

A letter from hospital

At a time when hospitals are at the forefront of our minds comes a letter from a notable hospital just over a century ago. Few examples of letters in the writing of casualties have survived the passage of time, but one has recently appeared at the same time as a new book about a remarkable hospital.

Tom Pook was born in Tedburn St Mary in 1880 and in the course of time became a gardener to the Partridge family at Eastdon House, Starcross. While he was there he helped plant fruit trees and his employer, John G Partridge, took him to Exeter in 1912 to choose trees to plant, and it was recorded that they still produced fruit in 1984 when the family sold the house. 1912 was also important to Tom who married Emily Philpot at Dawlish Parish Church on 5th October. They both gave their address as 10, The Strand, Dawlish.

Tom's military career started when he enlisted with the 8th Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment. The 8th Devons were the first service battalion formed by the Regiment in the First World War. In early August 1915 the 8th, and then the 9th, joined 20 Brigade in the 7th Division in France. After the briefest experience in the line, both Battalions were hurled into the Battle of Loos on 25th September. In this single battle the 8th suffered 639 casualties with eight men from Dawlish among them. In April 1917 during the Battle of Arras the 8th and 9th Battalions attacked Ecooust with great success and light casualties but, a month later, capturing part of Bullecourt cost them 382 killed and wounded. It is most likely that Tom was badly injured in this battle.

From his hospital bed, Private T Pook 26714, 8th Devons E Ward, Endell Street Military Hospital wrote on 24th May 1917 to Mr Partridge; "Dear Sir, I've no doubt you will be surprised to see that I have got back to England again. I have been here about a fortnight sent me from a hospital in France. I have put my ankle out it has been very bad but it is getting better now. I am very pleased to get back and must think myself lucky to have pulled through it as I have done up to now without a scratch. It has been terrible hardships this winter and we have been in really the thick of it chasing up the Germans on their retreat of which they have been driven back several miles from where they were last November when I went up the line. The place I came now from was close to where the hard fighting has been going on Bullecourt. The 8th Devons took the village adjoining a few weeks ago. We took them rather by surprise."

"I hope the garden is going on alright and the rain that we had a few nights ago I believe was needed badly in Devon. Shall be pleased to be able to look at Eastdon again when I get my leave. All the villages around where I was in France were all destroyed fruit trees and all gardens laid to waste."

The hospital where Tom was recovering in London is the subject of a new book by Wendy Moore, “**Endell Street** The Trailblazing Women Who Ran World War One’s Most Remarkable Military Hospital”. The story is built on the role of two women doctors, former suffragettes, Louisa Garret Anderson and Flora Murray who took over the St Giles and St George Workhouse just north of Covent Garden. At a time when men headed most medical facilities the staff of doctors and nurses were all women. Male supremacy in the training of doctors returned after the war and the hospital was closed in 1919.

There is no evidence to show whether Tom Pook had his leave in Devon, but in October 1917 he was once more with his regiment for the Passchendaele attacks when on the 26th the official report states that: ”It is clear that the advance of the 9th Battalion was met with heavy rifle and machine-gun fire from strongly defended positions and pill boxes. The 8th Battalion was intended to move up from the rear and take over the advance and in doing so also lost many men. In the course of the attack all Lewis guns and Vickers machine guns were out of action from shell-fire and mud, and rifles had become unworkable owing to the mud. Further, the enemy counter-attack at 10am was mounted by lightly-equipped troops and many of them were armed with revolvers. This gave them the advantage over our men, many of them stuck in mud, and most of whose rifles had become unserviceable.” The report by the Lieutenant Colonel in command ends with the statistic that 2 Officers were killed and 4 were missing, 20 other ranks were killed and 105 were missing (“there must be a certain number of prisoners but there must also be a large number killed and lying in German territory”). Tom Pook was recorded as killed in action.