

## William Henry PITTS

Born St Thomas District, Q4, 1887  
Private 7882  
Lance Sergeant, 17565

Killed in action, Flanders, 22 June 1917  
Devonshire Regiment  
Machine Gun Corps (Infantry)

**William Henry Pitts** was the son of Edward Elston and Mary Ann Pitts.

Edward Elston Pitts (1858-1934) started life in the Union Workhouse in Crediton where, at the age of two, he was described as a 'scholar'. He is listed in the 1861 census with others of the same surname including his mother Charlotte:

William Pitts, unmarried,	63,	Mason's labourer	born Crediton
Maria Pitts, marr,	81,	Weaver, wool	"
Charlotte Pitts, unmarried	21,	Shoebinder	"
Edward Pitts,	2,	Scholar	"

William Pitts (1798-1867) was the only child from the marriage of Joseph Pitts (1776-1852) to Elizabeth Stone (1776-1803). Joseph then married again, on 26 February 1804, to Maria Croot (1777-1864) and they had five children. It is Maria (Croot), now a widow, who is in the workhouse with her step-son.

The evidence from other family trees (Ancestry.com.uk) suggests that William did not marry, and earlier census returns show him in St Thomas Union Workhouse, Wonford (Exeter) in 1841 and Cheriton Road Union Workhouse, Crediton in 1851.

The census of 1851 gives a possible clue to Charlotte's parents: (viz FIP family tree)

Park Street, Crediton

Joseph Pitts, Head, marr	78,	Parish pay, Carpenter	born Crediton
Maria Pitts, wife,	73,	" , Weaver	"
Charlotte, grand daughter	12,	Scholar	"
John, son,	30,	Shoemaker	"
Ann, grand daughter	10,	Scholar	"
Harry, grandson	8,	"	born Weston-Super-Mare
John, grandson	6,	"	"

John Pitts (1814-1885) had married Sarah Hookway (1810-1847) in Exeter in 1833 when he was 19. They moved to Weston-Super-Mare and he was a shoemaker in 1841 (census record). They had seven children before her early death in Weston-Super-Mare at the age of 36. They were :

Henry (1835-1837), Ann Elizabeth (1836- ), Henry William (1837-1837), Charlotte (1839-1919), Ann (1839- ), Henry "Harry" (1842-1880), John (1846-1852).

John Pitts, a widower, came home to live with his parents and the four youngest children as are shown in the 1851 census, above.

Charlotte is the only named parent of Edward Elston Pitts who was born in Crediton (GRO ref 1858, Oct-Dec vol 5b, page 378). He appears again, aged 14, at Crediton Union Workhouse in 1871 census and there is also a Harry Pitts, 6, also born in Crediton. His mother, Charlotte, appears to have married Edward Webb on 4 August 1869 in Wandsworth Surrey (now London), and they went on to have seven children and remained in Wandsworth until her death in 1919 at the age of 77. (viz Webb family tree)

Edward E Pitts was 19 when he married Mary Ann Fawdon (1855-1930) in 1878 in CREDITON (GRO ref CREDITON, 1878, Apr-June, vol 5b, p 685). She had been a general domestic servant to a farmer, Richard Ellis of Chagford.

In 1881 Edward and Mary Pitts were living at No 3 Stanton Cottage, Marldon, where Edward was a farm labourer. They had two children:

Hannah Fawdon Pitts, (1878- )	born in CREDITON
Edward Samuel Pitts, (1879- )	born in DREWSTEIGNTON.

At the next census (1891) they were at Cofford Mill Cottage, KENTON with four more children:

Emily Jessie Pitts, (1882-1969- )	born in KENTON
Rosalina Alice Pitts, (1885- )	"
<b>William Henry Pitts</b> , (1887 - )	"

(GRO ref born, St Thomas district, Oct-Dec 1887, Vol 5b, p 7)

Leah Louisa Pitts, 4 months old (1891-1931)	"
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In 1901 The parents had moved to Duckaller Cottage, Port Road, Dawlish and **William Henry, 13**, and Leah L, 11 had been joined by Albany John (1893-1931), 7, born in Dawlish.

The other children had moved away by 1911 and one of their number had died, as recorded in the census. The parents were living at Westwood, Cofton, Starcross, with Albany John Pitts, 17, joined also by Albert Edward Pitts, 11, a grandson. By this time Edward's occupation is shown as a gardener, as is his son Albany.

In 1914 (GRO ref Exeter, 1914, Jan-Mar, vol 5b, p 172) **William** married Ethel Beatrice Westcott (Born Lambeth Jan-Mar, 1890, vol 1d, pa 565) in Exeter.

The Westcott family had moved to Middlewood, Dawlish and Ethel's father, George H P Westcott was a pensioner of the Metropolitan Water Board. In the 1911 census he records that he was a widower and a gardener. His first wife, Mary Ann Westcott died in Apr-June 1898, aged 45, and he married again to Elizabeth Holborrow who died in Lambeth in early 1905. It appears that George Henry Palmer Westcott then moved to Devon, where he died at the R.D.& E. Hospital on the 12<sup>th</sup> September 1918.

**William Henry Pitts** joined the Devonshire Regiment with a service no. 7882. It appears likely that he was with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion which had been stationed on Jersey since 1911. On 21<sup>st</sup> August 1914 they landed at Le Havre, where they were reinforced by nearly 500 reservists from Exeter. This accords with the Medal Roll Index Card for William H Pitts that shows his "date of entry" (France) as 22-8-14 which entitled him to the award of the 1914 Star.

In September, during their first spell in the line, they suffered 100 casualties from shelling. In October on the La Basse Canal they supported the badly mauled 1st Dorsets and helped capture Givenchy Ridge. The Devons performed well during a bitter three-week battle but lost two thirds of their officers and a third of their men. From November they occupied Messines Ridge in rain and sleet, often knee- or waist-deep in mud and icy water.

On 21st April 1915 they occupied Hill 60, which had been captured on 17th April. Counter-attacks and heavy shelling cost them more than 200 casualties.

On 31st July 1915 they moved to the Somme. When the offensive began on 1st July 1916 the Devons were at Arras but returned to the Somme, to consolidate the line around Longueval. Shellfire and German counter-attacks cost them 265 casualties. In September they made two very successful advances near Guillemont at a cost of 376 casualties.

There are no surviving records which show when **William Henry Pitts** transferred to the Machine Gun Corps. The Medal Roll Index Card hints that he was no more than a Private with the 1<sup>st</sup> Devons, and this suggests that he may have transferred to the Machine Gun Corps (Infantry) soon after its formation in October 1914. The Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects show that **William** was serving with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Company of the Machine Gun Corps at the time of his death on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1917.

### **23rd Company, Machine Gun Corps**

The 23rd Machine Gun Company was formed from the Machine Gun Sections of 23rd Brigade, 8th Division on the 15th of January 1916. They were in action at the Battle of The Somme. In 1917 they fought in The German retreat to the Hindenburg Line and then moved to Flanders and were in action in The Battle of Pilkem and The Battle of Langemarck.

#### **Extract from the Commonwealth War Graves website regarding those commemorated at the Menin Gate, Ypres.**

There was little more significant activity on this front until 1917, when in the Third Battle of Ypres an offensive was mounted by Commonwealth forces to divert German attention from a weakened French front further south. The initial attempt in June to dislodge the Germans from the Messines Ridge was a complete success, but the main assault north-eastward, which began at the end of July, quickly became a dogged struggle against determined opposition and the rapidly deteriorating weather. The campaign finally came to a close in November with the capture of Passchendaele. His name is inscribed on panel 56 of the Main Gate at Ypres.

After **William's** death, Ethel Pitts married Alfred Bowles in Oct-Dec 1920 (Dartford, Vol 2a, p1571) and the CWGC website records her address as 8 Battle Road, Erith, Kent.

A Death grant of £ 5. 12s. 9d. Was paid to his widow and sole legatee Ethel, and a War Gratuity of £17. 10s. 0d. To his widow Ethel B in September 1919.

Cofton memorial inscription: William Pitts. Mach.Gun Corps. June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1917

Last known address: Duckaller Cottage, Port Road, Dawlish

Next of kin: Ethel Beatrice Pitts, widow

#### References:

Birth, Marriage Death refs

[wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar](http://wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar)

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment

<http://www.keepmilitarymuseum.org/history/first+world+war/the+devonshire+regiment/the+first+battalion>

## Dawlish World War One Project

Refs via subscription:

Census records

UK, Army registers of Soldiers' Effects

UK, Soldiers died in the Great War

Family trees – Ancestry.com.uk

DEVON Newton ST Cyres B Pitts

Hookway Surname Study

FIP tree

Webb