfather. On the mantelpiece were the cases of two brass shells, and a small 'goblet' made of different-sized bullets; they fascinated me, but I never asked where they came from. After he died two medals came my way and for years sat in my drawer, unnoticed.

At school I loved English and inevitably Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon came into my cosmos, then the epiphany occurred. My parents on holiday bought me the diary of an officer in the Somerset Light Infantry, Geoffrey Prideaux, which I devoured. Next year meandering in France we decided to find where he was buried and after much difficulty found Hem Farm with the added interest of two VCs, and the obsession stretched and stirred. If Prideaux, why not Owen and next summer we went to Ors; no reassuring CWGC signs showed us to the Communal Cemetery, so we went to the Mairie to ask where the famous 'poète anglais' was buried. 'Qui?' was the response; they were unaware of who they had, not so today!

Then fate took control: I had to give up the job; became an apron-decked house-husband, but found when the children were at school, what to do? I looked at the town war memorial and its 159 names, a research project, easy, I thought. Ten years later I found the one hundred and fifty-ninth,

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Walter Hill, lying unmarked, forgotten in the town cemetery and the task, except for the small matter of a book, was complete. Meanwhile Grandad's medals, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, irreverently referred to as Squeak, and Wilfred, were framed, a Dead Man's Penny, or Death Plaque discovered, a Military Cross like Owen's was bought and the never-ending pilgrimage to visit and pay my respects began.

I was intrigued by who had died in the Great War; the effect on individuals, relatives, society, suddenly the men who had lived in my town, my street were comrades in sacrifice with Test cricketers, sons of lords and politicians, actors, poets, scions of industry, society and simply the brave.

Once this plethora of potential research emerged, the future was inevitable – the Pike caravanserai inexorably explored the battlefields, where the hospitals were and the POWs were held in a multitude of destinations such as Flanders, Asiago Italy, Salonika, Malta, Germany and Gallipoli - Oh Gallipoli, once seen, a part of one's soul forever, the sea, the flowers, the tragedy and the final resting place of four Walden men.

Visiting these places was enhanced by the books, the poems, but throughout it all there was an underlying sense that there but for the Grace of..... I looked at my two sons and thanked God they were born when they were.

For me it will always be the Great War; a war about people, not strategy, statistics, battles. I decided once to research brothers who had died, tragic, but then realised it was commonplace, so much so that now I realise even three brothers really is!

It is now 13 years since my research came to an end - how much quicker and thorough it would have been with the advent of the internet, is pointless to speculate, but what I do know is that through that long and continuing journey I have identified for all time who those men were who fought and died; two of whom as a result of my research were 'brought in from the cold' of non-commemoration - Walter Hill who died at home from the effects of gas now has a white CWGC headstone in the town cemetery and Geoffrey Searle's name now adorns the Addenda panel at the Pozieres Memorial to the Missing.

My travels have led me to pay homage at the graves/memorials of all but four of 159 names, one of the most memorable and moving being to lay a small poppy cross at the grave of Arthur Hailstone in Shrapnel Valley,

Gallipoli just round the corner from Anzac Cove where he landed with the Australian Light Horse in 1915.

It has also been my privilege to lay wreaths at the graves on the 90th anniversary of the battle of the Somme, of Charles Andrews, one of 7,127 buried in the largest cemetery on the Somme, Serre Road No. 2, and Rifleman John James Halls, awarded the D.C.M, in Sucrierie Military Cemetery, where during the days before the battle mass graves had been dug to receive the casualties, little did they envisage the terrible numbers there would be. It is quite possible that he and his battalion had marched past these very graves on their way up to the front-line. Today he lies with 1,103 of his comrades. The inscription chosen by his family reads, 'His memory is as dear today as in the year he passed away'.

There are still questions that haunt me: how many parents died of grief? How do you choose an inscription for your beloved son's headstone, surely the most important phrase you ever write? What would society be like if the intellectuals, poets, politicians had not died? I inevitably return to Grandads, both of whom returned but not unscathed, one, 'a verry gentil parfit knyght' in every way, took to drink, the other became a miserable b....; lives were never the same and not long after another despot needed 'sorting' and their sons obliged.

It is easy to idealise the plucky Tommy withstanding the rampaging Boche hordes, but these were ordinary men - men who lived in any road, any town; men who were far from Classical heroes; far from supermen; not perfect or idealised, just caught in a moment of time where they felt they had to do their duty out of patriotism, or fear, love, necessity, under duress - who knows? What we do know is that Saffron Walden in 1914 with a population of something over 6,000 sent over 1,000 men - one in six of their population - and one in every six of those men has his name inscribed upon the memorial.

When I am in France I always visit the grave of Tom Smith who is my representative for all 159 men who died and who symbolises the importance of Remembrance and the Great War and why this Centenary is so important to us all.

Tom came from Debden Road. Eager to better himself he emigrated to New Zealand where he became a farmer. In 1918, perhaps through a sense of guilt that he was safe and far away from danger, Tom decided his country needed him more than his farm, so he volunteered and was posted to the New Zealand Expeditionary Force Reinforcements.

After a voyage of eight weeks he arrived in Liverpool on 31 July 1918 and joined the New Zealand Rifle Brigade (N.Z.R.B) before being shipped to France on 25 September. Before his departure Tom came home to Saffron Walden one last time to say his farewells. At the end of his leave, for his short journey to the station his family hired a handsome coach and horses to transport their hero on the first stage on his journey to the Front.

He joined his battalion in the front line on 30 September. On 8 October he received multiple wounds and died in the Casualty Clearing Station where he had been taken.

Tom had been in France a mere twelve days; in the front-line only eight and he was 13 days away from his 40th birthday, never again to see the green and rolling hills of his lonely farm.

In commemorating the centenary we are embarking on a voyage into the human suffering it embedded in the fabric of every participant country. For those who lost a loved one, a light had been extinguished, never to be rekindled. Many of those who did return had physical and psychological scars. These could not fade away - they were the legacy of a war that ended only with their deaths or the deaths of those who loved them.

'What can the world hold afterwards worthy of laughter or tears?'

I leave the last words to Siegfried Sassoon:

*'Have you forgotten yet?..... Look up, and swear by the green of the Spring that you'll never forget'.
Aftermath*



The author standing before the grave of Tom Smith, one of the 159 men commemorated on Saffron Walden's war memorial.

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