

## **Wilfred Claude WILLIAMS**

Born Dawlish, Q1, 1897  
Private 40149

Died 31 July 1917, Flanders, aged 20  
Royal Tank Corps

**Wilfred Claude Williams** was the son of John and Bessie Williams. **Wilfred** was born in Dawlish, his mother's home town, in Jan-March quarter of 1897 (Newton Abbot district, vol 5b, p 98).

The common name of Williams makes a certain identity difficult but the marriage of John Williams (1868-1898) to Bessie Slocombe (1870 - ) is linked to the Baptism of **Wilfred Claude Williams** in St Mark's Church, Dawlish (since demolished) on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1897 where the father, John, is described as a Grocer and the mother is Bessie. The marriage register of Bessie and John shows that John Williams' father was Thomas Williams and a cross reference to the 1881 census shows a John Williams in Beach Cottage, Dawlish, as a Grocer's Assistant born in Bodmin, Cornwall. Thomas Williams (1829-1905) and Belinda Varcoe (1830-1910) brought up eight children in Bodmin over 19 years, and John Williams is among them.

Bessie Williams, nee Slocombe, was born in Q4, 1870 (N.A.district, vol 5b, p 111) and Baptised in St Gregory the Great on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1870.

In the 1871 census the family are shown living at No 3 Brunswick Place, Dawlish, where the father, John Slocombe, 38, is a Plasterer and Rose, his wife, 38, is a housekeeper. There were six children with them, Louisa, 15, Mary J, 13, Annie Maria, 11, John, 9, William, 5 and Bessie, 5 months.

Annie Maria Slocombe (1861- ) married a hairdresser, Alfred William Lane (1857- ) in Croydon, Surrey in 1884 (Q2, Vol 2A, p 327), and in 1891 they had moved to Dawlish, No 2 Vaughan Terrace, with two children, born in Bexley, Kent; Rose D, 3 and William H, 0. They were next door to her parents John and Rose, who had moved to 1 Vaughan Terrace, West Cliff.

Also in 1891, the son John is married and has followed in his father's trade of plastering. His wife, Marie, 32, and their daughter Mary, 5, are living at No 3 Vaughan Terrace with his sister Bessie, 20, who is unmarried.

Bessie Slocombe was 25 when she married John Williams, 28, in St Gregory the Great, Dawlish on 21 March 1896. A possible death of John Williams in 1898, aged 28, can be followed by obtaining a death certificate (June 1898, N.A., vol 5b, p 89).

After the death of John Williams, Bessie can be found in 1901 with her son at the home of her sister Annie Maria and brother-in-law, Alfred W Lane, at 39 Fest Road, Kingston-upon-Thames. Hairdressing is a mobile occupation and they may have moved back to an area that he knew well from childhood. They had four children and Bessie was there with **Wilfred Williams**, 4, nephew to the Lane family.

In 1905 Bessie Williams married once more to Charles Christopher Pound, another hairdresser conducting his business at 17, the Strand, Dawlish. It would appear that Pound had been married previously.

In 1911 the census shows the household:

Charles Pound, 48, hairdresser (born in Torquay), Bessie Pound, 38, **Wilfred C Williams**, 14, step-son and apprentice hairdresser and Cyril W Pound, 4, son, born in Teignmouth.

Bessie Pound died on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1944, aged 73, at 2 Selborne Road, New Malden Surrey (Surrey North Eastern district, Sep 1944, vol 2a, p 81) and left her effects to Cyril Williams Pound, dental practitioner.

There are no surviving records to show when **Wilfred** enlisted at Exeter. From the following account of the formation of the Royal Tank Corps he may have first joined the Machine Gun Corps.

"Through mud and blood to the green fields beyond". - Tank Corps motto.

Tanks were used for the first time in action on the battlefield of the Somme on 15 September 1916. 36 Mark 1 tanks of C and D Companies arrived on the start line for the renewal of the Somme offensive: this action was later designated as the Battle of Flers-Courcelette. Arguments continue as to whether it would have been better to wait until much larger numbers of tanks were available before they were used in battle. The Heavy Section Machine Gun Corps was redesignated as the *Heavy Branch MGC* in November 1916.

The *Tank Corps* was formed from the Heavy Branch MGC on 27 July 1917 and the Battalions adopted numbering rather than letter designations (although tank names followed the same lettering: for example, 7th Battalion tanks were all named with a letter G, like Grouse, Grumble, etc.) Each Tank Battalion had a complement of 32 officers and 374 men.

By summer 1917 tank numbers had increased and the better Mark IV's were available. Sadly, the tanks deployment in the *Third Battle of Ypres (July-November 1917)* proved to be another slog through deep mud. The area became a tank graveyard as machine after machine ditched in deep trenches and shell holes, sank, stuck and was shelled. Morale in the Tank Corps was low and confidence of the rest of the army destroyed. Although there was a bright incident when tanks did well at St Julien, the tanks needed to be given a fighting chance.

**Private Wilfred Claude Williams** lost his life on the opening day of the assault on Ypres, and he is recorded among those on the Menin Gate memorial.

A death grant of £3. 14s. 3d. was paid to Bessie Pound, as was the War Gratuity of £4. 10s. 0d. Awards of the Victory medal and the British War medal were made later.

Wilfred C Williams is recorded on the Devon Roll of Honour

Dawlish War memorial inscription: WILLIAMS W.C. GNR. TANK CORPS

Devon Heritage site info: 40149 Private Wilfred Claude Williams of "G" Battalion, the Tank Corps. Stepson of Charles Pound and his wife Bessie (formerly Williams) of Dawlish, Born in Dawlish in 1897. Died 31 July 1917, aged 20.

Commonwealth War Graves entry: WILLIAMS, WILFRED CLAUDE Private 40149  
31/07/1917 Tank Corps, "G" Bn. Panel Ref: Panel 56. [Ypres \(Menin Gate\) Memorial](#)

Last known address: 17 The Strand, Dawlish

Next of kin: Bessie Pound, mother

References:

BMD records

The Long, Long Trail - <http://www.1914-1918.net/tanks.htm>

Refs via subscription sites:

Census records

UK, Soldiers Died in the Great War

UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects

Baptism and Marriage records

Ancestry - Barbour family tree