

## Samuel Gordon WILLS

Born 5 March 1887, South Town, Kenton Died 27 April 1919, Brooklyn, New York, USA, aged 32  
Leading Seaman No: S.S.1368 (R.F.R. Dev.B.3738) Ship: S.S. BELGIC

**Samuel Gordon Wills** was the grandson of John Wills (1819-1867) and Elizabeth Morey (1818-1896). John Wills was a farm labourer, born in Moretonhampstead and living in Croft Street.

**Samuel's father**, Francis Wills, was born in 1849, also in Moretonhampstead, and married Harriet Rugg in 1882 (GRO ref St Thomas, 1882, Jan-Mar, vol 5b, p 103). Harriet was born in Exminster and they started a family ca 1883:

|                |            |                    |                  |
|----------------|------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Bertha,        | dau        | (1883- )           | born in Kenton   |
| Francis,       | son,       | (1885- )           | Exminster        |
| <b>Gordon,</b> | <b>son</b> | <b>(1887-1919)</b> | <b>St Thomas</b> |
| Ellen,         | dau        | (1890 - )          | Kenton           |
| George,        | son,       | (1895- )           | Kenton           |
| Elizabeth M    | dau,       | (1897- )           | Kenton           |

Francis and Harriet Wills are recorded at 12 Kenton Hill, Kenton in the 1891 census when Francis was a farm labourer with four children.

In 1901 (**Samuel) Gordon Wills** was 14 and living as a servant/gardener with Walter Henry Dodge's family at Middlewood Cottage, Cockwood, Starcross. This family are shown elsewhere to be prominent market gardeners.

In 1911 Francis Wills was a quarryman and the family lived at Bridford. They had seven children but one had died by this date. Francis junior was also a quarryman, working for the Devon Basalt Company. Other members of the Wills family appear to have boarded with them.

**Samuel Gordon Wills** joined the Royal Navy at Devonport as a Boy 1<sup>st</sup> class on 18 April 1906 for a 5 year engagement and the option to extend by a further 7 years. He was given the service number SS 1368. His date of birth is shown as 1888 but his birth certificate shows 1887.

The 1911 census shows him as an Able Seaman aboard H.M.S.TEMERAIRE at Portland Harbour. He served until 28 April 1911, when he left the service. His previous occupation is shown as a Gardener, and he was 5' 7 3/4" tall, with brown eyes and hair and a fresh complexion.

On completion of the 5 year engagement he transferred to the Royal Fleet Reserve (R.F.R.), Devonport with a service number B3788 on 29 April 1911. He appears in Naval Records as Gordon Wills.

A possible reason for his leaving the service at this point is the marriage in 1912 to Ethel May Gilpin (1887- ). Ethel May was the older daughter of Fred and Hannah Gilpin who were at Shiverstone Cottage from 1891 to 1901, at least. By 1911 Ethel May had become a cook with a household at Bellevue, Exmouth.

**Gordon and Ethel** had two children, first a daughter, Phyllis, born in June 1913 and then a son, Francis, in the summer of 1914, but sadly he died. (Phyllis was to marry Ernest Roy Harris (1914-1942) who served as an Air Gunner, RAFVR, who died in action on 4 October 1942 and is buried in Dawlish Cemetery.)

In August 1913 **Gordon** signed on as a Postman, No 143004 in Exeter.

The approach of the Great War saw **Samuel Gordon Wills** recalled to Barracks in Devonport on 13 July 1914 as an Able Seaman, R.F.R.

He was posted to H.M.S.EXCELLENT for six months in 1915 where he would have undergone gunnery training.

His Naval Service Record shows that he was made Provisional Leading Seaman on 17 January 1916 with adjustments to Pay and Pension rights.

He was posted to a number of Barracks from which he would have been allocated short term postings to local ships, as needed. His last postings were to H.M.S.PRESIDENT III from 17 June 1916. This was an accounting base, which covered the accounts of the active services of the Royal Fleet Reserve, the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and the Royal Naval Reserve from 1916 onwards, also extending to covering demobilisation accounts from December 1918 onwards. It included the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship accounts, until they were transferred to H.M.S.VIVID on 1 October 1919.

In April 1919 he was serving aboard S.S.BELGIC. Originally built in 1914, she served as a freighter and World War I troopship for the White Star Line under the name S.S. BELGIC. Because she was needed for the war effort, she was hastily finished with only two smokestacks and a superstructure only one deck high. Initially used for carrying cargo, in 1918 she was given accommodations for up to 3,000 troops. Her gross tonnage was listed at 24,547.

After completion of hostilities she was converted and renamed **Belgenland** under the Red Star Line.

It seems that the BELGIC was carrying American soldiers returning from the Western Front when she berthed in Brooklyn on 25 April 1919.

**Samuel Gordon Wills** fell into the hold of the BELGIC on 27 April and died as a result of this accident.

He is buried in the Nazareth section 2185, Evergreen Cemetery, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Commonwealth War Graves entry: (NAVAL-HISTORY.NET) Belgic, steamship WILLS, Gordon, Leading Seaman, SS 1368, accident. 27 April 1919.

**Samuel Gordon Wills** is shown on the Devon Roll of Honour.

Last known address: 5 Church Street Cottages, Dawlish

Next of kin: Ethel May Wills, widow, 5 Church Street Cottages, Dawlish. He left effects valued at £132. 3s. 11d. (*equivalent to approx £7,128 in 2018*)

References:

Descendants' personal records and memorabilia of S G Wills

UK RN & RM War Graves Roll.

ww1sacrifice.com

CWGC

Free BMD refs

refs via subscription websites:

census entries

Nat'l Probate Calendar

British Postal Service Appointment Books, 1737-1969

UK, Royal Navy Registers of Seaman's Services, 1848-1939

Klein 2016-06-21 family tree (ancestry)