

SUNDAY 17th JUNE 2018

Here in England in the Spring of 1918, one hundred years ago, most people thought the War was over. On 21st March, however, the Germans achieved surprise once again; they launched a major offensive astride the River Somme, breaking through the Allied lines, and taking back much they had lost in the previous two years. The British Army had 38,000 casualties that day, the second worst day in its history.

Two men of St Katharine's were killed that day both serving in 2nd Battalion Wiltshire Regiment in 30th Division.

William Henry Palmer was born at Crabtree on 9th June 1877. He was baptised here in our church and went to St Katharine's School. His parents Sarah and David Palmer had 10 children all baptised here: William Henry was still living with them at Crabtree in 1911.

He enlisted in Devizes in 1916 and was in a draft of 50 that joined 2 Wilts on 20 April 1917: it was a regular army battalion but by then such distinctions had become very blurred. For two months they were on the Arras front and played a minor part in that Battle. They were then moved north to take part in the Third Battle of Ypres, Passchendaele (in which Wasey and Shephard were killed). After the battle they stayed on that front until January 1918 when they moved to the south, to St Quentin.

On 21st March after an intense bombardment with high explosive and gas, which forced them to wear gas masks all day, the battalion was attacked in overwhelming strength. In thick mist the enemy moved fast breaking through gaps in the line and surrounding the defenders. 600 of the battalion became casualties, many were taken prisoner. William Henry Palmer has no known grave and is commemorated on the Somme Memorial at Pozieres.

William Robert Gosling was born on 30th September 1892 in St John's Wood, London. At the age of 15 he enlisted in 9th (Territorial) Battalion Middlesex Regiment. At the same time he had various jobs – plumber's labourer, zinc liner and piano packer. On 12th September 1914 he volunteered and joined 13th Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps, a battalion of the New Army. By the time they got to France in 1915 he was a Sergeant. He had also married Edith Mary Jane Barrett on 20th December 1914 at the Denbigh Road Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in London. She was a St Katharine's girl.

Her parents were Fanny and Anthony John Barrett, both buried in our churchyard. They had five children – one was Albert 'Bertie' Henry who married Edith Blanche and lived at 23 Stokke Common – they too are both buried here. They had 10 children of whom Shirley had hoped to be here today but sadly is in hospital.

In 1901 the Barretts were living at 33 Thistleland, now part of Sicily House. By 1911 Edith was in London living and working in North London where she must have met William Gosling.

His battalion landed at Boulogne on 31st July 1915 and went first to the Ypres front. On 9th August he made his will leaving all that he had to Edith. The battalion was then moved to the Arras front where they spent the next relatively quiet 10 months. Then, on 6th July 1916, 13 KRRC was moved south to take part in the Battle of the Somme.

On 13th/14th November the battalion, part of 37th Division, attacked and captured Beaucourt and it seems likely that Sergeant Gosling's Military Medal was awarded for this action. The regimental chronicles record that he was presented with the medal ribbon near Merville by Lieutenant General Sir Richard Haking GOC XI Corps sometime in January 1917 although the award was not published in the London Gazette until 1st April.

On 29th January 1917 he was put forward for a commission, accepted, and posted to 19 Officer Cadet Battalion at Pirbright on 7th April. Four months later he was commissioned and then posted to 2nd Battalion Wiltshire Regiment serving on the Ypres front where he joined William Henry Palmer.

After the battle on 21st March 1918 William Robert Gosling was reported missing but it was not until much later when Sergeant Moreton wrote from a prisoner of war camp in Germany 'Second Lieutenant Gosling was my platoon commander and died of a wound in the body and I saw him lying dead in the English lines' that he was officially accepted as dead. From her letters Edith seems to have accepted his death much earlier.

It must have been a very tough time for Edith not least because four days before he was killed she gave birth to their son – Bernard William Gosling. By that time she was back living with her father at Sicily Cottages, and her son went to St Katharine's School in due course. He became an auctioneer's clerk at Neates and married in 1953. We think that he had a son before he died in 1956. Sadly contact with this side of the family has been lost. Edith moved to Great Bedwyn when her father died, and she died in 1962. She is buried here at St Katharine's in an unmarked grave. An inspiring and at the same time very sad story.

William Robert Gosling has no known grave and is commemorated on the Pozieres Memorial.

Thomas Martin was the last on our war memorial to be killed in the War. Born 1882 in Wishaw, Lanarkshire, where his father was a coal miner: by the age of 18 he too was a coal miner. He married Norah May South in Maidenhead in 1911. They met when both working at a house in Peppard near Reading. After they married they moved first to Nettlebed where Thomas was a gamekeeper, and later to Bloxham Lodge, near Great Bedwyn, where he worked on the Savernake Estate, again as a gamekeeper.

In July 1916 he enlisted in Marlborough, was accepted in Plymouth, and joined 247 Siege Battery Royal Garrison Artillery which was raised at Tynemouth on 13th September that year. The battery was equipped with four 6" 26 cwt BL howitzers which fired a 100lb shell a maximum of 6 miles. Each gun had a crew of 10.

They arrived in France on 30th December 1916 and joined VII Corps on the Arras front. They were there for four months and took part in the Battle of Arras – both the preliminary bombardment and counter-battery fire. On 8th April 1917 the battery fired 1030 rounds – an astonishing figure. Sometime afterwards the Battery moved to Malta: there on 7th May Thomas qualified as a gun layer.

In November 1917 the battery moved to Italy and joined XIV Corps Heavy Artillery. On 31st May 1918 Thomas Martin was wounded in the back and arm and on 15th June, just over two weeks later, he died of these wounds. George Imrie, a fellow Gunner, wrote: 'I was on the gun with him when he got wounded and with him when he was carried to the Dressing Station, which is not very far from our battery position.' Bombardier Matthews wrote: 'He was quite conscious and was attended to right away. I cannot tell you how grieved we were to hear of his death for Tom was a great favourite with us all.' This happened in the days leading up to the last Austro-Hungarian offensive in the war which coincidentally was launched on 15th June: he was probably hit by the enemy's counter-battery fire

Norah and Thomas Martin had three children, Norah Jean, John and James: James's son, Thomas Martin, is here today. After Thomas was killed Norah moved to 20 Stokke Common and later married Charles Leonard Cripps who had also served in the War. She met him at the Marlborough Fair. Norah and Charles are buried here in our churchyard. Joan Chapman, their daughter, is here today.

Gunner Thomas Martin is buried in a beautiful Commonwealth War Cemetery near Vicenza in Central Italy. He is also remembered at the Scottish National War Memorial in Edinburgh Castle.

William Robert Gosling, William Henry Palmer, Thomas Martin

'THEY SHALL GROW NOT OLD AS WE THAT ARE LEFT GROW OLD: AGE SHALL NOT WEARY THEM NOR THE YEARS CONDEMN: AT THE GOING DOWN OF THE SUN AND IN THE MORNING WE WILL REMEMBER THEM'

'WE WILL REMEMBER THEM'

LAST POST

SILENCE

REVEILLE