

The ones who died at home

Hello, my name is **George Plumridge** and I lived at Heath End, along Chopstick Alley. I'm the youngest man on the war memorial. I came from quite a large family so I was pretty good at looking out for myself. And so when I joined up at only 15 - on May 11th 1915 to be precise – I felt I'd get along all right.

You had to be 18 to join the army (although many lads lied about their age) but there were posters that encouraged boys of 15 to join the Royal Navy. The advertisements told us that we could earn three shillings and sixpence a week and get free rations, as well as a free uniform. So I joined the Royal Navy, as did quite a number of other local men.

I saw a great deal of service in a short time - on home waters, on patrol and on other duties. I fitted in, and they said I had a promising career ahead of me. I entered the war as a boy but left it as a man.

In 1915 the waters around Great Britain were declared a war zone by the Germans and so ships of the Royal Navy blockaded Germany in return. In 1917 1 in 4 ships bringing imports to Britain was being blown up by the Germans and, as a consequence, by mid 1918 Britain only had about 40 days of food left. So our work was vital.

I was a signal boy to start with on the HMS Victory. Don't mistake that for Nelson's flagship. Our HMS Victory was actually a Portsmouth Depot ship in World War One and it was used for accommodation. And I was back there again, as a deck hand, when I was taken ill in September 1918. Sadly I died at the Royal Navy Barracks in Portsmouth from pneumonia on 22nd. I expect it was the result of influenza which was going around like wild-fire at the time. My Commonwealth War grave is in Fern Lane Cemetery, down in Little Marlow – you know the kind I mean, they have those white Portland stone headstones that you see.

However, I guess you could say that I was luckier than most. At least I died in England and my grave is where my family can visit it. In fact there are several names on the Flackwell Heath war memorial who made it back home: wounded and suffering - physically or mentally or both - but they made it home!

But I wonder if they realised that they were still only on borrowed time?

I wasn't the only one to die of the flu that year, **Hubert Ray Secker**, also died of it and he's also buried in Little Marlow Cemetery. And so did **Peter Tripp** who's buried in Beaconsfield. Poor Peter had already been transferred to the Labour Corps due to ill health when he caught the flu and died of it on the 13th October 1918, his wife then died on the 16th and his step-son on the 18th. All because of the flu.

It's an unfair world, to get almost through the war and then die of something as simple as flu! Although, of course, it wasn't the usual type of flu. This one took the lives of young people. They say it was the deadliest in history and killed perhaps as many as 50 million people worldwide – that's a hell of a lot more than those who were killed in the First World War.

Joseph Jeremiah Smith, also survived the war and he's buried in Little Marlow too, but in an unmarked grave. He deserved better. He'd been badly wounded in the fighting and was still suffering from his injuries when he was discharged from the Army. He had a lot to contend with when he got back home, what with elderly parents and crippled brothers. He committed suicide in 1919 when he couldn't face a life with so much pain, and without a much needed disablement pension. He was no longer serving in the army, you see, when he took his life. That disqualified him from being given a war grave with a war grave headstone.

Now, **Thomas Lacey**, he'd been in the army on and off since 1895 and didn't get a Commonwealth war grave either. He'd been discharged through ill health by the time of his death in 1915. They say he had liver disease. He's buried in Wycombe Cemetery.

George Weedon also made it back but died in 1920 in Farnham Common. He was the oldest and also the last of our war memorial men to die. We lost touch with George because he'd married a Farnham Common girl and had left the village. But he came from a large Flackwell Heath family and they made sure his name was put on our village memorial. He wasn't forgotten.

Then there's **William Collins**, he's another local chap who made it home. He died at Connaught Hospital in Aldershot, from wounds he'd received in conflict, and so he's buried in the military cemetery there. But he's on our memorial though, he's still one of us.

Vincent Wilks, he's another one. He was transferred to the Labour Corps probably due to his epileptic fits, like Peter Tripp was because of his ill health, and was considered unfit for front-line duties, so he fortunately survived the war. But he died in 1919, also due to the flu, and is buried in Wycombe Cemetery in a Commonwealth War Grave. He probably thought he was fortunate to have made it home because his brother Ernest had been killed in the war, and so had quite a few of his cousins.

And that just leaves one more name on the memorial of those who are buried in England. That of **Viscount Wendover**, but his story is different. For a start he never lived in the village although his family, the Carringtons, owned much of the land round here. His name is on the memorial as a mark of respect for the support his family had given to the village in happier times. And Viscount Wendover actually died in France, not in England, from the wounds he'd received in conflict. It was only his body which made it home and his grave is in the family vault at Moulsoe in North Bucks, another seat of the Carrington family.

In fact his death was one of the last where relatives were allowed to bring the soldier's body home. The Government changed the rules you see. There were just far too many men being killed and most families couldn't afford to bring them home anyway.

There's thousands of men still out there, buried in Commonwealth War Grave cemeteries or remembered on Commonwealth War Memorials because they have no known grave, their bodies still buried in the mud of a foreign battlefield or somewhere at the bottom of an ocean.

That's why you could say that we who made it home, to lie in English soil, were more fortunate than a lot of our chums.

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