

*Order of Service of Remembrance, St Gregory's Church, Dawlish
September 25th 2015*

THE STORY OF THE DEATH OF EIGHT DAWLISH MEN ON ONE DAY

Introduction by Rev Di Caine

In this section of the Service, compiled by Rev Roger Whitehead, Bob Vickery will give an overall commentary on the War. Keith Gibson will contribute aspects of the life stories of those men of Dawlish who died at Loos. After each person remembered there will be responses.

(RV)

Before we come to the Battle of Loos (pron; lowce) it is worth reflecting on the Dawlish where the men spent their early years. The 1911 census returned a population of 4,760 for Dawlish. Kelly's Directory of 1914 describes the town as "having risen from a small fishing village to a place of considerable importance. The air is considered particularly mild and salubrious, and the bathing being easy on a firm and gently shelving sandy beach, this place is a great resort for sea-bathers and invalids at all seasons of the year."

If you have looked through contemporary photographs in Dawlish Museum you will see a relaxed town where the pace of life was calm.

The outbreak of War brought news of the first death within days, and by this time in 1915 there had been eighteen deaths on land and at sea, which we have recorded and commemorated in Services.

Another eight deaths in a single day at Loos must have sent shudders through the town.

Loos is a small town on the edge of coal fields near Lens in the French Department of Pas de Calais, and it was near the front lines. The German assault through Belgium in 1914 had been halted in Northern France, and after a year of war there was stalemate along the Western Front. The Allies decided that a major attack, on what was thought to be a weak spot in the enemy's lines, was the only way forward. It was to be a combined British and French attack, to be known as 'The Big Push', with 75 thousand allied soldiers seeking to break through. One of them was John Anning.

(KG)

JOHN GWYNE KERLE ANNING

John Anning's family had for a long time lived in Starcross and his grandparents' grave is in their churchyard. By the turn of the century his parents occupied a lodging house in Marine Parade, Dawlish with their young family. John was the only son, with two sisters. The family remained at 'Beachcroft' until 1964 when John Anning's sister died.

John became an engineer's apprentice and moved to the north of England where he was apprenticed to a brass-worker. He joined the Devonshires almost by chance. He returned home for a summer holiday in August 1914, and as soon as war broke out he enlisted. He was reported killed in advancing on the enemy's trenches – just moments after going over the top.

Here, the prayers for John Anning, the lighting of a candle and silent prayer.

Those we commemorate today were all members of the 8th (Service) Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment. The Devonshire Regiment was the county regiment and it was the obvious one to join. It contained a number of battalions, each of approximately 1,200 men. Initially, the 1st Battalion was stationed in the Channel Islands to defend them, but by the end of August 1914 they were moved to France and preparations were made for them to join the front line. Other Battalions were sent to India and Egypt.

When recruiting began for Kitchener's New Army of volunteers the 8th (Service) Battalion was formed, and our men found themselves in training on Salisbury Plain. The core of the new battalion were experienced officers and NCOs who brought the men to a standard for transfer to France in July 1915. The soldiers were untried, but their training had been thorough and their performance in battle matched that of experienced professional soldiers. This battalion became known as Buller's Own.

Frank Cotton found himself leading a Platoon of Buller's own into battle 100 years ago today.

FRANK COTTON

Frank Cotton was the second youngest of eleven children of Arthur Cotton, one of the most notable fishermen in Dawlish, who also served as Town Crier; his mother was a Sick Nurse. His family provided five of the children for military service; it seems that only Frank was killed. We do not know his date of enlisting, but he had risen to the rank of Lance Sergeant and must have shown leadership as a new soldier.

We do not know how Frank died. He was officially posted as “missing”. His commanding officer wrote that “None of his platoon have returned. They are all either killed, or wounded, or missing.” We can only guess at what happened to those 30 or so men who vanished without trace. We can guess at the anguished waiting of the relatives.

Here, the prayers for Frank Cotton, the lighting of a candle and silent prayer.

An artillery barrage of the enemy front line told them when an attack was to be expected, and reinforcements had been brought in by the Germans before the assault was launched. By now the Royal Flying Corps was able to fly over enemy territory and they helped to pin point the German front line to make heavy artillery fire more accurate; but these observations did not show the condition of the wire defences which remained largely intact. The army leaders had not learned from the tragedies of the battle of Ypres, in particular the need for heavy artillery to break the lines of barbed wire which could not easily be cut by the infantry, especially in the height of battle.

Another lesson which should have been learned was the importance of communication, particularly between the British and French High Command. General Haig was reduced to driving from his headquarters to the French in order to discuss how to respond to the developing state of the battle field. Communications were particularly important because Haig and the French General Joffre were not really at one on the manner and timing for The Big Push. Communications between the front line and headquarters were equally poor.

Soldiers like the one we next commemorate paid the price for poor preparation.

SIDNEY CORNELIUS

Sidney Cornelius was born in Dawlish to Samuel and Harriet Cornelius. Samuel was a cabinet-maker and they lived at Stafford House on Park Street, later renamed Strand Hill. As war broke out Sidney was living in Truro as a Fruiterer's manager. He returned to Exeter to enlist.

He too was 'missing. His Commanding Office wrote to his mother,

“May I express my deepest sympathy with you and your family in the anxiety you have felt. I am afraid I feel the worst. It is a terrible blow to you I feel sure. He has been returned as 'missing'. I think some of the latter probably have been taken prisoners, and perhaps your son was wounded and captured. I really can't find out. All I can tell you is that he was with the scouts, who I regret to say lost severely, very few escaping unwounded. Your son was conscientious in his work as a soldier, and a perfect gentleman.”

Here, the prayers for Sidney Cornelius, the lighting of a candle and silent prayer .

The landscape near Loos appears flat but the Germans had chosen higher ground to set up machine-gun positions which could cover all sections of no-man's land from two sides. The German fire proved devastating on the men first out of the trenches.

A miscalculation in planning was the dependence by General Haig on gas. It had first been used by the Germans at the Second Battle of Ypres, in April, when the effect on Canadian troops was devastating.

General Haig was advised that wind could blow the gas the short distance across no-man's-land to the enemy trenches and force them into their dug-outs. At 5.15 in the morning the dying wind raised doubts, but there was no means to call off the attack. 150 tons of gas were discharged from 5,200 cylinders of chlorine gas. Unfortunately, on parts of the front the breeze faded, leaving a fog between the British and enemy lines and the breeze turned to move the gas cloud back to some of the British trenches. The crude gas masks were such that the glass steamed up and the soldiers could not see, so that many of them discarded their masks. The injuries were terrible and long-lasting.

ERNEST JOHN CRIDEFORD

Ernest Crideford was one of a family of nine children, working as a gardener. His father had been a farm labourer. Ernest probably enlisted in response to news of German atrocities in Belgium and Allied difficulties.

We know very little of the nature of his death apart from a letter from a friend who wrote to his parents that he was killed in the charge in the first moments of the attack, just like John Anning. The parents may have had some comfort from some of the photographs and other things found in Ernest's pockets which were returned to them.

Here, the prayers for Ernest Crideford, the lighting of a candle and silent prayer.

At 6.30 am the Devonshires left their trenches to advance in line towards the enemy following the gas cloud.

They suffered terribly on sections of the Front where wire defences were still intact and had to be cut by hand. German machine-guns exacted a heavy toll on such static targets. Within half an hour of the attack being launched the survivors had overrun the first line of trenches and fought hand-to-hand on the second line. They went on and captured eight field guns and, with the 2nd Gordon Highlanders, they held a cross roads on the Hulloch road. But they were well ahead of troops on either flank and were exposed to counter-attack which they resisted.

With reduced numbers, they needed support from the reserves which were too far behind them and so were unable to move on to the stated objectives. That evening, cold, wet and hungry, they were ordered to hand over to the 21st Brigade and returned to the British lines to regroup.

The result of the advance had been a slaughter. The figures are staggering. There were 8,246 British casualties in the first four hours of the Battle, including three major-generals. One of our dead was a married man with four children.

WILLIAM JOHN DEW

William John Dew was one of five children of John Dew and Louise Hodge. His father died when he was 5 and he was brought up by his widowed mother who worked as a charwoman. One of his brothers, Alfred Thomas Dew, was killed in the Battle of Jutland on 31st May 1916. Before the War, William was a General Labourer for the railway company.

William married Sarah Monk in 1907, and they had five children, Annie Louisa, Emily Kate, and William John, and twins born in 1911. The twins died before their father, in 1915. A further son, John, was born before the war started.

After her husband's death Sarah Dew married Charles Jarvis in Newton Abbot in 1917 and had a further three daughters.

Here, the prayers for John Dew, the lighting of a candle and silent prayer.

The soldier we remember next is the only one who had been a member of the Territorial Force at home. This was the volunteer reserve component of the British Army formed in 1908, combining and re-organising the old Volunteer Army with the Yeomanry. The Territorial Force was a home defence force for service during wartime; units were liable to serve anywhere within the United Kingdom. The individual units were administered by County Associations, with the county's Lord Lieutenant as President. The local unit for Devon was the Wessex Division which primarily recruited from Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset and Wiltshire.

No member of the Territorial Force could be compelled to serve outside the country. It was in this force that Albert Hooper gained military experience and – without compulsion – volunteered to serve in the war.

ALBERT HOOPER ('Bert')

Bert was the oldest Dawlishian killed that day. He had been born in April 1878 to William, a journeyman painter, and Mary Netting who was born in St Minver, North Cornwall. Albert's mother was a widow by 1891 and worked as a laundry mangle to bring up her three children. In time Albert went to Dawlish Boys' School and he is recorded on their Roll of Honour. He lived at home and he started work as a shoemaker but later became a Postman and signed up before the war began. He was 37 when he died.

Here, the prayers for Albert Hooper, the lighting of a candle and silent prayer.

In the heat of battle there is always confusion, and the first day of the Battle of Loos was no exception. The dead and wounded lay everywhere. The company commanders responsible for directing their troops had mostly been killed and the infantry had taken whatever route was open to them to advance. Many had not been seen to fall and were just ...missing.. whole platoons did not return from the battle. It is no wonder then that news of the casualties was patchy and often inconsistent.

Just think, for a moment, of what it meant for the people at home. The first news of the wounded must have spread concern about the other men of Dawlish who were not mentioned, leaving families torn between hope and fear. Official news dribbled through over a period of weeks in October. Eventually eight names were added to the Roll of Honour.

We perhaps reflect mostly on the very young who volunteered, often to see the world and enjoy adventure. The youngest Dawlish volunteer is next.

ERNEST GEORGE MARTIN

He was only 18 and one of the youngest to die that day. He was the oldest of six children born to George Martin, an agricultural labourer, and Ellen Pike. They lived at Gatehouse Cottages where George was described as a 'Cowman'. After school Ernest Martin worked as a paper boy and was then employed by Mrs Townley Parker of Bridge House.

He also was killed in the initial charge on the German trenches. His body was buried on the battlefield and his grave marked with a cross.

Here, the prayers for Ernest Martin, the lighting of a candle and silent prayer.

One feature of a battle like that of Loos, which rumbled on until October 13th, is that the bodies of the dead may never be found, or they may have been buried quickly at or near the battlefield with the minimum of ceremony as was the case with Ernest Martin. Later, they were transferred to the permanent war cemeteries such as Dud Corner on the road north west of Loos. Only the bodies of 2,000 of the 8,500 British troops killed in the battle were recovered for formal burial. It was the most costly in lives of any battle ever fought by the Devonshires. Many were without identity and their headstones are carved with the words -

“A soldier of the Devonshire Regiment - Known unto God”.

We honour the eight men awarded the Victoria Cross; one was Arthur James Terence Fleming-Sandes who fought with the East Surrey Regiment and who retired to Holcombe many years later. He will be commemorated on Sunday morning at St George's, Holcombe.

We honour equally those who were led to believe that the Germans were ill-equipped to resist their advance and who, soon after emerging from the trenches, were massacred.

No medals could be awarded if there were no witnesses to return with the evidence of bravery.

We must never forget they were human beings with families and their hopes, who – for whatever reason – put themselves in harm's way and paid the price.

Our final commemoration is of a labouring man whose wife died shortly before he was killed. He must have gone over the top, knowing that she would not be at home to welcome him. We wonder if that made any difference to his feelings that morning.

WILLIAM HENRY STEVENS

William Stevens was the fourth child of Henry Stevens and Sarah Jane Harris. His father was an agricultural labourer and his mother came from Luton, near Chudleigh. Just before the war they were living at Hill Head Cottages, Mamhead. William probably attended school in Starcross. William married Elizabeth Aggett in the autumn of 1908 and they lived at Swan Court, Old Town, Dawlish. He was a carter and Elizabeth worked in a laundry and they had a lodger. Elizabeth died just before William was killed in the war, aged 25.

Here, the prayers for William Stevens, the lighting of a candle and silent prayer.