

Westbury Remembers - Part 8

William Wilks

Written by Di Landon
and sponsored by

Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council



fect of the war that was being felt on the Home Front—but it was not all bad news. Maynard Colchester-Wemyss wrote that small shop keepers were reporting that “there never was so much money floating around as there is now” as soldier’s wives, who had ‘separation allowances’, and munition workers with wages, were spending freely. He added that the higher-class shops were not doing so well because the “professional and landed classes were feeling badly the pinch of the war.”

He also reported that the prejudice against the employment of women was evaporating. Previously thought “indecorous” or “inadvisable”, the employment of women in many roles that had been “jealously guarded for men” was now being actively encouraged.

But the civilian population were also coming under attack from the Germans. A Zeppelin raid at the end of January had led to 61 deaths in various towns in the Midlands and blackout precautions were being taken in Gloucester.

William Wilks’ widow, Fanny, had even more to worry about when their son, William Josiah, enlisted in the 13th Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment on 5th February 1916, just three weeks after his father came home to die. He was 20 years old and had

been living in Gloucester and working as a gateman on the Midland Railway. After some musketry training, he qualified as a 2nd Class Shot before being posted to the 10th Battalion serving in France. His military record gives no detail of the actions in which he was involved but his battalion took part in the Somme offensive in 1916 and several other major battles including Passchendaele in 1917. Fortunately, William seems to have come through unscathed, and was medical category A1 and “not claiming any disability” when the war ended. He remained in the army in what was known as the Class Z Reserve.

There were fears that Germany would not accept the terms of any peace treaty, and therefore the British Government decided it would be wise to be able to quickly recall trained men in the eventuality of the resumption of hostilities. Soldiers who were being demobilised, particularly those who had agreed to serve "for the duration", were at first posted to Class Z. They returned to civilian life but with an obligation to return if called upon. The Z Reserve was abolished on 31 March 1920.

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

When William Wilks died on 15th February 1916 at the age of 43, he was the oldest of Westbury’s soldiers to die in the First World War. He was also one of the few to die at home and to be buried in Westbury Churchyard.

He was born in Ashleworth in 1873. His father (who was also called William) and mother Eliza already had two sons when William was born and went on to have three more sons and a daughter, Sarah, who was the youngest. William senior was a labourer and the family seem to have moved around a lot, presumably following the work. In 1871 they were in Linton in Herefordshire, and by 1881 they had moved from Ashleworth to Churchdown. By the time the 1891 Census was taken, they were living in Stantway, where William senior was employed by William Hart of Rock Farm.

Young William, now 18, was at home at the time of the census but is shown as being a Private in the 2nd Battalion of the Welsh Regiment. It appears that on 26th February the previous year, he had gone to Bristol and enlisted in the army. He gave his occupation as a labourer, but he was not a big lad, being 5’6½” tall, with a 34” chest and weighing only 8st 9lb. He was described as having a fresh complexion, brown eyes and brown hair. At this point the records are confusing as on the Short Service Attestation form that he completed on enlisting, he stated that he had already served in the 3rd Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment

and that he was 18. By my reckoning, he was still only 17 years old and it seems unlikely that he had already served in another regiment. However, his



Rock Farm, Stantway

army career was short -

lived as on 23rd July 1891, after only 18 months, he was discharged as medically unfit for further service. His discharge papers show that he had not fought in any campaigns or suffered any wounds.

The next record that I found for

William was in the Forest Mercury of 19th January 1894, which carried a report of him being involved in a

violent incident outside the Red

Lion. Police Sergeant Murphy gave evidence that in the course of his duty at 11pm on 13th January he had gone to the Red Lion and William, his father and another man were outside. William Wilks senior was telling the other men about a fine of 10/6d that he had had to pay after Sgt Murphy had summonsed him for 'riding without reins'. William senior was heard to say "Mind and stick together and let him have it," and in spite of his wife trying to stop him and Sgt Murphy blowing his whistle, the three men attacked the policeman, kicking him about the head and body. Seven or eight men apparently stood by and watched until the sergeant was "kicked senseless" and carried inside by the landlord. William senior

had worked for William Hart for several years and his employer gave him a "splendid character" but father and son were sent to prison for 3 months and 2 months respectively. The incident alarmed

many local residents and led to calls for a police station in the village.

A few months later, William married Fanny White, a labourer's

daughter who lived in Fairview Cottage

on Wintles Hill. They soon had a growing family with daughter Ethel born that year, William Josiah born in 1895, Frank in 1897, Charles in 1898, Henry in 1901 and Elsie in 1906. When the census was taken in 1901, the family were living in Adsett and William was working as an agricultural labourer. Three year old Frank was staying with his grandmother, Harriet White in Rodley.

The children went to school in Westbury where the school log records that in October 1908 little Frank had diphtheria and his brothers were kept away from school. Frank died a week later and was buried at Westbury Church, but it was another month before his brothers were able to



The Red Lion

return to school.

In 1911, the census shows the family living in Northwood Green and William working as an ostler. Their elder daughter, Ethel, now aged 17, had gone into service with the Hart family in Mitcheldean, young William, aged 15, was working as a shepherd and the younger three children were still at school.

When war broke out in 1914, William was 41, with a wife and five children and would therefore not have been expected to volunteer, and yet nearly 23 years after he was discharged from the army as medically unfit, he re-enlisted with the 1st Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment.

The 1st Battalion had been mobilised for war on 13th August 1914 and had landed at Le Havre before taking part in many of the early actions on the Western Front. William's wartime service record is very sketchy but if he was with the 1st Battalion from the start of the war, which seems likely, he could have fought at Mons, The Marne, The Aisne and the First Battle of Ypres during the autumn of 1914.

Predictably, his health could not withstand the sort of conditions that he must have encountered, and on 11th December 1914 we find him mentioned in the medical records of No 3 Casualty Clearing Station in Hazebrouck in Northern France. This shows

that he was transferred to a Sick Convoy on No 8 Ambulance Train after being admitted with tonsillitis.



A First World War Ambulance Train

When he had recovered, he was transferred to the 3rd Battalion, which was a Reserve Battalion, so he was presumably not deemed fit to return to France. The 3rds were based in Bristol at the start of the war and moved to Gravesend in May 1915. However, it appears that William's health continued to deteriorate as he was finally discharged from the army due to ill health on 16th January 1916. He lived less than a month after his discharge and died in Westbury on 15th February 1916. He was not accorded a war grave, with the characteristic headstone, presumably because he was no longer a serving soldier when he died, but villagers clearly saw his death as due to the war and included his name on the War Memorial.

By this time, the death of many young men was not the only ef-