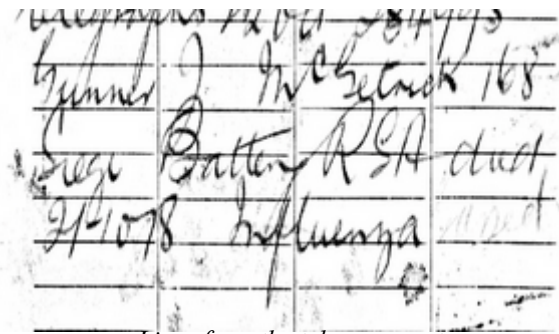


the effects of gas and he died three days later at the age of 36. However, one record states that he died from wounds as well as gas, but the telegram sent to his wife simply states that he died of influenza.

So whether John fell ill with influenza after being gassed, or the writer of the telegram believed that Mary would find the news of his death from influenza less horrifying than from his being gassed, we do not know.

In the late spring of 1918, the Spanish flu epidemic reached the Western Front. Initially, the virus caused only mild symptoms but by the summer it had taken on a more severe form and

would eventually claim nearly 70 million lives around the world — far more lives than the war itself. Unlike typical flu pandemics it disproportionately killed young healthy adults. The armies of both sides were



Lines from the telegram sent to Mary McGetrick

affected but both tried to conceal the extent of their losses in case it encouraged their enemies.

John is buried in the St Sever Cemetery Extension in Rouen. This extension was found to be necessary in September 1916, mainly because the vast majority of dead from the numerous hospitals in Rouen were being taken to the City Cemetery for burial.

John was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. His widow, Mary, was awarded a pension of 13s 9d per week and seems to have remained in Westbury

until at least 1921.

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



The St Sever Cemetery Extension in Rouen

Westbury Remembers

Part 25 John McGetrick

Written by Di Landon
and sponsored by

Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council



John McGetrick, whose name was spelt McCatrick on the War Memorial, was born in Chester in 1882. His parents, Thomas and Rose, are recorded on the 1911 census as having had 13 children of whom only two, John and his sister Mary, had survived.

On leaving school, John became a general labourer, like his father, but on 16th October 1900, when he was nearly 19 years old, he enlisted in the



Westbury-on-Severn Workhouse

Royal Horse Artillery in Manchester. Their records show that he was 5'8" tall, weighed 137 lb and had brown hair and blue eyes. He had a large scar on the right side of his back and he was a Roman Catholic.

The Royal Horse Artillery were based in Woolwich and John appears to have spent nearly five years with them there before being discharged as medically unfit in June 1905. There

is no record of him being posted abroad. After his discharge, he must have returned to Chester because it was there, on 1st November 1910, that he married Mary Serdiville, who was also from Chester. By this time John was working as an asylum attendant for

Cheshire County Council.

Mary's sister, Annie Serdiville, was married to Charles Cruse, who had recently been appointed

Master of Westbury's Work-

house. John's experience of working in an asylum, together with his military service, would have been considered an excellent background for maintaining discipline in a workhouse, and so John was employed as a male nurse and the couple moved to Westbury.

No doubt there was also plenty for his wife, Mary, to do, especially as

Charles and Annie had two young children and Annie then tragically died giving birth to twins in 1914. Charles remained in Westbury until his death in 1947 and he and Annie are both buried in Westbury Churchyard.

In September 1916, at the age of 34, John enlisted in the army again in Bristol. By this time conscription had been brought in for all men between the ages of 18 and 41, even if they were married. Having previously been discharged as medically unfit, he

was now accepted with a fitness category of B1, which meant that he was capable of marching five miles, could see to shoot with glasses, if worn, and could hear sufficiently for ordinary purposes.

His previous artillery experience may have been a factor when he was posted as a gunner in the Royal Garrison Artillery. He seems to have initially gone to the Royal Citadel, Plymouth in January 1917 for training.

The Royal Garrison Artillery devel-

oped from artillery located on British coasts. Before the war, the army had possessed very little heavy artillery and was tasked mainly with manning Britain's coastal defences. Coastal artillery had always relied on high velocity guns capable of penetrating the armour of ships at a great distance. In the past, the land-based artillery would have had the advantage over ships because they were firing from a fixed platform, but by the start of the 20th century,



The Royal Garrison Artillery at the Somme

the increasing size of many naval ships and their guns meant that they could destroy coastal batteries while still out of range of answering fire. During the war, the

Royal Garrison Artillery grew into a very large and important component of the British forces. It was armed with heavy, large calibre guns and howitzers that were positioned some way behind the front line and had immense destructive power.

From Plymouth, John seems to

have moved to Catterick before being posted to the 168th Siege Battery. They had been in France since September 1916 but John joined them there on 11th Dec 1917. I can find no record of where they fought, but we know that by October 1918 they were positioned at Escaufourt, near Cambrai, in support of operations by the 2nd American Corps.



General Pershing

General Pershing, the Commander of the American Expeditionary Force, insisted that American soldiers were properly trained before going to Europe and so only small numbers of troops had arrived before January 1918. He also insisted that US troops were not used to fill gaps in the French and British armies, a stance that was unpopular with Allied leaders. By May 1918, over a million Ameri-

can soldiers were stationed in France and when the last great German push failed in July 1918, the tide turned in the Allies' favour. The arrival of the American forces, together with some major tactical and technological improvements in the British and French armies had helped to push the Germans back to the Hindenburg line. The Allies then launched a whole series of offensives so that the Germans could not concentrate all their available reserves in one place, which could have hindered the Allied advance along the northern half of the Western Front. Most of these attacks were against the Hindenburg Line, which was heavily defended.

In October, the 168th Siege Battery was subjected to severe shelling with high explosives and gas. This resulted in four officers and 52 other ranks being killed or wounded, and the depletion of their ranks was so severe that gunners from 494th Siege Battery were temporarily drafted in to ensure that they could still form a fighting force. John was admitted to the General Hospital in Rouen on 18th October. Rouen was safely behind the lines and many Commonwealth camps and hospitals had been set up in the city and remained there throughout the war.

Three of the military records state that John was seriously ill from