

COMMEMORATION & SACRIFICE

ST. GREGORY'S WAR MEMORIAL & THE GREAT WAR

Introduction

Canterbury's modern history as a military city began with the large scale development of barracks during the Napoleonic wars. This development, housing regular artillery, cavalry and infantry units, plus a depot for militia, was concentrated in the Northgate area, adjacent to Sturry Road. By the 1840's a new church, St. Albans, was built in Military Road, to serve the men and families of the garrison.¹

As a result of further reorganisation a new parish in eastern Canterbury was formed, at the centre of which, in North Holmes Road, construction of a new church was begun in 1850. This church was named after St. Gregory the Great, the Pope behind the St. Augustine mission to England in 597AD. Designed by George Gilbert Scott and dedicated to the memory of Archbishop William Howley, who died in 1848, St. Gregory's was completed and consecrated in 1852. Between 1852 and 1976, St. Gregory's Church served as the parish church for one of the poorest and smallest parish communities in Canterbury, members of which included a number of military families who lived in quarters fringing the established garrison. In its present life as a university music centre, the Church remains home to the Great War Memorial to members of the parish, who made the ultimate sacrifice in that catastrophic conflict.

Canterbury Cathedral archives hold the records of St. Gregory's, but information therein, regarding the Great War Memorial, is sparse. For example,

¹ Following a name change in 1974 and the amalgamation of a number of parishes, this church is now known as All Saints.

the only mention of the decision to create the memorial, is to be found in the Vestry minutes of the 9th April 1920:

‘Various matters discussed unofficially ...including that of the Permanent memorial to those whose lives had been given in the Great War’ (signed) Revd Gerald Thompson.’²

Indeed, the next mention of the memorial is 24th June 1948 when, as a result of the damage to the church during the Baedeker air raid on Canterbury in the second world war, a petition for and granting of faculty by the Diocese was made:

‘To remove from the North aisle an oak board on which are painted the names of the men of the Parish who died in the Great War 1914-1918 and to re-erect such board between the two windows on the North Wall.’³

The People

The memorial contains 144 names of the fallen, and this research was undertaken to trace their family history and war story. In total, 123 records were discovered, consisting of 122 men and 1 woman, revealing how the experience of a small parish could represent the scale of loss throughout the country. Two names on the memorial stand out, Ethel Parker, the lone woman commemorated in St. Gregory’s, and Edward Mannock VC, the well known fighter pilot. Ethel Frances Mary Parker, 21, daughter of William Parker of 6, East Street Sturry Road, was killed whilst serving as a waitress with the Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC) in Abbeville. Members of this unit were employed in the large British and Imperial Army depots around the town of Abbeville, which saw over 4 and a half million men pass through during the war. She was lost together with eight female colleagues, during an air raid on the night of 29/30

² Canterbury Cathedral Archives File Ref:CCA U3 105/8/1

³ Canterbury Cathedral Archives File Ref:CCA Dcb-E/F/Canterbury, St. Gregory/10

May, when their shelter received a direct hit. Ethel is buried alongside her comrades at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery in Abbeville, France. One interesting aspect of this tragedy was that 3 women, Forewoman Clerk Ethel Grace Cartledge, Dr. Phoebe Chapple (an Australian volunteer) RAMC attached QMAAC and Assistant Administrator Elizabeth Sophy Cross, received the Military Medal, as a result of their actions during and after the raid. ⁴A legendary air ace of the war, Edward 'Mick' Mannock VC, is also commemorated at St. Gregory's, having spent sometime as a regular worshipper there. He is also commemorated in Canterbury Cathedral and in several towns around the UK where he had previously lived. In a two-year frontline flying career he achieved almost 60 'kills', before being shot down and killed on the 26 July 1918.

Of the remainder at least 15 were baptised as infants in St. Gregory's, and only 3, Edwin Axten, whose parents resided at 27 St. Martin's Road, George Argrave, previously of 36, Sturry Road and Arthur Styles, with parents at 61, Sturry Road, were non-resident. In addition, a Roman Catholic Irishman from Tipperary, Samuel Howson, who enlisted in the British army in Canterbury before 1911, is also commemorated as a former parishioner. Samuel was a sergeant in the 3rd Dragoon Guards (Prince of Wales Own), and lost his life during the battle of Frezenberg, part of the second battle of Ypres, 13 May 1915. The records show that 113 men served in the British Army, with 33 joining the local infantry regiment, the Royal East Kent Regiment, (The Buffs) and 17 serving in the adjacent regiment, the Queen's Own Royal West Kent (QORWK). Of the remainder, 5 served in the Royal Navy and 1 in the Royal Flying Corps. At least 11 men were regulars who had enlisted before the war, and 47 enlisted as volunteers before conscription was introduced in 1916. As far as the location of death is concerned, 104 died in France or Flanders, 5 at sea, 4 in Mesopotamia, 3 in India, 2 in Palestine and 1 in Egypt. These figures illustrate the fact that the war was primarily a military activity, with the point of decision in France and Flanders.

⁴ See *London Gazette* 19 October 1918

The average age at time of death was 27 years, with Charles, known as Fredric, Willey aged 44, the oldest to be killed in February 1915, whilst serving in Hazebrouk, Flanders with the 2nd Battalion The Buffs. The youngest consisted of five 17 year olds: Edward John O'Mahony, killed in France/Flanders 13 October 1914. Edward had enlisted in the 1st Battalion Royal Lancaster Regiment, which was based in Dover prior to the outbreak of war. Lewis Albert Lyons, who was with the 8th Battalion The Buffs, a battalion raised in Canterbury in September 1914, was lost on 19 March 1915. Cyril Arthur Gill, 2nd Battalion The Buffs was one of the final casualties of the second battle of Ypres, dying on 26 May 1915. Frank William Powell, 7th Battalion QORWK, was a casualty of the ongoing battle of the Somme 30 September 1916. The fifth 17 years old was Charles Bertram Maxted, a boy Telegraphist serving on board *HMS Black Prince* at the battle of Jutland. Charles' ship, an armoured cruiser had, during the course of 31 May 1916, become separated from the main British fleet and found itself confronted by a squadron of German dreadnoughts. In the subsequent exchange of fire the heavily outgunned and outnumbered *Black Prince* was sunk in less than 15 minutes, with the loss of all 857 crew.⁵

Two other names on the memorial demonstrate the imperial commitment to Britain in the First World War. Arthur Frederick Styles, previously of 61 Sturry Road, had emigrated to Canada where he enlisted in the Quebec Regiment. Arthur was killed in France 4th April 1918, aged 28, as the British and Imperial army fought for its very existence against the mass offensive of the German Army's 'Kaiserschlacht'. Out of Canada's population of 7.8 million, 425,821 men (only 25,00 being conscripts) served overseas in the war, incurring casualties of about 210,00, including nearly 60,000 killed. George Palmer Argrave, late of 36, Sturry Road had also emigrated before the war, but he went to New Zealand. He enlisted in the Wellington Regiment and lost his life at Gallipoli 8 August 1915, at the age of 29. From a population of only 1.15 million, New Zealand sent 100,000

⁵ See Army Service and Medal records at the National Archives (available on line through 'Forces War Records')

men overseas, of which 30,000 were conscripted. Their casualties amounted to 60,000, of which 18,000 lost their lives.

The poor nature of the parish of St. Gregory is reflected in the fact that over 70 of the deceased came from a household that depended on unskilled, casual and domestic labour, both in the town and the surrounding countryside. Some families suffered more than others. Charles Dobson, 30, of 6, Victoria Row, Northgate, was lost to his wife Betsy and their 4 children, in France/Flanders on 26 June 1917. He served in the 1st Battalion The Buffs. The Birch's of East Street, Sturry Road, lost two sons, William, 30 and Fredrick, 20, on 11th July 1915 and 6th April 1917 respectively. Both were in France with the QORWK. Two other families also lost two sons. Thomas, the eldest son of Thomas and Edith Gibbs of Military Road, was a pre-war regular soldier in the 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards who was killed on 5th November 1914, during the first battle of Ypres. His younger brother, 19-year-old William, of the East Surrey's, finally succumbed to his wounds 15th May 1919. Albert and Mary Powell of Spring Lane, Sturry Road lost their bachelor son Frederick on 14 March 1916, and their married son Bertie on 18 April 1918. Bertie's widow, Rose, was left to grieve at their home in Mayton Cottages, Broadoak. The greatest loss, however, was borne by Alfred and Sarah Lemar, 2, North Holmes Road, who lost 3 sons between the 7 April 1917 and 21 March 1918. Two, 30 year old Frederick and 21 year old David, were lost in France when serving with the London Irish Rifles. Their eldest son, Thomas, aged 33, died on the Northwest frontier in India, a member of the Machine Gun Corps. Together with two surviving younger brothers, they had all worked as gardeners, with their father, before the war.⁶

Conclusion

This research, centred on a minor parish in one corner of Canterbury, albeit with historic military connections, represents the impact of the first world

⁶ Information taken from the 1911 Census (available on line through Ancestry.co.uk) and Army Service and Medal records at the National Archives (available on line through 'Forces War Records')

war upon small communities throughout the length and breadth of the country. The grand scale and scope of the war are also reflected in many of the personal stories mentioned above, and it can be appreciated just how overwhelming the war was for so many families and individuals. A solemn introduction to total war.

'WE WILL REMEMBER THEM'

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April 2015.

Author's note

The research for this project was conducted using local archives, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, the National Archives, interviews with relatives and the 1911 Census. Its findings were presented to a public audience, in St. Gregory's, on 29th November 2014. The author, who can be contacted at martin.watts@canterbury.ac.uk welcomes any amendments and additional information that can be used to supplement this research.