

# *The Fallen of Embleton*

*Chapter 5 – 1918*

*Chapter 6 – 1919*

*A tribute to the men of Embleton  
who fell in the Great War*

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## Chapter 5

## 1918

Mention must be made of a battle that took place in late 1917 on the plains near Cambrai in France. Having been unsuccessful in the battle at Ypres, the British were in need of a morale boosting victory. Cambrai was chosen because the countryside there was considered to be suitable for the first battle to use massed tanks. Although the attack would be on the Hindenburg Line it was considered to be weakly defended in this area and a major breakthrough was expected. The British plan was innovative in that the enemy wire was to be destroyed by tanks, whilst the artillery barrage was to be held until zero hour to maintain surprise. The battle opened on November 20<sup>th</sup> with 300 British tanks in the field. The first day was a success with advances of over 5 miles and the Line over-run, but some 180 tanks had been lost and no major breakthrough had been achieved. The second day was much less successful in that the enemy brought up massive reinforcements and the lack of mobility of the British artillery meant that they could not support subsequent attacks. On November 27<sup>th</sup> the offensive was called off but the British now held a large salient which was being shelled from both sides and was in danger of being cut off. Whilst the British were preparing to withdraw from this dangerous position, and give up all their hard earned gains, the Germans attacked their weakest point. Again the offensive was initially successful, the Germans advancing some 8 miles to get beyond the original British positions. The day was eventually saved by British reinforcements flooding in and the British retreating to better defensive positions. By December 3<sup>rd</sup> the Germans were exhausted and stalemate returned, the year ending with no British victory to celebrate.

1918, therefore, started with the Allies having taken very hard blows on all fronts with very few successes and needing to regroup, whilst the Germans were suffering from the war of attrition. Although the USA had officially been at war since April

1917 it was clear that they wouldn't be able to make any meaningful contribution in terms of troops until early summer. Russia, in the throes of revolution, was looking for peace and no threat to Germany who could now move large numbers of men from the east to the west. The Germans were thus in a 'now or never' position and launched their own offensive before the Allies could gather their strength.

The first of what was to be a series of German offensives was launched on March 21<sup>st</sup> on the Somme (Operation Michael), where 43 divisions attacked 12 depleted British divisions spread out over 42 miles of uncompleted defences. The attack was spectacularly successful with the British being forced back some 17 miles in the first day. In the days that followed the Germans continued to advance and by April 4<sup>th</sup> were nearly 40 miles from their starting point on a 50 mile wide front. Fortunately the French were able to provide reinforcements and the Germans ran out of manpower, artillery support and supplies.

During this offensive the fourteenth 'Embleton' man was killed.

## ARTHUR JAMES DOUGLAS



Arthur Douglas was born in Christon Bank on the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1899. His father, George Douglas, was born in Ditchburn, Northumberland and worked as a mole catcher/market gardener. His mother, Jessie Ann (nee Murdie), was born at Fallodon/Cold Harbour. The couple married in the third quarter of 1891, probably in Embleton.

Arthur had two brothers, George (b 1894) and Percy (b 1901) and the family lived in Christon Bank, being listed in 1914/15 as inhabiting a 'freehold house and land'.

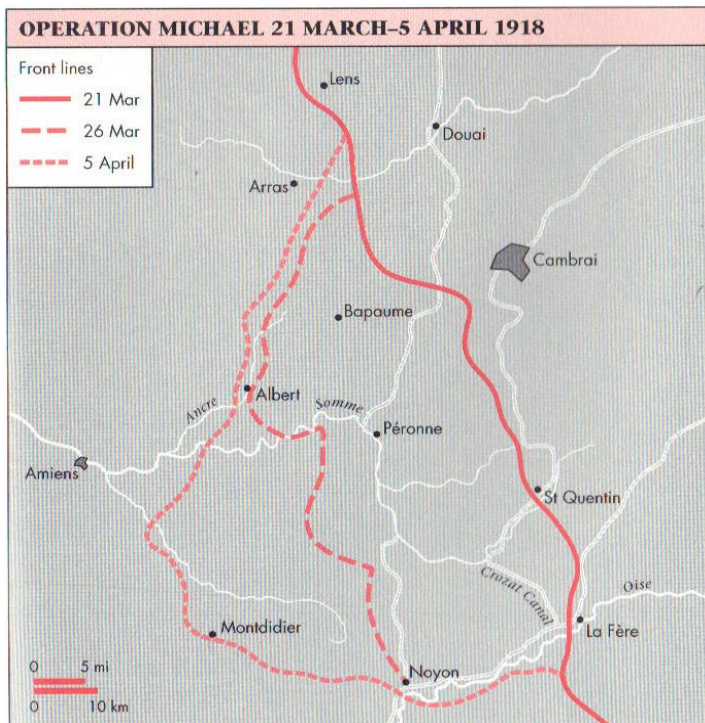
Arthur attended the village school in Embleton, starting in 1904, leaving in August 1911 when he was over 12, having won a County Scholarship (Junior) tenable at the Duke's School, Alnwick. He was one of the few pupils from Embleton school who were able to take up their scholarship and he joined the Duke's School in September 1911, leaving in July 1915 aged 16 to work in a

bank. His scholarship had entitled him to a free place at the school and half price rail travel from his home in Christon Bank to Alnwick.

Arthur is recorded as enlisting in North Shields, which may have been as a result of him working in a bank in Whitley Bay. He joined the Northumberland Fusiliers (1/4<sup>th</sup> battalion territorials) with a service number 59957. The 1/4<sup>th</sup> battalion was based in Hexham when war broke out in August 1914. After training they proceeded to France in April 1915 to join the 149<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 50<sup>th</sup> (Northumbrian) Division. Arthur is unlikely to have joined the army before February 1917 because of his age, or to have gone overseas before mid-1917. Although men were not supposed to serve in the trenches until they were nineteen he may have been pressed into action before this.

The Alnwick and County Gazette reported in late April 1918 'Mr and Mrs George Douglas of Christon Bank received news their second son Arthur James Douglas died of gunshot wounds on March 28<sup>th</sup>. Prior to the war he worked on the staff of the London Joint Stock Bank in Whitley Bay'.

There is no way to establish when or where he was wounded. If, as likely, he died where he is buried (Rouen) then he was probably wounded up to a week before this (March 21<sup>st</sup>). If this is the case then he would have been wounded during the devastating German offensive 'Operation Michael' (March 21<sup>st</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup>



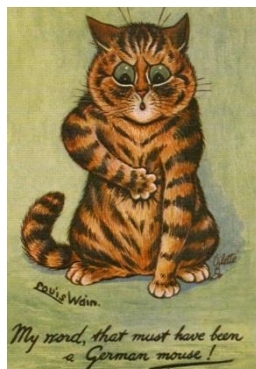
April 1918). Then, lacking manpower, artillery support and essential supplies they simply ran out of steam. Over this period both the Allies and the Germans suffered over 240,000 casualties but no ground of great strategic importance had been won or lost.

A large proportion of the casualties from the Somme battles passed through Rouen. The British scheme of

evacuation was based chiefly on this city, where there were fourteen hospitals - eight general, five stationary and one Red Cross - to which casualties were conveyed mostly by train, ambulance or lorry, but also by barges down the Somme and by char-a-bancs. Rouen, alongside Boulogne, Etaples and Trouville, acted as one of the primary Hospital Centres for the B.E.F., with some 20,000 beds by March 1918. A number of the dead from these hospitals were buried in other cemeteries, but the great majority was taken to the city cemetery of St. Sever. By September 1916 this was full and it was necessary to begin an extension which remained in use until April 1920 when the last burial took place.

Arthur is buried in the St. Sever Cemetery Extension, Rouen (grave number P.VII.H.2A.).

The second German offensive commenced on April 9<sup>th</sup> in Flanders. 'Operation Georgette' was based on an attack from Armentieres to capture the railway junction at Hazebrouck (20 miles away) and then on to the coast (a further 40 miles on). They advanced 3 miles in the first day and by April 10<sup>th</sup> the situation had deteriorated such that Field Marshall Haig issued Orders for the Day: *'Every position must be held. There must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one must fight on to the end'*. By April 12<sup>th</sup> the Germans were only 5 miles from their first objective but, as always, logistics and exhaustion overcame them and the attack petered out. During this battle the fifteenth of the 'Embleton' men died.



## OSWIN CREIGHTON



Oswin was born on June 10<sup>th</sup> 1883 in the Vicarage at Embleton and christened a month or so later. He was the sixth child of Dr. Mandell Creighton (born 1844 in Carlisle) and Louise (nee Hume Van Glehn) who was born in Sydenham, Kent in 1850. His father was Vicar of Embleton from 1874 to 1884, when he left to become Canon of Worcester and ultimately Bishop of London. Oswin had four sisters - Beatrice (b 1872), Lucia (b 1874), Mary (b 1880) and Gemma (b 1887) and two brothers - Cuthbert (b 1876) and Walter (b 1878). In 1891 he was living with the family at College Precincts, Worcester.

In 1895 he went to Marlborough School, having until then being educated at home. His school career was not brilliant but his conduct was always rated excellent. He went to school determined to be a clergyman and never wavered from this ambition.

In 1901 his father died and in the autumn Oswin went up to Keeble College, Oxford. He was 22 when he graduated with an upper second and decided to gain experience, before going to theological college, by becoming an assistant master at an English-run boys' school in Smyrna (Greece) from September 1905 to July 1906. He was licenced as a lay reader by the Bishop of Gibraltar so he could help with services at the school and work for the Mission for Seamen.

On returning home, Oswin read for Orders at Bishops Hostel, Farnham and was ordained in St Paul's Cathedral by the Bishop of London in October 1907. He spent three years working in the slums before sailing to Canada in August 1910. He devoted his time there to working at establishing churches in rural Alberta, but returned to England in October 1914 to join the war effort, offering himself as a Chaplain to the Forces. After being appointed in November, was sent to the New Army being formed in Folkstone.

In March 1915 Oswin joined the 29<sup>th</sup> Division as Chaplain to the 86<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which was made up of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers and 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers, and sailed from Avonmouth to Gallipoli via Egypt. Arriving in April, the Division was involved in very heavy fighting and suffered huge losses. Oswin, apart from being Chaplain, worked with the Field Ambulance teams at the front and was often exposed to enemy fire. By August the campaign had failed, Oswin had diphtheria and was evacuated to Alexandria and then to the Anglo/American hospital in Cairo.

Once he had recovered he was put in charge of the Churches' work to establish recreational facilities for the wounded throughout the area, which he did with great success. Arriving back in London in January 1916 he was posted to the remount division in Ramsey and then joined 3<sup>rd</sup> Division artillery as Chaplain and travelled with them to Bus in France. He was with them throughout 1916, being involved in the battle of Serre in November. In 1917 the Division was based near Arras and Oswin served during the battle there in May. After a 72 hour leave in Paris in July he returned to the Division at Bethune, and was with them at Ypres in October during weeks of hard fighting. In December he went home to London on leave and, having money to spend, took his family out to theatres etc.

Back with his Battalions, he worked with the dead and dying during the German offensive of March 1918 and in April was based west of Bethune. On April 9<sup>th</sup> the Germans launched an attack on the line there and the Division was rushed out to meet them. During this time they were exposed to the heaviest shelling they had ever experienced. Under these conditions there was difficulty in arranging the burial of the many men killed as their bodies were spread about. Oswin volunteered to undertake the organisation of burial parties. He went up to a battery position but a shell burst near him killing him instantly, along with the three men with him.

Oswin is buried in Chocques Military Cemetery near Bethune in grave I.P.34 and was awarded the 1914 - 15 Star.

His probate, granted in London on 17<sup>th</sup> June to Louise Creighton (his mother), stated him to be 'a resident of Alix, province of Alberta Canada. Clerk temporary Chaplain of Forces 4<sup>th</sup> class. Value £463-11-4.

Whilst attention was focused on the Western Front battles were being fought and men were dying in other parts of the world.

The Turks had attacked the Suez Canal in 1915 and although this was unsuccessful, it frightened the British enough for them to



launch an offensive in early 1916 which drove the Turks back and allowed the British to establish a new defensive line 100 miles east of the canal.

It was thought that success in Palestine would increase British influence in the region after the war and to this end an unsuccessful attempt to take Gaza was made in early 1917 with high casualties. A second attack later in the year was successful and then, aided by Lawrence of Arabia's Arab forces, they captured Jerusalem in December 1917 and Damascus by mid-1918.

During these campaigns many men succumbed to illness and unfortunately these included the sixteenth Embleton man to die.

## THOMAS APPLEBY

Thomas was born in Embleton in 1878, being christened in the village church on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1878. His father was also Thomas (b. Embleton



1847), a stone merchant and proprietor of the Hare & Hounds (now Dunstanburgh Castle Hotel), whilst his mother was Margaret (nee Reekie) born in Falkirk in 1846. The couple were married at St. Giles, Edinburgh in 1876. Thomas Jnr. had a brother Alexander (b. 1881) and two sisters, Margaret (b. 1883) and Frances (b. 1886), all born in Embleton. Alexander died aged 12

and Thomas Snr. died in 1894 and both are buried in Spitalford cemetery, Embleton. At some time after her husband's death Margaret returned to Scotland to run a boarding house, taking her daughters with her.

Thomas Jnr. lived at the Hare & Hounds with his brother and sisters and attended the village school until he was fourteen although he, together with his siblings, did transfer to Newton school for six months after the 'Wade affair' in 1891. In 1901, with his mother and sisters in Scotland, Thomas was boarding in Hotspur Place, Alnwick and working as a blacksmith.



In 1909 Thomas's sister Frances married James Quigley in Derby and in 1911 they, together with their 8 month old daughter Madge, were boarding in Wolverhampton and listed as 'Kinematograph Managers and Proprietors'. They presumably owned the cinema and a 'Kinematograph Lecturer' lived in the same boarding house, who would accompany the silent films. Thomas also boarded in the same house, having presumably being offered the job as 'Kinematograph bill inspector' by his sister. At some time Margaret moved from Scotland to live with her daughter Frances in Wolverhampton, where she died in June 1918.

Early in 1914 Thomas married Sophia Agnes Taylor in Wolverhampton and over the next four years they had three children Iris (b. 4<sup>th</sup> quarter 1914), Thomas (b. 4<sup>th</sup> quarter 1916) and Vera (b. 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 1918).

It is not known when Thomas joined the Army but he didn't go abroad before January 1916. Virtually nothing is known for definite about his military career. Unless he volunteered then, because of his age, he was probably called up in mid-1916. He joined the Royal Field Artillery (No. 147898) and was attached to the 60<sup>th</sup> Division.

On 1st November 1916 the 60<sup>th</sup> Division received orders to reorganise, preparatory for a move to Salonika in Greece. Units entrained at Longpre, France between 14<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November and, going via Marseilles and Malta, assembled at Salonika on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1916. The Division then remained in Salonika and took part in the unsuccessful battle of Dorian against the Bulgarians.

In June 1917 the Division was once again reorganised in preparation for a move to Egypt for operations in Palestine. It embarked on 12<sup>th</sup> June and by 4<sup>th</sup> July had completed concentration at Moascar in the Southern Suez Canal Zone. The Division began to advance to Palestine and by 23<sup>rd</sup> July was at Deir el Balah (8 miles SW of Gaza). The Division then remained in Palestine and took part in many engagements, culminating in the capture of Jerusalem in December 1917 and Jericho in February 1918.

Thomas died of sickness (probably malaria) on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1918 and was buried in the Alexandria (Hadra) War Memorial Cemetery (see image on previous page) in grave F129. It is known that Alexandria remained an important hospital centre during later operations in Egypt and Palestine and the port was much used by hospital ships and troop transports bringing reinforcements and carrying the sick and wounded out of the theatres of war.

On the day of his death he was on the strength of the 60<sup>th</sup> Divisional Ammunition Column Royal Field Artillery.

Thomas prepared a field will on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1917 (see below). It is interesting to note that probate for his 'private affairs' was granted on July 29<sup>th</sup> 1918 to Audrey Appleby, spinster, in the sum of £370:8:10 and not to his wife.

# INFORMAL WILL.

W.O. No. E/581854/1

DOMICILE. *English*

Record No. 425/711 193/19

Name *Thomas Appleby*

Regtl. No. and Rank *44893. Gunner*

Regt. *60<sup>th</sup> Div. Ammunition Column  
Royal Field Artillery*

Died at *Egypt*

Date of Death *22 4-18*

WAR OFFICE.

Date *7.8.18*

The enclosed document dated *20<sup>th</sup> Oct 1917* and signed

*Thomas Appleby,*

appears to have been written or executed by the person named in the margin while service was "in actual military service" within the meaning of the Wills Act, 1837, and has been recognised by the War Department as constituting a valid will.

*unrecorded*

for the Assistant Financial Secretary.

# WILL.

In the event of my Death I give the whole of my Army effects to my Wife Mrs Agnes Appleby 109 Alma St. Heath Town Wolverhampton My private affairs are already settled

no-144898  
Signature *Thomas Appleby*

Rank and Regt. *Gnr R.F.A.*

Date *20<sup>th</sup> Oct 1917*

Meanwhile, back on the Western Front, the Germans now turned their attention back to the Somme and, by April 25<sup>th</sup>, the British were forced to withdraw from the positions on Passchendaele Ridge which they had taken in 1917 at great cost. Despite this reverse the British fought strongly and the German offensive was called off on April 30<sup>th</sup>. It is quite possible that the seventeenth 'Embleton' man received wounds that would prove fatal during these battles.

## ROBERT JOHN JOSEPH DICKINSON

Robert Dickinson was born in Embleton in 1892 and christened in the village church on the 17<sup>th</sup> July 1892. His father, William Hope Dickinson, born in Newcastle, worked as an ordnance fitter. His mother, Margaret (nee Carr), was born in Christon Bank and christened in Embleton church on December 29<sup>th</sup> 1867. She worked as a dressmaker. The couple married in Newcastle in the fourth quarter of 1889. As far as is known Robert was an only child.



Robert attended the school in Embleton where it would appear he was quite unruly. He is regularly mentioned in the punishment book for offences such as 'interfering with classmates' (2

strokes), 'truant' (3 strokes), 'throwing lighted matches in playground' (1 stroke), 'disobedience and continued inattention' (1 stroke), 'stone throwing' (4 strokes), 'disobedience and insubordination' (2 strokes and a stroke or two on his behind) and 'throwing stones at night' (2 strokes). He left school at fourteen and worked as an apprentice joiner.

In 1901 he was living in Christon Bank with his mother and three boarders (laundry workers) and in 1911 he was living in four rooms in Christon Bank with his mother and grandmother. Although his mother was still detailed as 'married' there has been no mention of William for over ten years.

Robert enlisted in Newcastle and was originally posted to the Durham Light Infantry (No. 4612). At some time he was transferred to the 26<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers (3<sup>rd</sup> Tyneside Irish battalion - service number 35385)

which was a Pals battalion, originally raised in Newcastle in November 1914. The 26<sup>th</sup> battalion proceeded to France in January 1916 where they, as part of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division, were stationed at La Crosse east of St. Omer. They were in action during the Battles of the Somme, including the capture of Scots and Sausage Redoubts, the Battles of Bazentin Ridge and Pozieres Ridge and the Battle of Flers-Courcelette. In 1917 they fought in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battles of the Scarpe and the Battle of Aieeux during the Arras Offensive. In August they were involved in the fighting at Haricourt and in October took part in the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) at the Broenbeek. In early 1918 the army was reorganised and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tyneside Irish battalion was disbanded in February in France, the troops transferring to other units.

It is not known how many of these battles Robert fought but he died in the Etaples hospital complex south of Boulogne on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1918. He must have been in hospital for some time because he was still listed as being in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tyneside Irish which had been disbanded in February. His death certificate lists him as dying of 'disease' but this could be diseased wounds or pneumonia, or any of the many other diseases that affected the troops living in awful conditions. The area around Etaples was the scene of immense concentrations of reinforcement camps and hospitals. In 1917 100,000 troops were camped amongst the sand dunes and in the hospitals. There were eleven general, one stationary and four Red Cross hospitals plus a convalescent depot which all together could deal with 22,000 wounded or sick. Robert's grave (LXVIII.D.2) is in the Etaples Military Cemetery (see image on previous page).

Time was now running out for Germany, as US troops were arriving to join the Allied front line in ever growing numbers. On May 27<sup>th</sup> they launched an attack in the Chemin des Dames near Soissons to the north east of Paris. Again they quickly gained ground, 10 miles in the first day, and by the end of the third day were 40 miles from their original front line. They had now reached the Marne river and were only 56 miles from Paris but, as always, they had such extended lines that they were unable to consolidate their gains. It was in this battle that the eighteenth 'Embleton' man was killed.

## ROBERT WOOD McLAREN



Robert McLaren was born in Embleton on the 14<sup>th</sup> December 1898 and was christened on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January in the village church. His father, also Robert Wood, was born in Embleton and worked as a steel and drainage contractor owning, with John Roland McLaren, the firm McLaren & Co. Quarry Owners and Contractors at Woodstead. This partnership was dissolved in 1909. His mother, Jane Ann McLaren (nee Johnson), was also born in Embleton. Robert's parents were married in Embleton in the fourth quarter of 1897 and it would appear that Robert was an only child. Jane Ann died in 1901 when the family was living on Front Street Embleton. Following her death, Robert was brought up in the homes of his maternal and paternal grandparents and in 1911 lived in his grandfather's house at Woodstead.

Robert attended the Vincent Edwards Church School in Embleton from September 1903 until December 1912 when he reached the age of 14. He was very well behaved throughout his time at school without any entries in the punishment book against his name. He and his father emigrated to Canada in 1913, only to return home in 1915, at which point Robert went to work for Armstrong Whitworth in Scotswood, Newcastle, for a year until he was 18.

Because of his date of birth, Robert junior would have been registered in August 1915, on National Registration Day. In theory, he would then have been called-up under compulsory conscription, one month after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is therefore probable he was conscripted in Newcastle after February 1917. Since the rules stated that a man should not go abroad until he was eighteen and a half, he would have undergone training in one of the two reserve battalions of the East Yorkshire regiment based at Seaton Delaval.

He shipped out to France on Easter Monday 1918 (10<sup>th</sup> March) and joined the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion which suffered greatly in the German spring offensive 'Operation Michael' at the battle of St. Quentin on March 21<sup>st</sup> 1918. The next day they were forced to withdraw to the Longavesnes - Saulcourt Road.

The Companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion were reorganised and prepared to move by train to St. Omer to join the French 6<sup>th</sup> Army. They travelled on May 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, passing through the northern outskirts of Paris to arrive at a camp at Romigny. For the next week the battalion formed working parties and went on route marches to keep fit. Finally, on May 12<sup>th</sup>, they left in incessant rain to march to Prouilly and then next day to Chalons le Vergeur (Marne). On the evening of May 22<sup>nd</sup> the battalion moved off to become a support battalion at Cauroy les Hermonville. They were in position by midnight and spent two quiet days repairing trenches overlooking the Aisne-Marne Canal. What nobody had anticipated was a renewed German advance. On May 26<sup>th</sup> the battalion noticed a great deal of enemy activity to the front of their area and were warned to expect an attack. At 1 a.m. on May 27<sup>th</sup> there was a heavy gas attack along the front and orders were given to demolish the Aisne-Marne Canal bridge. At 3 a.m. the attack commenced. Parts of the battalion were enveloped and the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion made a gradual withdrawal to Hermonville. Under attack, and partly surrounded, the battalion withdrew a further 1,000 metres but then, on May 28<sup>th</sup>, the enemy advanced in force and several posts were over-run, so the 1<sup>st</sup> withdrew southwards until they met up with some French soldiers of a Mitralleirs (machine gun company) and made a stand at St. Joseph's farm. Under cover from the French, the East Yorks moved further south to Trigny village where they formed a defensive line. Unfortunately at 1.30 a.m. the French were ordered to withdraw, so the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion lost its machine gun cover and later that night they withdrew to Muizon village where they formed yet another defensive line.

The German advance was un-sustainable and this became known as the Battle of the Aisne 1918. The losses of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion between 27<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>



May were six other ranks killed, 55 wounded and 314 missing, presumed killed. Robert was killed in action near Homerville and is commemorated on the Soissons Memorial (left) along with almost 4,000 other officers and men who died in the battles of Aisne and Marne 1918 and who have no known grave.

Robert's father received official news that Robert was



killed in action in France on May 28<sup>th</sup>. In a battlefield will, he left all his property to his father at his last known address of 32 Fifth Avenue, Heaton, Newcastle.

# INFORMAL WILL.

W.O. No. 1 E/582624/1.

DOMICILE. England

Record No. 429/414703

Name Robert Wood McLaren

The enclosed document  
dated April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1918.  
and signed Robert Wood  
McLaren

Regtl. No. 52449 Private  
and Rank

Regt. 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. East Yorkshire

Died as in the field France

Date of Death 28. 5. 18.

appears to have been written  
or executed by the person  
named in the margin while  
he was "in actual military  
service" within the meaning  
of the Wills Act, 1837, and  
has been recognised by the  
War Department as con-  
stituting a valid will.

WAR OFFICE.

Date 25<sup>th</sup> Sep. 1918

for the Assistant Financial Secretary.

# WILL.

In the event of my death  
I leave all my property  
to my father

Mr Robert Wood McLaren  
32 Fifth Avenue  
Heaton  
Newcastle-on-Tyne  
England

Signature Robert Wood McLaren

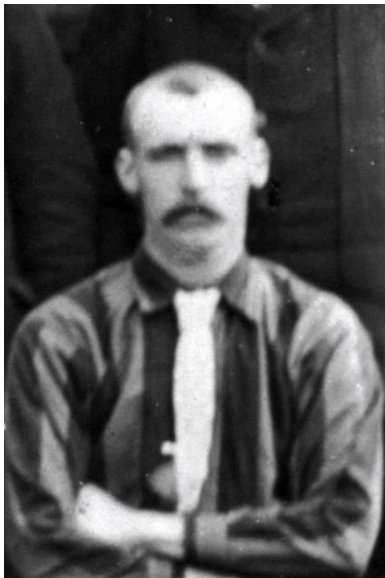
Rank and Regt. Private 86606

Date April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1918.

The Germans withdrew men from Flanders and attacked for one last time on July 15<sup>th</sup>. They did manage to cross the Marne but couldn't keep up the pressure and the Allied defences held firm. French counter-attacks drove the Germans back and, when the battle finally ceased on August 6<sup>th</sup>, Soissons had been re-taken and the Germans were back on the defensive.

The British were now receiving great numbers of guns and tanks from the home industries and American troops were arriving in large numbers, and so began the '100 days' of Allied offensives that finally led to the end of the war. The Allies attacked across almost the whole length of the western front. The British overcame the problem of crossing the Hindenberg Line plus two large canals in the St. Quentin region of the Somme in September, and by October 4<sup>th</sup> the British had broken through into open country. During this period the nineteenth 'Embleton' man died.

## ALFRED BARRS



Alfred Barrs was not an Embleton 'local'. He was born in the third quarter of 1874 in Rowley Regis Staffordshire. His father, Joseph, was an iron sett maker and his mother Mary (nee Tromans) was a nail maker. He had two sisters, Ellen born two years before him and Ann born three years after him. Alfred's mother died when he was eight and his father re-married two years later to Ellen Payne. In 1891 the family were living in Enderby, Leicestershire where Joseph was a stone sett maker and Alfred was working as a shoe hand.

Sometime in the mid 1890's Alfred moved to the north from Enderby (together with a Herbert Neal and a member of the Varnham family). Why they ended up in Embleton is not

known, but in November 1898 Alfred married Margaret Ann Appleby in Embleton. Her father, Mark Appleby, owned the quarry in Embleton and rumour has it that the marriage was not popular in the family.

Perhaps immediately after the wedding, but certainly by 1901, Alfred was living in the quarry house and working as a whinstone sett maker. Alfred and Margaret had six children, Francis Alfred (b 1901), Margaret (b 1905), Leslie (male b 1909), Joseph William (b 1910), Mary (b 1912) and Hilda (b 1915). In 1911 the family was still living in the quarry house and Alfred was still a whinstone sett maker.

In 1906 the second wife of Alfred's father died and in 1907 he married for a third time. His new wife, Jane Ord Ions, was born in Alnwick and in 1911 Joseph and Jane were living in Embleton, he working as a whinstone sett maker in the quarry and she as a dressmaker. The Barrs families were thus established in Embleton and, as late as 1915, Alfred and family were living in the quarry house. At some time before 1918 the Barrs moved to Star Yard (behind the village shop) and Mrs Barrs was still there in 1919.

As a matter of interest, the Alfie Barrs who died in 2005, and is remembered by many current Embleton residents, was the son of Francis Alfred Barrs and the grandson of this Alfred Barrs.

It is known that Alfred's hobby was pigeon keeping (racing). He raced and exhibited pigeons as 'Alf Barrs Christon Bank' of the Alnwick and District Homing Society and in 1902 received a 'very highly commended' award at the Annual Pigeon Show held at Turk's Head Inn at Bedlington for a racing cock bird. In the Alnwick and County Gazette of June 19<sup>th</sup> 1915 it was reported 'Over 2,000 homing pigeons have been placed by their owners gratuitously at the disposal of the Admiralty in connection with the war. Prizes have been awarded for efficient services rendered and amongst the successful ones is Mr Alfred Barrs of Embleton.'

At the outbreak of war the British did not have a pigeon service and the first birds were given by the French to the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) Intelligence Corps for carrying coded messages. By May 1915 the BEF was using pigeons to send messages to pigeon posts in the trenches during battle. The Royal Engineers were responsible for communications during the war and pigeons were an effective replacement for broken telegraph wires.

The birds were kept in reserve until telegraphic communication was destroyed by shells etc. and then released to carry coded messages. In June 1915 the Carrier Pigeon Service of the Royal Engineers was allowed to recruit 60

pigeon specialists who were men already experienced in keeping homing pigeons in civilian life. Future handlers were trained on the job in France and Flanders. The men who looked after the birds were dubbed 'pigeoneers' but by the end of the war their official title was 'Loftsmen'. As the service expanded in 1916 mobile lofts were introduced, and in 1917 artillery Forward Observation Officers and tank crews were provided with messenger pigeons.

The most common route for a bird was to carry a message on a 10 to 20 minutes flight to a pigeon loft situated next to the HQ's communications officer. Soldiers appreciated the use of birds as it reduced the need for somebody to act as a runner across a battlefield. At the end of the war there were 400 men attending 150 mobile pigeon lofts (see photo below). From a nucleus of 15 pigeons in 1914 the bird strength grew such that 12,000 birds were used at the First Battle of the Somme in 1916 and by 1918 20,000 birds were available for duty.

Alfred enlisted at Newcastle on Tyne on January 14<sup>th</sup> 1918 as a pioneer in the Royal Engineers and was sent to France on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1918. As Alfred was 43 at this time, this was probably a 'special enlistment' which was created so that men could carry out their civilian skills wearing a uniform, but not act as a trained



combatant. Alfred died at Gezaincourt (Somme, France) as a result of 'an accident sustained whilst on active service', his death certificate giving his cause of death as "died of injuries". His date of death is recorded as 18<sup>th</sup> September 1918. He was serving with 'D' Signal Company Royal Engineers (No. 305147),

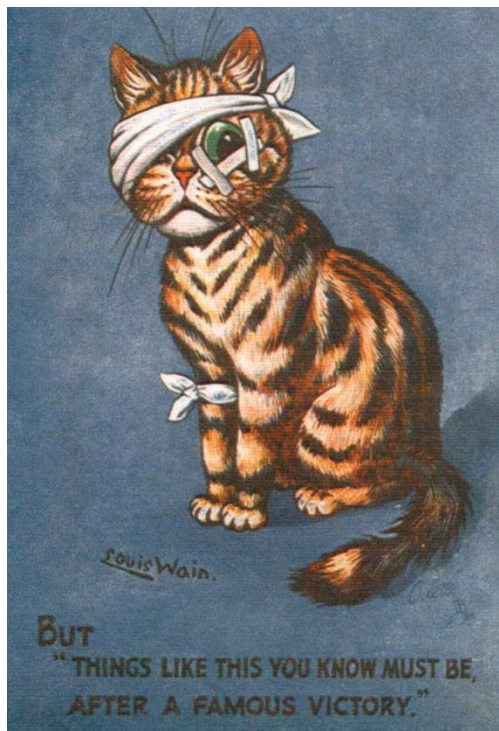
although he was employed by the Carrier Pigeon Service. He is buried at Bagneux British Cemetery, Gezaincourt.

The probate of Alfred reads 'Barrs, Alfred of Embleton Northumberland, private in H.M. Army died 17<sup>th</sup> September 1918 in France. Administration Newcastle on Tyne 27<sup>th</sup> March 1919 to Margaret Ann Barrs widow. Effects £41.19.8.'

Margaret Barrs married Alfred's friend Herbert Neal in the second quarter of 1920.

By late October the Germans were in a very difficult position. Its allies were all beaten and there was no will in the country to prolong the war into 1919. On November 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> a German delegation crossed the lines to start negotiations for peace. On November 9<sup>th</sup> a republic was declared in Germany and on November 11<sup>th</sup> an armistice was agreed in a railway carriage at Compiegne. The fighting was over.

The minutes of the December Embleton Parish Council meeting record that, in response to a Government demand, the following figures had been submitted:- number of men sent to war – 160, number of men killed – 37, number of men wounded – 25.



## Chapter 6

## 1919

And so the fighting was over and the troops were coming home but some 'Embleton' men would not survive long into the year due to their wartime experiences. The two men yet to die had both been in England for some time at the cessation of hostilities, but neither of them could be described as wounded in the conventional sense.

**THOMAS STRAFFEN**

Thomas Straffen was born in Brunton during July 1896 and christened in Embleton on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August that year. His father was John Straffen from Kirkharle, who worked as a domestic coachman and his mother was Isabella (nee Wales) who was born in Wigtown. They married in Sunderland in 1895. Thomas had one sister, Edna, who was born three years after him. He attended Embleton school, probably until 1910, then for two and a half years worked as an apprentice butcher and then became a groom. His sister also attended the school. The family home was in High Brunton, Christon Bank, Embleton where they lived in three rooms.

Thomas stated his age as '19 and two months' when he enlisted in Alnwick on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1914, the height of the September recruiting campaign. (September 1914 saw 462,901 men enlist as volunteers, from then on the numbers declined. Recruiting officers had no idea how long the war would last and had nowhere to accommodate the men). He was actually only 18 but claimed to be the minimum age (19) to serve overseas. He was told he would be in the army for a day and then would serve up to three years when called up, which he was on September 25<sup>th</sup>, ten days after being attested. Probably because he was a groom, he was posted to The King's Hussars stationed at Scarborough. He served



with the Hussars until the 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1915 when he was transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion East Yorkshire Regiment (Regimental No. 18488) which was then based at Withensea (near Hull) as a training and reserve battalion.

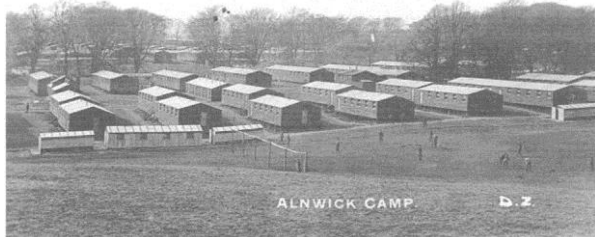
After five weeks infantry training he was posted overseas on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1915 as part of a draft of reinforcements to the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion East Yorkshire Regiment. The 1<sup>st</sup> battalion was serving in France and Flanders with the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade in the 6<sup>th</sup> Division at this time, but in November moved to the 64<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade in the 21<sup>st</sup> Division.

Thomas was wounded in the right arm in September 1916 and was returned to the U.K. on 28<sup>th</sup> September for medical treatment. The Division had been fighting on the Somme at the Battle of Flers-Courcelette (15<sup>th</sup> - 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1916). At some unspecified time Thomas returned to the Front to re-join the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion and was appointed paid acting corporal on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1917. He was subsequently appointed paid acting sergeant on July 31<sup>st</sup> 1917. In October 1917 he was again wounded, this time in the left arm, and returned to the U.K. as a casualty for treatment on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1917. The Division had been fighting at the Battle of Broodseinde in Flanders on October 4<sup>th</sup> and then the Second Battle of Passchendaele from October 26<sup>th</sup>, so Thomas' wound was probably received during time in the trenches at the Front between these dates.

On December 18<sup>th</sup> 1917 Thomas had recovered from his wound and was posted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion East Yorkshire Regiment as a private soldier, his appointed rank of acting sergeant being valid only for the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion because it was a 'local' appointment in the grant of the Commanding Officer and not a formal promotion.

Thomas remained in the U.K. with the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion and was appointed acting lance corporal on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1918. He was admitted to the

Alnwick Military Hospital Command Depot on the Pastures where he died of valvular disease of the heart and oedema of the lungs on February 12<sup>th</sup> 1919. A Military Hospital Command Depot was a type of military convalescent camp for the rehabilitative training of soldiers too fit for a true convalescent camp but not fit enough to be returned to their unit. The Depot in Alnwick had accommodation for 40 officers and 5,000 other ranks.



Thomas was buried at Alnwick Cemetery on February 15<sup>th</sup> 1919 and a small wooden cross marked his grave until a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone was erected some years later. He qualified for the 1914-15 Star.

## WILLIAM HENRY WINSTANLEY



William Winstanley was born in Oystermouth, Glamorganshire in 1889 the son of Ralph and Mary Jane (nee Thompson) Winstanley. He had an elder sister Mary and a younger brother Thomas Jefferson. His father Ralph grew up in Rush Green, Cheshire and at the age of 16 he joined the Royal Navy as a 'boy' until his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday when his ten year service contract started. By 1871 he was a seaman on H.M.S. Racoon, a Pearl class corvette with a crew of close to 200 which spent most of her career on overseas stations. In the 1860's she was on the South Africa Station and in the 70's on the North American and West Indies Station. In

April 1871 she was alongside at Halifax, Nova Scotia for the Census. At the end of his service contract in 1878 Ralph signed on for a further ten years. By 1880 Ralph was married to Mary Jane and was working as a Coast Guard Officer in Bangor, Wales having transferred from the Navy.

Their first child, Mary E, was born in Bangor in 1884 followed by William Henry born at Oystermouth (the Mumbles), Glamorganshire in 1889, and finally Thomas Jefferson born in 1891 in Tenby. Mary Jane, his wife, died in late 1894 in Altringham. Six years later Ralph Winstanley married again, this time to Mary Ann Sanderson, who was born in Barrow, Lincolnshire. They had no children. In 1901 the family was living in Newton by the Sea in the Coast Guard Station and Ralph was Chief Coastguard Officer. At this time the two boys aged 12 and 10 attended Embleton school. The family was still living in Newton in 1903 but some time before 1911 Ralph, Mary Ann and Thomas Jefferson moved to Barton on Humber and by now Ralph was a Naval Pensioner.

In 1911 Thomas Jefferson was working as a railway clerk, living at home in Barton on Humber. He later served in the Durham Light Infantry and Army

Service Corps and survived the war. Mary E became an elementary school teacher and in 1911 was living in Snaith & Cowick in Yorkshire.

William Henry had always lived by the sea. No doubt having heard stories of his father's life on ships in South Africa, the Americas and West Indies he opted to join the navy in 1907 for a period of 12 years (service no. 271958) having already spent two years as a trainee/cadet at the Royal Navy ERA (Engine Room Artificer) training school called H.M.S. Indus in Devonport. H.M.S. Indus in this context was actually three ships, converted so that together they formed a school for 200 lads, 160 crew and 40 instructors. William was about 5ft 6ins tall with brown hair, grey eyes and a fair complexion and throughout his service his conduct was always rated as very good. In 1909 he was an ERA 5 and by the time he left the Navy in 1918 he was an ERA 2. Most of William's service was spent at the various shore-based training establishments in Devonport (H.M.S. Indus, H.M.S. Termaire, H.M.S. Fiscard and H.M.S. Vivid). He did serve in H.M.S. Blake, a first Class Cruiser, H.M.S. King Alfred, an armoured Cruiser and, for a very short time, in the Battleship H.M.S. Resolution.

Finally in May 1918 William was medically discharged from Devonport Naval base (H.M.S. Vivid) with tuberculosis. He returned to the family home at Cyprus Villas in Dam Road, Barton on Humber and died in February 1919. He was buried in the family grave alongside his father and step-mother. Based on his service, he qualified for the 1914 - 15 Star. His medals were posthumously issued to his brother Thomas Jefferson.

