

LIONEL BEAUMAUURICE CLARKE VC

Lionel (Leo) Beaumaurice Clarke VC (1 December 1892 – 19 October 1916) was a Canadian recipient of the Victoria Cross, the highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces.

He was born in Wentworth / Waterdown Ontario Canada on 1st December 1892 to Henry Trevelyan Clarke and Rosetta Caroline Bodily. He was one of six children. He was known as “Nobby” as a child and then later as Leo.

Henry Trevelyan Clarke was the son of Beaumaurice Stracey Clarke who from 1883 to 1897 had been rector of Laindon-cum-Basildon. My interest in this story is threefold, not only because Leo, Beaumaurice’s grandson won the V.C., he was involved in the Battle of Flers-Courcellette that my grandfather Frederick Pitts was injured in and that my Great-Great Grandfather Nathan Beardwell moved with Revd. Beaumaurice from Boxted, Essex as his Groom and Gardener.



Henry (born Boxted, Essex in 1868) had moved to Canada when he was 18 in 1887 but just over a year after Leo was born the family moved back to Billericay where Henry started up a vegetable farm business. Leo spent his early years in and around the Billericay, Laindon area with the family attending St Nicholas Church, Laindon. It would appear that Leo moved back to Winnipeg Canada in 1903, a year before the rest of the family.

By the time, the First World War commenced Leo was working as a Surveyor for the Canadian National Railway in the Canadian North. He returned to Winnipeg and enlisted in the 27th Battalion and after arriving in England in 1915 he transferred to the 2nd (Eastern Ontario Regiment) Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force to be with his brother Charles Edward Clarke (Born 1894 in Chelmsford Essex).

On 9th September 1916, the prelude to the main assault of the Battle of Flers-Courcelette scheduled for the 15th, three Companies of Clarke’s battalion, Clarke at the time was Acting Corporal, were assigned to take a section to clear the enemy from a 50 yards long salient between the Canadian position at Mouquet Farm and Courcellette to the north. This was to enable the Company Sergeant to build a fortified dug out that would secure the Canadian position once the salient was over run.

When his section reached the trench, it was so heavily defended that they had to battle their way through with hand grenades, bayonets and their rifles as clubs. Clarke was the only man left standing; the rest had either been killed or wounded.

At that time, about 20 Germans, including two officers, counter-attacked. Clarke advanced, emptying his revolver into their ranks. He then picked up two enemy rifles and fired those too. One of the officers attacked with a bayonet, wounding Clarke in the leg, but Clarke shot him dead. The Germans retreated, but Clarke pursued, shooting four more and capturing a fifth. In all, Clarke killed 19 of the enemy, capturing one.

In a 1916 letter to his own uncle Arthur in England, Leo retold the event for which he was posthumously honoured: “You’ll be glad to hear that Charlie, and I were both recommended – Charlie for the (Distinguished Conduct Medal) again and I for the (Victoria Cross). I don’t know whether I can tell you all about it or not, but I killed 18 Germans, including two officers with my revolver alone. And inflicted many casualties on the enemy with bombs, also, put one machine gun out of action and all I got was a slight bayonet wound in my leg caused by one of the officers who I killed before he got me. I also got a sore back caused by the explosion of a German bomb – main thing is, I’m still here and very much alive.”

This was followed by with an extract from The London Gazette,” No. 29802, dated October 26, 1916, records the following:

For most conspicuous bravery. He was detailed with his section of bombers to clear the continuation of a newly-captured trench and cover the construction of a “block.” After most of his party had become casualties, he was building a block when about twenty of the enemy with two officers counter-attacked. He boldly advanced against them, emptied his revolver into them and afterwards two enemy rifles which he picked up in the trench. One of the officers then attacked him with the bayonet, wounding him in the leg, but he shot him dead. The enemy then ran away, pursued by Acting Corporal Clarke, who shot four more and captured a fifth.

Clarke had to be ordered to leave the battle to have his wounds cared for, but he was soon back in the thick of it and on 11th October while moving forward with his battalion to secure a newly capture Regina Trench a shell fell behind him as he was crouching in a hole and the back of the trench caved in, burying him. His brother Charles dug him out, but he was paralysed with a crushed back and injured spine. He was taken to No 1 General Hospital but died on the 19th.

Leo was appointed acting Sergeant and admitted to hospital on 18th September, re-joining his unit on 24th September. He was in the newly captured Regina Trench, between Pys and Courcellette, on 18th October 1916, which was still under heavy artillery fire. A shell exploded nearby, and he was buried, but his brother Charles was close by and rushed to dig him out. Charles' shovel struck Leo's helmet, and he then scooped the earth out with his hands. Leo was seriously injured, as the explosion had crushed his back, and he was paralysed from the waist down. The enemy barrage forced him to not be moved until evening. He was taken to No 22 Ambulance Train at 8pm and moved to No 1 General Hospital at Etretat, north of Le Havre, arriving at 11pm. Leo died at 11am on 19th October. He was buried in Etretat Churchyard, Seine-Maritime, near Le Havre, France.

He had written to his parents just before his death saying, 'I don't care so much for the V.C. as getting home for a couple of months.' He is buried in Etretat Churchyard, 16 miles north of Le Havre. In the spring of 1917 he was posthumously awarded the V.C., it was presented to his father in front of 30,000 Canadians by the Duke of Devonshire Governor General of Canada.

A plaque in his honour has been erected by the Ontario Heritage Foundation at the Royal Canadian Legion branch in Waterdown, also a bronze plaque on a lamp post in Valour Road, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

In my research I have read many courageous and brave exploits, but Clarke's heroism tops the list. Though the 1911 and 1916 Canadian censuses records show that Leo was born in Canada under the heading "racial and tribal" it states English. So although I understand that Canadians see him as one of their V.C. Heroes, I believe, Laidon/Billericay also has a great claim to one of our V.C. Heroes.



I only wish I had found this story when I was researching and writing the book 'Laidon in the Great War'



Decoration and Medals of Leo Clarke VC, on display at the Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg, Manitoba, October 19, 2014.



His brothers and sister:

Lionel Beaumaurice CLARKE (01 October 1892 Ontario Canada – 19 October 1916
 Charles Edward CLARKE (03 December 1894 Chelmsford Essex – 1985 Nottingham)
 Harry Vincent CLARKE (04 April 1894 Wentworth Ontario Canada –
 Muriel Rosamond CLARKE (24 October 1898 Chelmsford – 17 October 1991 Winnipeg Manitoba)
 Jack Trevelyan CLARKE (26 July 1901 – Chelmsford –
 Arthur Roy CLARKE (20 May 1907 Winnipeg Manitoba – 16 March 1990)

The next part of the story relates to the family as a whole and in particular their secular links to the peerage of the realm.

Beaumaris Stracey CLARKE (Paternal Grandfather of Leo (Lionel) Clarke.
 18 October 1813 Trompington Cambridgeshire – 13 September 1897 Hertfordshire.
 Vicar of Boxted before coming to St. Nicholas.
 He married Rosetta Caroline BODILY, and they had 19 children.

His father:

Edward Daniel CLARKE (Paternal Great Grandfather of Leo (Lionel) Clarke.
 The Reverend Edward Daniel Clarke was born on 05 June 1769 at The Vicarage Willingdon Sussex and died
 On 09 March 1822 at 25 Pall Mall London.

25 Pall Mall.

Andrew Millar was probably the publisher of that name, whose productions included Johnson's Dictionary and the Histories of Robertson and Hume; he died in 1768. In 1826 the house was occupied by John Gibson Lockhart, whose father-in-law, Sir Walter Scott, stayed there in the autumn of 1826. In the 1830's the house was occupied by Sir John Macdonald, Adjutant General at the Horse Guards.
 He married Angelica RUSH, and they had six children.

His father:

Edward Clarke (Second Great Grandfather of Leo (Lionel) Clarke.
 Born 16 March 1730 Buxted Sussex and 30 November 1786 Buxted Sussex.
 He married Ann Greenfield (1737-1802) on 23 May 1763, and they had at least four children.

His Father:

William Clarke (Born 1696 Haughmon Abbey Shropshire and died 21 October 1771 St. Katherine's Collegiate London.

He married Ann WOOTTON on 29 September 1724 in Milton Keynes Buckinghamshire.

He is chronicled as "A learned divine and antiquary who was educated at Shrewsbury School then to St. John's College Cambridge where he became Fellow in 1716/1717.

A Bachelor of Arts (BA) in 1715 and MA in 1719.

He was chosen as Chaplain to Dr. Adam Ottley Bishop of St. David's. Afterwards he was domestic Chaplain to Thomas Holles Duke of Newcastle but was presented by Archbishop Wake in the Rectory of Buxted Sussex, partly on account of merit and partly from recommendation of the learned Dr. William Wootton, whose daughter he married.

In 1738 made prebendary and residentiary of Hova Villa in the Cathedral Church of Chichester.

His father:

Richard Clarke (Born 14 June 1668 Upton Magna Shropshire – Died 17 August 1723 Upton Magna Shropshire.

He married Martha Grosvenor (1668-1729) about 1695 Upton Magna Shropshire.

Other lines linking to the family:

Sir John Marsham (23 August 1602 London – 25 May 1685 Bushey Hall Hertfordshire)

MP for Rochester 1660 and was Knighted.

Created a Baronet in 1668.

William FitzAlan (1105–1160) was a nobleman of Breton ancestry. He was a major landowner, a Marcher lord with large holdings in Shropshire, where he was the Lord of Oswestry, as well as in Norfolk and Sussex. He took the side of Empress Matilda during the Anarchy and underwent considerable hardship in the Angevin cause before regaining his lands and former status. William's younger brother, Walter FitzAlan (d. 1177), became ancestor of the royal House of Stuart.

William was born around 1105. He was the eldest son and heir of Alan Fitz Flaad, a Breton noble whose family were closely associated with the sacred environs of Dol-de-Bretagne, close to the border with Normandy and a short distance south-west of the great abbey of Mont Saint-Michel. Alan was a close ally of Henry I of England (1100-1135), who was determined to insert reliable supporters into strategically key areas after the disloyalty of Robert of Bellême, 3rd Earl of Shrewsbury, who had a strong support network in the Marches. Alan received extensive fiefs in Shropshire and Norfolk from around the beginning of Henry's reign and more as he proved his worth. Much of the Shropshire land was taken from the holdings of Rainald de Bailleul, ancestor of the House of Balliol, as was land around Pepperering, near Arundel in Sussex.

William's mother was **Avelina de Hesdin**. Her father was Ernulf de Hesdin (also transcribed as Arnulf), a crusader baron from Hesdin in Artois, which was a fief of the County of Flanders and only loosely attached to France. Ernulf built up large holdings in Staffordshire and Gloucestershire. After his death in the First Crusade, Avelina's brother, also called Ernulf, inherited his lands and titles.

William succeeded his father around 1114, probably still aged under 10. He was appointed the High Sheriff of Shropshire by Adeliza of Louvain, the second wife of Henry I. His first notable appearance is as a witness to King Stephen's charter to Shrewsbury Abbey in 1136.

As Sheriff of the county, William was also castellan of Shrewsbury Castle. In 1138, he joined in the revolt against Stephen and garrisoned the castle against the king. After resisting the attacks of the royal army for a month, he fled with his family in August 1138, leaving the castle to be defended by his uncle, Ernulf de Hesdin. When the town fell, Stephen acted in anger, hanging Ernulf and 93 others immediately, frightening the local people and magnates into transferring their allegiance to him.

William was deprived of his lands and titles and spent the next fifteen years in exile, until the accession of Henry II to power in place of Stephen in 1153-4. He was a close supporter of the Angevin cause, accompanying the Empress or her son on numerous occasions. He was present with Empress Matilda at Oxford in the summer of 1141, and shortly after at the siege of Winchester Castle. He remained in attendance on her at Devizes, witnessing the charter addressed to himself by which she grants Aston to Shrewsbury Abbey. In June 1153 he was present with Henry Fitz Empress, then Duke of Normandy, at Leicester.

It was during this period that his younger brother, Walter, used the family's royal connections to make a new career in Scotland under David I of Scotland, an uncle of the Empress.

William's active support did not end with Henry's accession to the throne. In July 1155, when the king marched against Hugh de Mortimer, a turbulent Marcher lord who had been a key supporter of Stephen, and recaptured the castles at Shrewsbury and Bridgnorth, William FitzAlan was the chief beneficiary. At Bridgnorth 'the king restored his lands' and William there received the feudal homage of his tenants. Thus he regained his paternal fief. He was also restored as High Sheriff of Shropshire in 1155, holding the post until his death in 1160.

It was probably between 1130 and 1138 that FitzAlan made the first recorded grant to Haughmond Abbey: a fishery at Preston Boats on the River Severn, near Shrewsbury. It is possible that there was a hermitage or a small religious community at Haughmond even in his father's time, and a small church from this earlier period has been revealed by excavations on the site, so it is not clear that William was the founder of the abbey. However, it was he who set it on a secure financial basis, with a series of important land grants in Shropshire and Sussex, which were reciprocated by other magnates in the region. Haughmond received lands from the Empress, confirmed by Stephen and Henry II.

William continued to make benefactions to it when he returned from exile, including the wealthy portionary church of Wroxeter, declaring his intention to increase the number of priests there too. He also made grants to nearby Lilleshall Abbey, another Augustinian house. Though not the founder of Wombridge Priory, a smaller Augustinian house, he sanctioned its foundation by the Hadley family, his vassals. It was, however, Haughmond that became the FitzAlan shrine, with all heads of the family after William buried there for a century and a half.

William died around Easter 1160. He was buried at Shrewsbury Abbey, according to Eyton, noted in the Haughmond Abbey history ("After William FitzAlan (I), who left his body for burial in Shrewsbury Abbey"). William's first wife was **Christiana**. She was the mother of his heir and other children.

- William's eldest son and heir was also called William FitzAlan.
- Christiana, their daughter married Hugh Pantulf, 4th Baron of Wem, a later High Sheriff of Shropshire.

His wife Christiana died before William regained his ancestral estates in 1155. Henry II therefore gave him the hand of Isabel de Say. She was the sole heiress of Helias de Say, who held the lordship of Clun and was an early benefactor of Haughmond Abbey. Clun was to pass to the Fitzalans on the death of Helias, but he outlived William, so it passed to his son, the second William. Isabel brought prestige as well as land. She was the niece of Robert, 1st Earl of Gloucester, an illegitimate son of Henry I, and thus cousin to William Fitz Robert, 2nd Earl of Gloucester, who was a principal supporter of the Empress.

The FitzAlans remained important Marcher lords and magnates in central England for several centuries. A strategic marriage with their Sussex neighbours, the d'Aubigny family, brought the FitzAlans the rich and important Earldom of Arundel. This they held from 1243 until 1580. It was as earls of Arundel that William FitzAlans descendants made their most important mark on the history of England.

In literature The taking of Shrewsbury in 1138 by King Stephen, including the escape of William FitzAlan and the hanging of the supporters who did not escape, was the historical background for the novel *One Corpse Too Many* by Ellis Peters. Agents of FitzAlan are characters in a few of the later novels in *The Cadfael Chronicles*.

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