

The families left at home

I am Mary Ann, I'm **the widow of George Smith**, and we lost two sons in the Great War, **Reuben and Arthur**, and three nephews: **Harold Smith** the son of my husband's brother John; and **Samuel and Joseph Summerfield** who were the sons of my brother Thomas. My own cousins Minnie and Emily lost their sons too - **George Plumridge** and **Albert Wilks**. And **Thomas Durrant** was the cousin of our Reuben's wife. All those lost lives. Sometimes I feel I can still hear their boyhood laughter across the heath.

So, you see, a good number of men on the war memorial left not just one family but *several* families mourning their loss. My poor cousin Emily, who'd married into the **Wilks** clan, lost not just **Albert** but four of his cousins in Flackwell Heath - another **Albert**, and his brother **Harry**, and the brothers **Ernest and Vincent** - plus a further three more Wilks cousins in High Wycombe.

Don't be fooled by the surnames on the memorial. Not all the Wilks were brothers but they *were* all cousins. Whereas not all the Smiths are closely related just because they have the same surname, some are, some aren't. And some names on the memorial are more closely related than you'd think. Let me explain:

Frederick Beal was a cousin of **James Witney**, whose sister Georgina was the wife of **Alfred Bowler**.

Ernest Barton was a cousin of **George Weedon**. George's two sisters had married into the Lewis clan and they were both sister's-in-law of **James Lewis**. George was also a cousin once removed of **James Anderson**. And James Anderson was a cousin of **Frank Baldwin** and a cousin once removed of **Joseph Jeremiah Smith** and Joseph was, in turn, a cousin of George Weedon.

Arthur Hall was a cousin of **Hubert Ray Secker**.

Ernest Gibson's wife was a cousin once removed of **William Collins** who in turn was linked to the Lacey family.

Thomas Lacey was a cousin once removed of **Charles Parker Saunders**. And Charles was also linked to **Joseph Langston** through family marriages with the Howard family.

Arthur Wilks of Wilks Park was not only a cousin to all the Wilks boys on the memorial, but he also lost his brother-in-law **Leonard Savill**.

William Redding was linked to the Gibsons, the Smiths and the Collins families through the marriages of siblings and in-laws.

So you can see that we villagers who were born and bred here had roots that go way back. The Wilks were relative new comers in comparison. Their grandparents had moved here from Oxfordshire, **William Hills** was a newcomer, he came from Burpham in Sussex and is also remembered on the war memorial there, along with other family members, and **Ralph Swanborough** came from Wiltshire. The Rogers family had come from Princes Risborough way.

What can I say about the **Rogers family**? Poor Albert Rogers lost four of his five boys. **Frederick** in 1915, **Owen and William** in 1917 and **Albert** in 1918. His poor wife had already died before the war started. Perhaps that was fortunate, I found the loss of two boys hard enough to bear I can't imagine what losing four sons must be like. They were Little Marlow folk really but they'd worked at Pigeon House Farm and therefore on the land that adjoined the

village. They were familiar faces round here although Frederick and Albert were already serving in India before the war with the Royal Berkshire Regiment.

At the unveiling of the war memorial the Marchioness of Lincolnshire wanted to meet Albert Rogers. It was a very sad moment as the Marchioness, who'd lost her only son, **Viscount Wendover**, in the war expressed her heartfelt sympathy with that poor bereaved man and the members of his family.

What a strain it must have been for any son who found that he was the only man of the family left, his brothers gone, his parents aged beyond recognition, and now it was down to him to look after those who were left and to raise the next generation to bear their name.

The first village lad to die was my poor cousin Emily's Albert – **Albert Wilks** - who died in Flanders on 6th November 1914. Albert was already a regular soldier and was with the 1st Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment in Aldershot at the start of the war. He was 32 when he died of his wounds. If the war really had only lasted until Christmas, as we had first believed, then he'd have been our only loss. But 1915 saw his cousin **Ernest Wilks** and **Ernest Barton** both die on 16th May, **Viscount Wendover** on the 19th, then **Thomas Lacey** in June, **Thomas Durrant** in August, and both **Albert Sarney** and **William Mayo** only six days after that. **Frederick Beal** died in September, **William Collins** on the 3rd November and **Joseph Langston** on the 4th. We waited with baited breath but all our other boys saw Christmas 1915.

In 1916 we lost only six of our men which was a miracle when you consider that the deaths on the Somme had been truly horrifying, and the casualty lists in the paper were endless. Sadly **Ernest Brooks** was to die on the first day of the battle, and then **Alfred Goodacre** in August.

1917 sadly saw double that number including **Frank Stone-Wootton**, whose name has only recently been added to the war memorial. His family were benefactors of our village church and are remembered there - go and look at the large circular window.

1918 was even worse. And we were still losing men right up until 1920 when **George Weedon** died. At the end of the war the village had suffered more than the average number of war deaths.

In 1921 the Commonwealth War Graves Commission closed their books on the Great War so that anyone who died of their injuries after that simply wasn't recognised as a casualty of war and this was to cause a lot of upset in the future. Injuries don't always heal, especially those caused due to gas exposure or shell shock. So there were probably quite a few more village deaths caused as a result of the war that went unrecorded as war casualties.

And, of course, you've got to remember that during the course of the war we didn't always know that our loved ones *had* died. Often we heard - and sometimes after several weeks had elapsed - that they had been reported missing. And obviously we lived in hope that they would still be found alive, perhaps in a hospital or a POW camp. But seldom were our prayers answered. **Frederick Barnes** was a POW but sadly he still died.

I don't know how we mothers truly felt when we heard the church bells ringing to tell us that we were finally at peace. It hadn't come soon enough, that was for sure, but at least we didn't have to send any more of our lads to the front. There was great joy, and also great sadness that those we had loved were no longer here to enjoy it with us.

The war left families without sons, wives without husbands, children without fathers. But there were a lot of us in the same boat and so there was always someone who knew how we were feeling inside, however much we tried to hide it with a smile. And so, very gradually, the village healed itself.

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