

Westbury Remembers—Part 2

The First Men to Die

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also died. By this time, Maurice and his mother, together with her 64 year old uncle, Reuben, had moved back to Heald Cottage and Maurice was working as an agricultural labourer.

As far as we know, little changed in his life until January 1915, when at the age of 31, he attended a recruiting meeting in the village and decided to sign up. He was made an artillery driver in the Royal Engineers because he was accustomed to working with horses and was described as “a fine, strong, active fellow.” He went off for training but a few weeks later, his mother called to see Maynard Colchester Wemyss at 9 o’clock one night because she had received a telegram to say that her son was ill in Cambridge Hospital in



Cambridge Hospital, Aldershot

Aldershot. MCW rang the hospital for her and found that Maurice was dangerously ill. The next morning she set off on the train, reaching his bedside in time to be with him when he died that evening, the 5th March 1915.

Maynard Colchester Wemyss later wrote that Mrs Wintle had been treated very kindly in Aldershot and that the army had given Maurice a military funeral “and as there has never before been a military funeral in our churchyard it created quite an excitement.” There was a military band, a firing party and some buglers, and soldiers

escorted the coffin in procession for the last half mile to the church. They fired three volleys over the grave and the buglers sounded the Last Post. Walmore Hill School (and probably Westbury too) had a half day holiday and MCW wrote that “the whole parish turned out.”

By this time, about 40,000 British men had been killed on the Western Front and it was clear that the war was going to produce an unprecedented number of casualties. Although people expected these soldiers to be commemorated individually rather than buried in communal graves as in earlier wars, many must have also realised that this number of bodies could not be repatriated, although there was a public outcry when the decision was announced. It was also decided that all the headstones would be the same design, in order to avoid class distinctions.

So I like to think that when the parish turned out in force to honour Maurice Wintle, they were also honouring the thousands of men who would never now be brought back to lie in the gentle peace of their home churchyards.



Maurice Wintle's grave in Westbury Churchyard

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

The Fighting Begins

Germany had been preparing for war long before 1914, and in 1897 had drawn up a plan – the Schlieffen Plan – which was based on the belief that Germany would have to fight both France and Russia at the same time. They assumed that France was weak and could be quickly beaten by sweeping down through Belgium and northern France and taking Paris. On 2nd August 1914, they asked for permission to go through Belgium but when this was refused, the plan began to go wrong. Having to fight their way through Belgium, they then found themselves also at war with Britain who had decided to uphold a treaty signed back in 1839.



The amazed German chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, is reported to have said “For a scrap of paper, Great Britain is going to make war?”

At this time, the British regular army was a small professional force and only 150,000 men were immediately

available to be formed into the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), described by Kaiser Wilhelm as a “contemptible little army”. Their first encounter



Kaiser Wilhelm

with the Germans came at Mons when the BEF were eventually forced to retreat. The German advance was halted by the Allies at the River Marne and the plan to push towards Paris had to be abandoned. Instead they began to retreat to the north east, a move which led to what became known as ‘The Race to the Sea’ in which each side tried to envelop the northern flank of the opposing army until the ‘race’ ended on the Belgian coast in October 1914. For the BEF, 1914 ended with the First Battle of Ypres in which the old regular British Army was virtually wiped out, although it had managed to stop the German advance. From then on, manoeuvre warfare gave way to trench warfare, and with the war on the Western Front reaching stalemate, the trench lines stretched out from the Belgian coast to the Swiss frontier.

In Westbury, Maynard Colchester Wemyss (MCW) had encouraged people in the county to take Belgian refugees into their homes and had arranged for one family to stay in a cottage at Chaxhill. He had explained to the Committee responsible for placing refugees that it was just a labourer's cottage, but they had sent down a large family who had owned and run a hotel in Ostend. MCW described them as "a hopelessly helpless sort of people" and they were "horrified at the cottage, terrified at finding themselves in the country and quite incapable of doing anything whatever for themselves in the house." They returned to London the next day and were replaced by "a peasant family" with six children who were soon "perfectly happy and getting on famously."

On 26th November 1914, MCW wrote for the first time about injuries sustained by those fighting on the Western Front. He described meeting a Westbury man who had just been discharged from hospital in France having been shot six weeks earlier. He does not name the man, but he was lucky to survive as the bullet had entered his back, passed through his neck and out through his left cheek, breaking two teeth on the way. He was now well and having ten days leave before rejoining his regiment and was, apparently, "as keen as possible to be back fighting again." And as 1914 came to a close, William Gleed, who had been the village postman, wrote home describing how he, too, had been severely wounded.

Christopher Warren

As far as I can tell, Christopher George Warren has the dubious distinction of being the first man from Westbury to

die in the Great War, having been killed in action in Belgium on 16th February 1915. He was buried in the Voormezele Enclosure which is just over three miles from Ypres.



Voormezele Enclosure 3

Christopher was baptised in Westbury in June 1886. His father, Sidney, was an agricultural labourer, who lived with his wife, Susannah, in the High Street. Christopher was their eldest child but they also had a daughter, Nora Ellen, and two younger sons, Alfred and Louis.

Sadly, it seems as if Christopher's father died around the time that Christopher reached his teens and in 1901, his mother Susannah was struggling to support her family by working as a 'charwoman'. For many years she was the cleaner at Westbury School.

At the age of 14, Christopher was working and 'living in' as a 'farmer's boy' for Edgar Payne, a farmer and fruit merchant, of Court Farm in Westbury. A year later, his mother married again, but her new husband, William Castledine, was no longer living with her in 1911 when the next census was carried out. By this time, Christopher was living in lodgings near Highnam and working as a warehouse porter. His sister Nora was 'in service' in Oxford and brother Alfred

was working as a groom.

Unfortunately, I could only find the briefest details of Christopher's military service but it seems that he enlisted as a private in the 2nd Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment in August 1914. The 2nd Battalion was stationed in China when war broke out and were hastily brought home, and then sent to France in December 1914. Christopher joined them there on 21st January 1915 and as this was a battalion of regular soldiers, it is probable that he had served either in the regular army or the Territorials before the war and had been recalled as a reserve.

By this time the town of Ypres had become embroiled in a battle which would last for 4 long years and see almost every one of its buildings razed to the ground. An estimated 10,000 German troops had occupied the town in October 1914 but were driven out by Allied troops who took up semi-circular defensive positions around the east of the town.



British soldiers at Ypres in 1914

Fierce fighting took place that autumn, as the area was a crucial point in the "Race to the Sea." The Allies were determined to hold it at all costs, but by January 1915 there was

a stalemate. The Allied occupation of this bulge into the German line left them in a difficult defensive position, as they were entrenched in the centre of the saucer-shaped "Ypres Salient", an area which is low-lying and prone to flooding, with heavy water-logged clay soil and a damp climate. The Germans had the advantage of being on higher ground around the rim.

Less than a month after his arrival in France, Christopher was dead. It does not appear, from the date of his death, that he died in any major battle and we can only presume that he was one of the many daily casualties that resulted from sniper and artillery fire in the trenches. He was 28 years old. Sadly, this war also took the life of his younger brother Alfred, who died in 1918. His mother, Susan Castledine, died in Westbury in 1945.

Maurice Wintle

Like Christopher Warren, Maurice Wintle also lost his father, Alfred, a farm bailiff, while he was in his early teens. Maurice had been born in Westbury in January 1884, when his parents were living at Heald Cottage in Rodley, with his older sister, Alice. He went to Walmore Hill School.

By the time Maurice was seven, his father had gone to work as a miner in Merthyr Tydfil and Maurice's mother, Charlotte, had taken the children to live at Gatwick Farm with her widowed mother, Louisa Harvey. Charlotte and her mother were both working as dressmakers and so would have had some income when Maurice's father died at the age of 47, when Maurice was just thirteen. A year later, grandmother Louisa passed away and when Maurice was about 17, his twenty year old sister, Alice,