

looked through the Westbury School log to see if he had been a pupil there. On doing so, I was mystified to see an entry dated 2nd May 1916 which read as follows: “Death of one of our ‘old’ scholars, Alfred J Warren. He was seriously wounded in France and died in Netley Hospital last Friday. He will be buried this afternoon at 3pm and the church choir will attend the funeral. He literally gave his life for his country. He might easily have escaped military service for he was rejected once on the grounds of bad health. But after some little time he tried again and was accepted. His mother has for many years been the school cleaner.”

At first I thought that I had misread the date on the school log but I then found Alfred’s burial entered in the Church burial register for 2nd May 1916, with his age given as 23 years and also stating that he had died at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley “from wounds received in France”. So it remains a mystery as to how the burial register is dated 1916 while the headstone and some other military records give his date of death as 1918, and I rather hope that there could be some surviving relative out there somewhere who can solve the riddle.



Alfred Warren’s gravestone in Westbury Churchyard

Whatever the answer, I do not want this puzzle to detract from the tragic story of this family. Susannah Warren, after all, lost her husband at a very early age and it is unclear what happened to her second husband. She obviously worked hard as a charwoman to make ends meet and both Christopher and Norah went into ‘service’ very young to help the family get by. To add to her grief Christopher was killed in action in 1915 and then she lost Alfred either one or three years later. It appears that she continued to live in Westbury until her death in 1945.

On searching the military hospital records for the Alfred Warren who died in 1916, I found that he had sustained a gunshot wound to his spine which had damaged his spinal cord. He was transferred to a Sick Convoy on 20th April 1916 and brought back to Netley Hospital in Hampshire on the hospital ship Patrick. It seems that he did not survive for long after this ordeal.

For further copies of this leaflet or if you have any information to add, please contact Di Landon on 01452 760531

Westbury Remembers

Part 21– William Owen and Alfred Warren

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Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council



William Owen was born in Mitcheldean in 1876 and appears to have lived there until he joined the army, so I’m not sure why he was commemorated on Westbury’s memorial rather than the one in Mitcheldean. His parents had both moved to Gloucestershire from Wales and his father, also called William, was an agricultural labourer. William was their first child and he had six younger siblings. William was already an experienced and decorated soldier when the First World War broke out, having joined the 1st Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment in 1896. At that time the regiment was alternating between postings at home and overseas, mostly in India. In 1899, the battalion was posted to South Africa during the Second Boer War and deployed to Ladysmith. In their first battle, they were caught in the open for several hours before they were able to extricate themselves, having lost five men killed and 58

wounded. A few days later, their mules were so stubborn when they were trying to set out for the battlefield that they failed to reach their appointed position and ended up surrounded by the Boers. They held out for several hours but the survivors, including William, were eventually



The Queen’s South Africa Medal, as awarded to William Owen

forced to surrender, and were then held as prisoners of war in Pretoria until they were liberated in July 1900.

As a result of his service, William was awarded the Queen’s South Africa Medal. The following month the battalion was posted to the former British colony of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)

before returning to England.

At the time of the 1911 census, William was still serving as a private with the Glosters and was based at Cambridge Barracks in Portsmouth. At that time, he was still single but by the time the First World War started he was stationed at Bordon in Hampshire and had a wife called Lilian.

William’s battalion landed at Le

Havre on 13th August 1914 and went straight into the fray, heading for the Belgian frontier. They engaged the enemy for the first time at the Battle of Mons, but it seems that previous wartime experience may not have prepared William for what lay ahead. Private Cox of the Glosters was quoted in the Dean Forest Mercury as saying of this battle, "I have been through the Boxer campaign. I went through the Boer War, but I have never seen anything so terrible as that which happened last Sunday." Shortly afterwards they had to march 200 miles to take part in the combined French and British attack



The village of Festubert during the Great War

which drove the Germans back across the Marne and Aisne. Meanwhile, back at home, William's wife Lilian had given birth to their son, also called William, on 24th September 1914.

The 1st Battalion Glosters remained on the Western Front throughout the war, taking part in most of the major actions including the Battles of Ypres, Loos, Passchendaele and the Somme and at some point William was promoted to Sergeant. Early in 1917 the battalion moved south of the Somme, and took part in the advance to the Hindenburg Line.

In the spring of 1918 the Germans

launched their Spring offensive with the aim of capturing Ypres and forcing the British forces back to the Channel ports. By 16th April William's battalion was holding the line at the village of Festubert. Their War Diary describes the ground as low lying and wrapped in mist so thick that visibility was rarely more than 50 yards. This caused difficulty for aircraft pilots and led to troops being "freely

bombed and shot at by our airmen who had lost their way." The Germans attacked at 4am on 18th April and with characteristic understatement, the War Diary reports that "The amount of gas

fired by the enemy was enormous . . . and what with the added inconvenience of the mist and of dust from falling buildings coupled with the deafening noise, some anxious hours were spent by the Battalion." Telephone lines were cut and several runners were lost in attempts to communicate with the Brigade HQ. One passage of the diary seems to sum up the horror of the day as it tells how a young officer was left with only 8 men after his platoon sergeant had been killed and the machine gun team destroyed. He managed to reach the battalion HQ but little

could be gleaned from him about what had happened. The war diary comments "Quite a boy, he had been subjected to a most trying ordeal and was totally incoherent. A couple of minutes later he was killed by a shell." The battle continued all day earning the battalion high praise and 33 awards for gallantry, as it had repulsed an attack by four enemy regiments.

William Owen was wounded and died four days later. The National Roll of the Great War tells us that he was awarded the Mons Star, the General Service and Victory Medals and was "a valiant soldier." He had spent more than half his 40 year life in the service of his country and it was said that "with undaunted heart he breasted life's last hill." He was buried at the Pernes British Cemetery.

The German attack was eventually repulsed, French reinforcements arrived and the German offensive was called off, but between 9th and 30th April 1918 a total of around 160,000 men had died in the fighting.

Alfred Warren

At first, my research into the life and death of Alfred Warren appeared completely straightforward. Records show that he was born in Westbury in July 1892 and baptised on 28th August. His parents were Sidney and Susannah Warren who lived in the High Street and he had an older brother and sister, Christopher and Norah. His father died in 1900 at the age of 39 years

and the 1901 census shows his mother, Susannah, working as a charwoman and living with Norah, Alfred and a younger brother, Louis, while Christopher at the age of 14 was living at Court Farm and working as a 'farmer's boy'. The following year, Susannah was married again, this time to William Castledine, but he does not appear in the household on the 1911 census, which shows Susannah living with 18 year old Alfred, who was working as a groom, and Louis who was still at school.

Unfortunately Alfred Warren's service record has not survived but two sources show him to have served with 3rd/5th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment and both give his place of birth as Westbury-on-Severn, his service number as 4486, his rank as Private and his date of death as 28th April 1918. One, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission record, also states that he was the son of Sidney and Susannah Warren, although it appeared that by this time Susannah was living at Poole Cottage, Flaxley. I was confident that this was the same person, especially as it gave his burial place as Westbury-on-Severn Churchyard and I took the photograph overleaf of his gravestone, which also gives his service number as 4486 and his date of death as 28th April 1918.

Perhaps I should have left it at that, but I thought I could add some extra detail to his story if I