

TALBOT HOUSE

Talbot House was built by the wealthy Hop traders of the Lebbe family in the 18th Century. Maurice Coevoet, a local brewer, bought the house in 1911. In 1915, after the house was struck by a German shell, he decided to leave for a safer place with his family. Soon thereafter, the house was rented to the 6th division of the British army. It was here that Chaplain Philip "Tubby" Clayton opened a soldier's club as an alternative for the often-controversial nightlife in the rest of the city.

At first the club was called "Church House," but Colonel Reginald May proposed - despite of Head Army Chaplain Neville Talbot's protest - to call it "Talbot House" after Gilbert Talbot, Neville's brother who died on 30th July 1915. Gilbert Talbot became the symbol of a "Golden Generation" of young men who sacrificed their lives in the war.

Tubby was in charge of the clubhouse and wanted to make sure that there was a cosy and homely atmosphere for all, regardless of rank and status. The sign on the door of Tubby's office, the chaplains room, still reads:

"All rank abandon ye who enter here."

This sentence became one of the pillars of the house. Everyone who entered did so as a member of the human race and not as a soldier or officer. Orders were also prohibited in the house. Tubby insisted that Talbot House had to be a place where people could forget about the war for just a moment. The sign next to the front door saying: "To pessimists, way out!" speaks volumes in this respect. The house is full of similar signs that, by making something clear in a humorous way, subtly takes away the need for orders. Keeping a soldiers club without order and discipline might seem impossible, but by doing this Tubby succeeded none the less.

During the Great War, Poperinghe was part of unoccupied Belgium. Away from the turmoil of battle in the Ypres Salient, the town became the nerve centre of the British sector. In the heart of this bustling town, the Army chaplains Neville Talbot and Philip "Tubby" Clayton opened a club. From December 1915 onwards, and for more than three years, the House provided rest and recreation to all soldiers.

The Reverend Philip Thomas Byard Clayton CH MC FSA (known as "Tubby Clayton") (12 December 1885 – 16 December 1972) was an Anglican clergyman and the founder of Toc H.

Philip Clayton was born in Maryborough, Queensland, Australia, to English parents who brought him back to England when he was two years old. Through both his father Reginald Byard Buchanan Clayton (1845–1927) and his mother Isabel Clayton, née Byard Sheppard (1848–1919), he is descended from George Sheppard, a clothier in Frome. He was educated at St. Paul's School in London and at Exeter College, Oxford, where he obtained a First in Theology.

After ordination as a priest of the Church of England, Clayton served as curate under Cyril Forster Garbett at St Mary's Church, Portsea, from 1910 to 1915. He then became an army chaplain in France and Flanders where, in 1915, he and another chaplain the Rev. Neville Talbot opened "Talbot House", a rest house for soldiers at Poperinge in Flanders. It became known as Toc H, this being signal terminology for "T H" or "Talbot House". It closed temporarily in 1918 when the German front had drawn too close.

The spirit of friendship fostered at Toc H across social and denominational boundaries inspired Clayton, the Rev. Dick Sheppard, and Alexander Paterson to set out



in 1920 what became known as the Four points of the Toc H compass:

Friendship ("To love widely")

Service ("To build bravely")

Fair-mindedness ("To think fairly")

The Kingdom of God ("To witness humbly")

This followed the foundation of a new Toc H House in Kensington in 1919, followed by others in London, Manchester, and Southampton. The Toc H movement continued to grow in numbers and established, also, a women's league. In 1930, Clayton led Toc H into creative support of the British Empire Leprosy Relief Association.

From 1922 to 1962, Clayton was Vicar of All Hallows-by-the-Tower in the City of London. While working in the area, he helped to devise the Tower Hill Improvement Scheme (with Lord Wakefield of Hythe), which led to the establishment of Tower Beach, an urban beach next to the Tower of London that existed from 1934 to 1971. His work also brought him into contact with the East End of London and its frequently harsh and impoverished conditions.



"In all my experience I have never known a place so vital to morale as Talbot House."
General Sir Herbert Plumer - 1928



Two aspects of his work converged in 1940 when All Hallows was devastated by bombing during the Blitz and Clayton played a primary role in fundraising for its restoration, joining this to a general drive for raising money for the similarly devastated East End. In 1948, Clayton and John G. Winant (the latter, at that time, the American Ambassador to the United Kingdom) set up the Winant Clayton Volunteer Association to bring young Americans to London for volunteer work.

In 1959, the association helped to send British volunteers to America to do similar work, setting up a mutual exchange scheme that has continued to this day.

While remaining based at All Hallows, Clayton travelled widely in Britain and throughout the British Empire promoting Toc H and encouraging the foundation of new branches. He was also the chaplain to the British Petroleum Company - a duty which overlapped with his chaplaincy to the Anglo-Saxon tanker fleet during World War 2 (a position which he was particularly proud of).

Clayton died on 16 December 1972. He is honoured in The Museum of Army Chaplaincy and in the "Talbot House" in Poperinghe.



Ken Porter hosting students from Geschwister Schol Gymnasium in Aachen Germany who joined our visit along with Basildon Students to the centenary celebrations of remembrance of the First World War battlefields and cemeteries in February 2018 as part of our "Forget Never" project.

Basildon Borough Heritage Society
November 2021 – updated December 2024.
Meanwhile just around the corner

'SHOT AT DAWN'

Between 1914 and 1920, more than 3,000 British soldiers were sentenced to death by courts martial for desertion, cowardice, striking an officer, disobedience, falling asleep on duty or casting away arms. That said, only 11 per cent (306) of the sentences were carried out. Medical evidence apparently showing that many were suffering from shell-shock was submitted to the courts, but not recognized & misinterpreted. Most hearings lasted no more than 20 minutes.

Transcripts made public 75 years after the events suggest that some of the men were underage. Others appeared to have wandered away from the battlefield in states of extreme distress and confusion, yet they were charged with desertion. When the suppressed documents relating to these courts martial were released, they showed that these men were demonstrably shell-shocked." Contrary to popular belief, they were not all denied natural justice....'Rough justice' it may have been, but justice, nevertheless. They were given access to legal representation, but not the right of appeal, as the Field Marshal's decision was 'absolute'.

Because 'Shell- Shock was not recognized & properly understood back then, most of them were not given proper medical examinations, and so their conditions were 'over-looked'.

The function of the 'threat of executions' was to a intimidate and frighten soldiers in the battlefield....'Risk the possibility of a bullet in battle or certain death if one didn't do their duty.

The standard soldier in the trenches would have been suffering from, chronic insomnia and anxiety attacks. He would be wet and cold, in wind-chill factors that dragged temperatures as low as minus -18. It was enough to drive anyone crazy.

To say that 'all these men who were shot were bad and deserved their punishment', is to ignore all these factors. Most just couldn't take any more. By 1930, Parliament had introduced legislation banning the death sentence for the offences for which the 306 were shot. None would be shot today. Remarkably, most of those shot in the 1914-18 war were 'volunteer soldiers' rather than conscripts and, perhaps unsurprisingly considering what was happening in their homeland, Irish soldiers were shot with proportionately more frequency than those of other regiments.

Among other principles of justice, the presumption of innocence was paid no more than lip service by many British courts martial. Some believe that the British Army was far more likely to shoot a working-class man than an officer, and broadly speaking, this was true. They were finally 'pardoned' in August 2006 under section 359 of the British Army Act.

In it is shown a list of the 'original offences' that soldiers could be tried and executed for :-

359 - Pardons for servicemen executed for disciplinary offences: recognition as victims of First World War

(1) This section applies in relation to any person who was executed for a relevant offence committed during the period beginning with 4 August 1914 and ending with 11 November 1918.

(2) Each such person is to be taken to be pardoned under this section in respect of the relevant offence (or relevant offences) for which he was executed.

(3) In this section "relevant offence" means any of the following:--

(a) an offence under any of the following provisions of the Army Act 1881 (c. 58)--

(i) Section 4(2) (casting away arms etc);

(ii) Section 4(7) (cowardice);

(iii) Section 6(1)(b) (leaving post etc without orders);

(iv) Section 6(1)(k) (sentinel sleeping etc on post or leaving post);

(v) Section 7 (mutiny and sedition);

(vi) Section 8(1) (striking etc superior officer);

(vii) Section 9(1) (disobedience in defiance of authority);

(viii) Section 12(1) (desertion or attempt etc to desert);

(b) an offence under any of the following provisions of the Indian Army Act 1911 (Indian Act, No 8 of 1911).

(i) Section 25(b) (casting away arms, cowardice, etc);

(ii) Section 25(g) (sentry sleeping on post or quitting post);

(iii) Section 25(i) (quitting guard etc);

(iv) Section 27 (mutiny, disobedience, etc);

(v) Section 29 (desertion or attempt to desert).

(4) This section does not:

(a) affect any conviction or sentence;

(b) give rise to any right, entitlement or liability; or

(c) affect the prerogative of mercy.

(5) Any reference in this section to a provision of the Army Act 1881 (c. 58) includes a reference to that provision as applied by any enactment, wherever enacted.

EXECUTION - 'Shot at Dawn'



The "Execution Stake" at Poperinghe.

The firing squad was composed of at least six soldiers, but usually twelve.

One of their rifles was customarily loaded with a blank round and no soldier could be sure he had fired a fatal shot.

The offender was tied to a stake and a medical officer would step forward and pin a piece of white cloth over the man's heart, the priest would then say a prayer. After they had both withdrawn, the order was given to fire. Immediately the shots had been fired the medical officer would examine the man, if he were still alive, the officer in charge would have to finish him off with a revolver.

Many of these men proved they were brave by refusing to be blindfolded for their executions.

They stared down the barrels of the guns which were about to kill them.

To me, that's not cowardice. That's courage.

SOME CASE FILES

One 19-year-old, Pte George Roe of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, was executed for desertion, even though one witness told his court martial: "[Roe] came up to me and asked if I was a policeman. He told me that he had lost his way and had been wandering about for two days."

Another 19-year-old, Pte James Archibald of the 17th Royal Scots, told his comrades he "felt queer" while

en route to the trenches at 6.30pm on 14 May 1916. At 3pm the next day, he was found asleep in a barn. He was shot by firing squad three weeks later.

Pte Joseph Byers was under-age when he enlisted in 1914. By January 1915, the war had ground the young man down and he went absent without leave. After being caught, he admitted attempting to desert in the naive belief that his honesty and contrition would earn him a prison sentence. He was shot at dawn two weeks later.

Sgt Joe Stones stood at just 5ft 2ins tall, but he was promoted over the heads of stronger men because of his acknowledged bravery and leadership qualities. Time and again he led barbed-wire parties out into No Man's Land, risking his life while caring for the men in his charge. But he was executed for "casting away his arms" in one of the most bizarre tragedies of the war.

Stones, 25, of the 19th Durham Light Infantry, had been in the trenches of northern France for a year when, one cold morning in January 1917, he went on patrol with his commanding officer.

The men were ambushed by Germans and the officer was killed, but Stones couldn't return fire because he had not removed a protective cover from the breach of his rifle.

The young sergeant turned and ran but had the presence of mind to wedge his rifle across a narrow trench to slow the Germans. He reached his comrades in the rear, shouting: "The Hun are upon us," and gave them enough time to escape.

However, he was charged with casting away his arms and two corporals, John McDonald and Peter Goggins, were charged with quitting their posts as they made their escape.

At Stones's court martial, one officer, Lt J. Rider, wrote: "I have personally been out with him in No Man's Land and always found him keen and bold. In the trenches, he never showed the least sign of funk. ...I have had countless opportunities of seeing him under bad circumstances. I can safely say that he was the last man I would have thought capable of any cowardly action."

But Stones, along with the corporals, was executed anyway. Like many families whose sons were shot at dawn, the Stones's never spoke of him again.

His great nephew, Tom Stones, 56, found out about him only last year. "My grandfather was a lay preacher, and he kept a bible with details of family members, the war and battles written inside - but there was no mention of my great uncle Joe," he said. "What they did to him makes me very angry. They shot him like a rat. It's clear that the poor bugger was no coward."

Private Farr, a bright young man from north Kensington, London, enlisted in the regular Army in 1908 at the age of 17. He served four years and then went on the reserve list.

In 1914, he was enrolled in the 2nd Battalion, West Yorkshire Regt and by November found himself flung into battle to hold back the German assault on France. The British Expeditionary Force stemmed the tide, entrenched itself and was, by Christmas 1914, starting to contemplate attack. Pte Farr's comrades formed part of 23rd Brigade, 8th Division, 1st Army. They stood in the forefront of the Battle of Neuve Chappelle, the BEF's first offensive, which began on March 10, 1916. In a barrage lasting a mere 35 minutes, British artillery fired more ammunition than during the entire four years of the Boer War.

A contemporary diary recorded what the battlefield was like: "The deluge shattered trenches like sandcastles and so close were the Germans to our lines that frightful fragments of once living men came back on us amid a welter of earth, dust and green fumes." In three days of fighting, four British divisions lost 11,500 men, killed, missing or wounded, a quarter of their starting strength, for almost no return.

Pte Farr was one of hundreds whose mental world was severely undermined by the impact of all those guns and the sheer terror of the new theatre of war. But there was more to come.

His court martial records show that he first went off sick with "shell shock" on May 9, 1915, immediately after the Battle of Aubers Ridge, in which his battalion also took part, although there is no detailed account of their experience there.

Aubers Ridge cost another 11,000 men, of which Pte Farr's 8th Division contributed the largest share, 4,852. He had been in hospital for five months recovering from shell shock before they sent him back to the trenches. Until the first day of the Somme, Aubers Ridge was the British Army's tidemark of military catastrophe.

Even Sir Douglas, later Earl, Haig, not noted for his pessimism about losses, recorded in his diary that it had been a shocking day. Today, we struggle to imagine the hardships of a few months spent in Iraq or Afghanistan, but 90 years ago the privations of trench warfare and the constant threat of sudden death from high explosives or a sniper's bullet dogged the lives of infantrymen for year after year.

Then there was the "Big Push".

The scale and coldness of human sacrifice involved in a First World War trench assault outranks anything we can conceive in modern warfare, and for two years, the 26-year-old married man from Kensington, west London, had been through some of the worst action of the war before he cracked up and, four months after sending him back into the fray, he cracked up again.

Pte. Farr was not available for duty until the following October, but was still in the area of the Somme on that awful July 1, 1916. In September of the same year, he finally lost his nerve irretrievably. The transcript of his court martial at Ville-sur-Ancre records that Farr failed to report for duty on 17 September.

He fell out without permission, intending to find an officer to report sick to.

However, his pleas fell on deaf ears, and he was dragged, kicking and screaming, towards the front before being charged with cowardice.

He told the court martial: "I returned to the 1st Line Transport hoping to report sick to some medical officer there. On the sergeant major's return I reported to him and said I was sick, and I could not stand it. Barracked by the regimental sergeant-major who said: "You are a fucking coward, and you will go to the trenches. I give fuck all for my life and I give fuck all for yours and I'll get you fucking well shot," he was unable to explain why he could not bring himself to return to the fighting front from the support lines.

Pte Farr was arrested, kept under close guard and within two weeks was fighting for his life before a hurriedly assembled tribunal of three officers - a lieutenant-colonel, a captain and a lieutenant.

The only defence he could raise was whatever his jumbled mind could conjure up. He had no legal representation.

As his family saw it, although the vicious battles of the First World War did not physically scar Pte Farr, they certainly scared him, and curt military justice did not permit men merely to be afraid.

While he was in the hospital suffering from shell shock, a nurse wrote a letter home for him to his wife, Gertrude, because his hands were shaking too much to hold a pen. It was the last she heard from him.

He was shot at dawn on 18 October.

The chaplain who witnessed his dawn execution said the 26-year-old refused to wear a blindfold and went to his death with his dignity wholly intact. Gertrude kept her husband's fate a secret for more than 70 years. She was 99 when the papers relating to his case were released and her granddaughter, Janet Booth, was able to explain that he had not been a coward, but was simply a sick young man unable to take any more killing. "After all those years not mentioning him, she spent the last days of her life talking about Harry Farr," said Mrs Booth. "It meant an awful lot to her to have the stigma removed.

Sgt Peter Goggins - Despite following the orders to retreat of an NCO who shouted, "Run for your lives, the Huns are on top of you!", Sgt Peter Goggins was shot for deserting his post. The 22-year-old soldier, who had married six months before his death in January 1917, was commanding a unit of six soldiers in the front line, when a sergeant came running back from a reconnaissance mission yelling at them to withdraw.

Sgt Goggins, of 19 Battalion, Durham Light Infantry, scrambled out of a dugout and fell back to a reserve trench 20 yards away - but it turned out to be a false alarm. Even though the sergeant confirmed that he had given the orders to retreat, Goggins was court martialled on Christmas Eve and executed a week later. His 19-year-old wife Margaret disappeared when she heard the news, and his mother had a nervous breakdown.

Pte Billy Nelson- Only days after being wounded in the murderous fighting at the Battle of Loos, Billy Nelson was facing the firing squad. The soldier had failed to "go over the top" because he was having his first meal for days, with permission, in another part of the battlefield. After a court martial lasting only five minutes, Pte Nelson, who was not represented, was found guilty.

The 19-year-old soldier told the hearing: "I have had a lot of trouble at home and my nerves are badly upset. My father is a prisoner in Germany and is losing his eyesight there through bad treatment. "My mother died while I was still in England, leaving my sister aged 13 and my brother aged 10. I am the only one left. I had no intention of deserting." He was shot as an example to others at dawn on Aug 11, 1916.

Sub Lt Edwin Dyett might have unwittingly been the victim of senior officers looking for a scapegoat from their own ranks after disquiet among soldiers that executions for cowardice and desertion were confined to the ranks. The son of a Merchant Navy captain, Edwin Dyett, from Cardiff, was a Royal Navy Reserve officer inexperienced in combat and even confessed his uncertainty of leadership. But after becoming lost for 24 hours and falling out with a senior officer Sub Lt Dyett was court martialled for deserting for two days between Nov 14 and 15, 1916 and a second count that he was guilty of cowardice.

On Boxing Day 1916, with barely half an hour to prepare his defence, he formally faced his accusers. He was shot on Jan 4 1917 without being given any chance to appeal.

Pte Abraham Bevistein was one of 250,000 British soldiers who gave a false age to join up and enlisted into the 11Bn the Middlesex Regiment aged 16. But after only a month in the front line the teenager suffered shell shock after a grenade exploded next to him and he went to the rear to seek help.

After being told by a medical officer that he was fit to return to fighting, Pte Bevestein, a Jew from the East End of London, wandered off and was arrested for desertion. In a letter to his mother, he wrote: "We were in the trenches, and I was ill, so I went out and they took me to prison, and I am in a bit of trouble now and won't get any money for a long time."

The family had not known that the teenager had joined up until he came home in uniform. A few months later they received a telegram telling them that Pte Bevestein had been sentenced to death for desertion and shot on March 20, 1916.

Worcestershire Regiment men

During the First World War there were 8 soldiers of the Worcestershire Regiment that were shot by firing squad. On the 26th of July 1915 five men of the 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment were executed on the ramparts of Ypres in what became the largest single execution by the British during the war. They were originally buried in the Ramparts Cemetery; they were later transferred to other cemeteries in the area.

Details of all Worcestershire Regiment men is shown below:

Private Oliver W. Hodgetts (8662) 1st Battalion Worcestershire Regiment - He was serving with the 1st Battalion when they arrived in Western Front on the 8th of November 1914 fresh from Egypt.

Some five days later the Battalion took up a defensive position in trenches facing Neuve Chapelle and came under heavy bombardment from the enemy during which 7 men were killed and 25 wounded.

During the next 3 days (16th to 19th November 1914) a further 13 men were killed and 27 wounded.

During this period Private Hodgetts went missing but on this occasion no action was taken against him.

On the 19th of November 1914, the men of the 1st Battalion exhausted climbed out of the trenches frozen and in heavy snow fall made their way back to billets at La Gorgue, six miles away. Next day one man in four suffered with frost-bitten hands or feet and in many cases feet or toes had to be amputated.

On the 9th May 1915 just prior to the attack on Festubert, Hodgetts went missing yet again just as the Battalion prepared to go into action. On the 12th May he reported to a nearby unit and claimed he had sprained his ankle, but when he was examined by the medical officer no injury was discovered.

On the 22nd of May 1915 he was brought to trial where he was undefended. Hodgetts conduct sheet showed that he had been sentenced to 90 days field punishment on the 1st of March 1915.

His commanding officer Major George W. St. G. Grogan at the trial described Hodgetts as a worthless fighting soldier who was only intent on saving his own skin. At his court martial Private Hodgetts was found guilty of cowardice.

Field Marshal Sir John French confirmed the sentence, and Private Hodgetts was shot by firing squad on the 4th of June 1915. He was only 20 years of age. He is buried at Royal Irish Rifles Graveyard, Laventie, Pas de Calais, France (Grave number IV.D.2).

Corporal Frederick Ives (12295) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment - Corporal Ives had only been in France just over a month when on the 15th of September 1914 he went absent without permission during the fighting on the Marne. He was already on remand for an earlier offence. Ives managed to avoid capture for 9 months. He was eventually arrested on the 24th of June 1915 by an officer of the Army Veterinary Corps. At the time he was wearing civilian clothes. Ives court martial took place on the 7th of July 1915, and in his defence he stated that he had suffered memory loss due to shell fire.

Although he was found guilty of desertion and sentenced to death, the members of the court martial recommended mercy on the grounds that he might be telling the truth.

However, his sentence of death was confirmed by the Field Marshal, and he was shot by firing squad with 4 other deserters from the 3rd Battalion on the ramparts of Ypres on the 26th of July 1915.

He was 30 years of age. He was originally buried at the Ramparts Cemetery but was later transferred to the Perth Cemetery (China Wall), Belgium which is 3 Km east of Ypres town centre (Grave number I.G.41). For some strange reason, the Commonwealths War Graves Commission shows the date of death incorrectly as the 22nd of July 1915. This error may have been made as he was tried and sentenced week before the other men of the 3rd Battalion who were executed the same day.

Private Ernest Fellows (9722) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment - Private Fellows of Birmingham was a married man with children. At the start of the First World War Ernest Fellows as an ex-Worcestershire Regiment soldier was on the Reserve List and as such was called up for service in

September 1914. He re-joined his Regiment on the 29th of September 1914. Fellows was sent to France as part of reinforcements for the 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment early in 1915.

Private Fellows was a well-respected soldier in the Battalion, and he had past experience. Early in June 1915 the 3rd Battalion was holding a line of trenches from the Menin Road on the left to Sanctuary Wood on the right. After 4 days of fighting, on the 9th of June 1915 the 3rd Battalion was relieved by the 2nd Royal Irish Rifles. The 3rd Battalion then moved out of the line to Busseboom just east of Poperinghe where they were billeted in bivouac and rested until the 15th of June 1915. It was during this rest period that Private Fellows went missing without permission. Following an evening roll call it was discovered that he had gone absent. The Battalion had just received orders that it was to attack enemy trenches at Bellewaerde the following day. Fellows was apprehended and was tried at a court martial on the 14th of July 1915. At his trial he offered no evidence in his defence and was found guilty of desertion and sentenced to death. Fellows was shot by firing squad with four other deserters from the 3rd Battalion on the ramparts of Ypres on the 26th of July 1915. He was 29 years of age.

He was originally buried at the Ramparts Cemetery but was later transferred to the Perth Cemetery (China Wall), Belgium which is 3 Km east of Ypres town centre (Grave number V.K.13).

Private John Robinson (7377) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment - Private Robinson of Nechells, Birmingham was a regular soldier with 13 years previous service and had been with the 3rd Battalion since Mons in August 1914. On the 27th of June 1915, Private Robinson and Private Alfred Thompson absconded together after they were told that they were to be on night duty in trenches near Hooze. The 3rd Battalion had been in action in this area since 16th June. On the 5th of July 1915 both Private Robinson and Private Thompson were arrested at Abancourt while they were sitting on a train bound for Rouen. At their court martial in a statement it said that both men were good soldiers, but that it appeared they were suffering from nervous strain at the time they went absent. Robinson was shot by firing squad with four other deserters from the 3rd Battalion on the ramparts of Ypres on the 26th of July 1915. He was 31 years of age. He was originally buried at the Ramparts Cemetery but was later transferred to the Aeroplane Cemetery, Belgium, which is 3.5 Km northeast of Ypres town centre (Grave number II.A.6/7).

The grave of Robinson has the following inscription: "In loving memory of my dear son deeply mourned by father mother, sisters and brothers".

Private Alfred Thompson (7625) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment - Private Thompson of Holloway Head, Birmingham was a regular soldier. He had joined the Battalion at the beginning of November 1914. On the 27th of June 1915, Private Alfred Thompson and Private Robinson absconded together after they were told that they were to be on night duty in trenches near Hooze. The 3rd Battalion had been in action in this area since 16th June. On the 5th of July 1915 both Private Thompson and Private Robinson were arrested at Abancourt while they were sitting on a train bound for Rouen.

However, this did not affect the outcome of the trial. Thompson was shot by firing squad with four other deserters from the 3rd Battalion on the ramparts of Ypres on the 26th of July 1915. He was 25 years of age.

At their court martial in a statement it said that both men were good soldiers, but that it appeared they were suffering from nervous strain at the time they went absent. He was originally buried at the Ramparts Cemetery but was later transferred to the Aeroplane Cemetery, Belgium, which is 3.5 Km northeast of Ypres town centre (Grave number II.A.8).

Private Bert Hartnells (8164) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment - Private Hartnell's was a regular soldier who had landed in France with the B.E.F. on the 12th of August 1914. Hartnells was shot by firing squad with four other deserters from the 3rd Battalion on the ramparts of Ypres on the 26th of July 1915.

He was 32 years of age. He was originally buried at the Ramparts Cemetery but was later transferred to the Aeroplane Cemetery, Belgium which is 3.5 Km northeast of Ypres town centre (Grave number II.A.6/7).

Sergeant John Thomas Wall (13216) 3rd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment - Sergeant J. T. Wall of Bockleton, near Tenbury, Worcestershire had enlisted in the Worcestershire Regiment in 1912 and served on the Western Front from the beginning of the First World War. When he arrived in France with

the 3rd Battalion on the 12th of August 1914, his rank was that of a Lance-Corporal. He had fought with his Battalion in every engagement and was promoted to Sergeant. In August 1917, the 3rd Battalion was in action near the Bellewarde Ridge, when Sergeant Wall went missing during the attack. This was unlike him, and it could have been that he was suffering from "battle fatigue" which affected his mental state. Unfortunately, this was not considered at his trial. On the 6th of September 1917, Sergeant Wall was executed by firing squad, for desertion, at Poperinghe. He was 22 years of age. He is buried Poperinghe New Military Cemetery. Poperinghe New Military Cemetery is located 10.5 km west of Ypres town centre, in the town of Poperinghe itself (Grave number II.F.42). His parents William and Harriet Wall placed the following inscription on his gravestone: "For ever with the Lord".

Private Robert Young (204232) 11th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment - Private Young was already serving under a two-year suspended sentence for absence and striking a superior officer, when he went missing again. This offence had been committed just two months before the end of hostilities, when Private Young found himself in action for the first time. During heavy shelling in which the dugout had been blown in, Young made his way to the rear. Although at his court martial he was convicted of desertion, had evidence been available at the time a charge of cowardice might have been preferred. At his trial little or no regard was paid to statements made by him in defence of his actions and he was executed by firing squad on the 18th of September 1918. He was 21 years of age. Private Young is buried at the Karasouli Military Cemetery, Greece. The cemetery is near the town of Polikastron (formerly Karasouli) which lies some 56 Km from Thessalonika (Grave number D.885).

Sept 8, 1914 - Pte Thomas Highgate, first British soldier of war to be executed, shot at dawn.

Nov 7, 1918 - Ptes Louis Harris and Ernest Jackson, last two British soldiers to be executed, shot.

The FGCM of Rfn. James Crozier. 9th Bn, The Royal Irish Rifles

CHARGE SHEET:-

Date: 14th February 1916.

No./ Rank/Name: No.9/14218 Rifleman James Crozier.

Regiment: 9th Royal Irish Rifles.

Charge: 'When on Active Service deserting His Majesty's Service in that he "In the Trenches" on the 31st of January 1916 absented himself from 9th Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles until apprehended "In the Field" by Corporal William Taylor on the 4th of February 1916.'

PROCEEDINGS - On Active Service this 14th day of February, 1916.

'Whereas it appears to me, the undersigned, an officer in Command of 107th Infantry Brigade on active service, that the persons named in the annexed Schedule, and being subject to Military Law, have committed the offences in the said schedule mentioned. And I am of opinion that it is not practicable that such offences should be tried by an ordinary General Court Martial: I hereby convene a Field General Court Martial to try the said persons and to consist of the Officers here-under named.'

President:-

Major L.G Bernard 8th Royal Irish Rifles

Members:-

Captain G.H Gaffikin 9th Battn. Royal Irish Rifles. Lieut. A.T Blackwood 8th Battn. Royal Irish Rifles.

(Signed) W M Withycombe. Commanding 107th Infantry Brigade.

THE TRIAL OF RIFLEMAN JAMES CROZIER. 9TH ROYAL IRISH RIFLES

PROSECUTION

1st Witness: No. 9/18835 Corporal E. Todd 9/R Irish Rifles states:

"On 31 January 1916 my Platoon went into the front-line trenches for duty at about 7 pm. The accused marched in with the rest of the platoon. At about 8.45 pm I went to look for accused to warn him for sentry duty at 9 pm. I could not find him. I had previously warned the accused at 8.30 pm not to leave the Dugout in which he was sitting." The accused declines to cross examine this witness.

2nd Witness: No. 9/16532 C.S.M. Hill 9/R Irish Rifles states:

"On 31 January 1916 about 9 pm Corporal Todd reported to me that he could not find the accused, Rifleman Crozier. My Company had come into the front-line trenches about 7 pm that evening.

The accused is in my Company and in Corporal Todd's Platoon. I searched the trenches and Dugout with Corpl. Todd and could not find the accused." The accused declines to cross examine this witness.

3rd Witness: No. 3292 Corpl. William Taylor 7th Ammunition Sub Park states:

"I am stationed about 25 miles in the rear of our front-line trenches. On 4 February 1916 about 9am I saw the accused strolling along our Mechanical Transport Lines. He had no numerals, cap badge or rifle or equipment on. I challenged him and asked him what he was doing. He had no pay book. I placed the accused in our guard room. I asked him his name and regiment and he told me his name and regiment and said he was a Deserter." The accused declines to cross examine this witness.

4th Witness: No. P 1172 Corporal. F.S Brightmore 4th Division M.M.P states:

"On 5 February 1916 I was ordered to go and fetch the accused from 7th Ammunition Sub Park, about 25 miles from the 4th Div. Headquarters. The Accused was under arrest there. I brought the Accused back to 36 Division Headquarters on 7 February 1916 and handed him over to the A.P.M. The accused had no rifle, equipment or pay book." The accused declines to cross examine this witness.

DEFENCE

1st Witness: The Accused, No. 9/14218 Rfn. J. Crozier 9th R. Irish Rifles gives the following evidence:

"On 31 January 1916 I went into the front-line trenches with my platoon.. I was feeling very ill; with pains all over me. I do not remember what I did. I was dazed; I do not remember being warned for duty. I cannot remember leaving the trenches ever."

Cross examined by the Court.

Q1. "At the time you were feeling ill in the trenches was any bombardment going on near you?"

A1. "There were some rifle grenades bursting about ten yards from me."

Q2. "Where you feeling ill before you went into the trenches?"

A2. "Yes, only I got worse when I began to get cold."

Q3. "Had you reported sick previously?"

A3. "No."

"Extracts from the Conduct Sheet of Rfn. Crozier, 'A' Company, 9th Royal Irish Rifles":

Date of Enlistment: 11.9.14.

Character: shown as BAD

Charges since arrival in France: -2.

(1) Absent from a working party.

(2) Absent from Billets.

Certified true extracts.

(Signed) J M Sinclair Lieut. and Adjutant - 9th Bn. R Irish Rifles

SCHEDULE

Name of Alleged Offender: No.9/14218 Rifleman James Crozier, 9th Royal Irish Rifles

Offence Charged: When on Active Service deserting His Majesty's Service

Plea: Not Guilty. Finding, and if Convicted, Sentence: Guilty, DEATH

RECOMMENDATIONS:-

107th Infantry Brigade, With reference to you regarding No.9/14218 Rifleman James Crozier;

(1) From a fighting point of view this soldier is of no value. His behaviour has been that of a "shirker" for the past 3 months. He has been with the Expeditionary Force in France since 3/10/15.

(2) I am firmly of the opinion that the crime was deliberately committed with the intention of avoiding duty on the Redan, more particularly as he absented himself shortly after the case of another soldier had been promulgated for a similar crime. The Officer commanding the man's Company is of the same opinion.

Sentence was remitted in the case mentioned to 2 years Hard Labour.

(Signed) F P Crozier, Lt. Col., Commanding 9th R Irish Rifles. 15.2.16.

36th Division The accused absented himself from the trenches on the 31st of January without reporting sick and was not apprehended until the 4th of February, it is therefore impossible to produce medical evidence as to the state of the health of the accused when he absented himself.

(Signed) W M Withycombe, Brigadier-General,
Commanding 107th Infantry Brigade. 16/2/16.

36th Division I recommend that the extreme penalty in the case of No.9/14218 Rifleman James Crozier be carried out.

My reasons for this recommendation are that the case is one of deliberately avoiding duty in the trenches and as a deterrent to a repetition of offences of this nature. The discipline of the 9th R. I rifles is good for a Service Battalion.

(Signed) W M Withycombe, Brigadier-General,
Commanding 107th Infantry Brigade. 16/2/16.

17th Corps

Forwarded* I concur in the opinion expressed by Brig. General Withycombe that the sentence should be carried out. There have been previous cases of desertion within 107th Brigade.

(Signed) O. Nugent, Major-General,
Commanding 36th Div. 16/2/16

"I certify that I have examined Rifleman James Crozier, 9th Bn Royal Irish Rifles and that he is of sound health in mind and body. I further certify that there is no evidence to show that he has recently been other than sound in mind and in body."

(Signed) Fawcett, Lieutenant-Colonel,
O.C. 108th Field Ambulance. 18/2/1916

3rd Army "A" I consider that in the interests of discipline the sentence, as awarded, should be carried out.

(Signed) J. Byng, Lieut. General,
Commanding XVII Corps. 19.2.16

Adjutant General, General Headquarters: I recommend that the sentence of death be carried out.

(Signed) Edmund Allenby,
General, Commanding III Army. 21st February 1916
[attached]

A.G: For submission to the Commander in Chief. - (Signed) Gilbert Mellor, Lt. Colonel, D.J.A.G. 22.2.16

Confirmed

(Signed) Douglas Haig, Gen., 23 February 1916

SENTENCE: Certified that above proceedings have been promulgated and that the sentence was duly executed at 7.05 am on 27th February 1916.

(Signed) O. Nugent, Major General,
Commanding 36th Division. 28.2.1916.

Basildon Borough Heritage Society
November 2021 – updated December 2024.