

Tribute to Sapper James Edwin Kerswell, 25th October 2018

Over the course of the past four years we have seen several examples of families losing two brothers to the war

Grief is not a competition.

Loss of loved ones is not measured in numbers

But, it is salutary to reflect that for one family this wretched conflict caused the loss of 7 cousins, including 3 pairs of brothers.

Today we meet to remember James Edwin Kerswell, whose brother Private Sidney Kerswell had died in 1915 from wounds sustained at Gallipoli

We have a photograph of the Kerswell family taken before the war. It is a happy family image, it seems to have been a summer's day. They are seated in the garden. A Mother with 5 daughters and 2 sons. The children raised safely to adulthood, the promise of life to come.

How sad to realise that for these two young men, the arguments of the great and powerful were to mean all this would be lost in drudgery of war and the suffering of injury and illness leading to premature death. No consolations of marriage, children or long lives.

The Kerswells lived a more nomadic life than most of Dawlish in the early 20th century

Their father James had been born in Crediton and served in the Royal Navy of Queen Victoria before settling to a career in the Coastguard service. He was to be found living in Ireland, we think this is where he married. It is certainly where his children were born.

James was his second son, born in 1878 in County Mayo

The Ireland of 1878 was in a ferment of dissent. The ravages of the Great Famine still affecting daily lives where, if not actually starving people lived in great poverty. Catholic Emancipation had been successfully fought for, and the campaigns led by Parnell for Land Reform and Home Rule gave focus to the anger of the Irish people

It must therefore have been something of a relief for the Kerswell parents that their younger children were born in Dawlish, where the family lived at Alexandra Place and then Hatcher Street.

James Kerswell was one of those men who served his country in two conflicts, the Boer Wars and the Great War. We know that he joined the Army Post Office Corps in 1901 at the age of 23

It is forgotten that the Netherlands was for a time the colonial power at the Cape of Good Hope before being replaced in 1806 by the British Empire after the Dutch state was taken over by Napoleon, who had installed his brother Louis as King.

The British installed strict controls on their new colony, even going so far as to ban the Dutch language. This led in time to the rise of the Voortrekker movement, which means literally “Pathfinders”. Disgruntled Dutch settlers marched northwards to establish new communities, eventually resulting in the foundation of two independent states.

Conflict with the British continued, resulting in two separate wars. It was in the second of these that James arrived, and it was to lead to the defeat of the Boers and annexation into South Africa.

Army life seems to have suited James. He signed on for extended service and continued beyond the end of his first war. He eventually left after his father died in 1908, and returned to Dawlish. His widowed mother was surely glad of the comfort of her eldest son.

He was employed in the town Post Office, and eventually rose to the rank of Chief Clerk. We know he was also a member of the town’s Masonic Lodge.

James Kerswell had fought in war, and survived. It might be argued that as a man approaching 40 he had done his duty. However, he responded again to the demands of his country, and re-enlisted to serve. This time as a Royal Engineer in the Signals Squadron. Perhaps his years of working with telegrams and morse code made him well suited to this.

His years of service ended in Palestine, as part of the forces led by General Allenby. The campaign was instructed by Lloyd George to push back against the Turkish forces that had been successful in the Middle East following on from the disaster of Gallipoli.

The years of 1917 and 1918 saw increasing success in this endeavour, most famously the liberation of Jerusalem. General Allenby showed great respect by getting off his horse at the city gates to walk through the gates on foot, and issued the following proclamation

“ your city is regarded with affection by the adherents of three of the great religions of mankind and its soil has been consecrated by the prayers and pilgrimages of multitudes of devout people of these three religions for many centuries, therefore, do I make it known to you that every sacred building, monument, holy spot, shrine, traditional site, endowment, pious bequest, or customary place of prayer of whatsoever form of the three religions will be maintained and protected according to the existing customs and beliefs of those to whose faith they are sacred”

At some point James Kerswell contracted an infection that led to a fever. He was being treated at the combined clearing hospital at Haifa, and was buried in the military cemetery. The location suggests he may have been involved in the Battle of Megiddo and the successful campaign for Damascus when he was taken ill.

The forces under Allenby were afflicted by a number of diseases. Malaria, Cholera and a new danger that became endemic in the Near East

Pneumonic Influenza, which in time would become known as Spanish Flu and sweep through Europe. Worldwide it killed 100 million people.

One hundred years ago today, James Kerswell died from fever.

17 days later the guns would fall silent

His mother would have known from the newspapers that the war was limping to its end.

She lost a baby son in the first year of his life and a second son in the 21st year of his age.

It is one of the last cruel ironies of this war that it was a telegram delivered by the post office in which he served that told her that James was not to make it home