



Holt

World War I Casualty Biographies

HIGGS, William George



William George Higgs was born at Holt c1895 His parents were Josiah and Rosa. Josiah had been born in Bristol in 1865 and Rosa was from a Holt family, the Beames, born in Bradford in 1868. They had married in 1885 and in 1901 the family, with 6 children, was living in 4 rooms at Church Brook, Broughton Gifford. By 1911 the family had grown with 6 more children. 2 had died but there were 7 still living at home at Hawcroft, The Common, Holt. Father Josiah was a mason's labourer and William was a nurseryman/gardener.

Little is known of his military service except that he was a Private in the 5th Battalion of the Duke of Edinburgh's (Wiltshire Regiment) and was killed in action at Gallipoli on 10th August 1915, when British troops lost the peak of Chunuk Bair.

FAITHFUL TO THE CALL OF DUTY

Comrades in Life and Death

Three Holt men killed in Gallipoli

The recent heavy fighting in the Dardanelles and the terrible sacrifices that war brings in its wake have been brought home vividly to several families in Holt. The long list of casualties amongst the 5th Wilts officers foretold an even heavier toll among the rank and file, and naturally there were many anxious thoughts and prayers for loved ones in the danger zone. At last came the dread news. Three sons of Holt had paid the supreme sacrifice, whilst four had been grievously wounded. The whole village remembers with pride the patriotism which had carried them away splendid in their manhood, and the news of their deaths came as a thunderclap, but later as the first thought of grief and pain had passed away there came a feeling of pride. Holt lads as of old could fight and nobly die for the honour and defence of their country.

No details of the action have been received but it is understood that the Wiltshire were the victims of a well-planned and desperately fought surprise attack. Taken at a great disadvantage, they seem to have done all that was humanly possible, but the numbers against them were over-whelming, and from the first their case seemed hopeless.

The first to receive the sad news were Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Llewellyn Smith of Lyndhurst, the official notification from Exeter stating that Pvte Frank Herbert Smith of the 5th Wilts Regiment had been killed in action in the Dardanelles on August 10th. Private Smith, with his friends and comrades Private Higgs and Corporal W. Moore were the first in the village to offer their services in the new armies soon after the outbreak of war and immediately Lord Kitchener issued his first call for men these lads gladly threw the weight of their services in the scale for civilisation and set an example which will be long remembered.

The Late Private Frank H Smith

Private Smith was only 17 years of age and had he wished, could have remained at home with a clear conscience, but like thousands of others, he was indifferent to the hardships of a soldier's life, his one thought being the defence of England and home. His early days were spent at the Congregational School and a message of sympathy from the headmaster – one amongst many received by Mr. Smith – reveals the deep feelings of grief which the sad news has created. Writing on behalf of Mrs. Longstaff and himself, Mr. J. C. Longstaff says:—"We wish to assure you that you have our deepest sympathy in your great loss – indeed we are quite sure that everybody in the village will feel for you at this very dark time. I think I could claim to know Frank better than almost anybody in the village, outside your own family, and I could testify that he had many excellent qualities. He was always thoroughly upright, strictly honest and most conscientious; and much as we must admire his courage, it seems hard that such a bright young life should be cut off. One of the saddest things about this terrible war is that it takes away from us the very best lads in the village. We trust that you will find some comfort in remembering that he gave himself freely for his country and that his memory will be honoured and cherished by all who have known him. And even in the darkest hour we must all try to trust in a kind and Heavenly Father."

Private Smith was an old member of the Baden Powell's Boy Scouts and an enthusiastic footballer. He was, previous to his enlistment, an apprentice to the leather dressing at Messrs. Beaven's works and writing from Bournemouth Mr. Edwin C. Beaven, in a letter of condolence says:—"The consolation we must feel at his loss is that he was true and faithful to the call of his King and country, and I know he will receive his reward where there is no more pain."

Mr. Tom Beaven also writes his message of sympathy to the bereaved parents and adds:- "I would rather be you with your great loss than the mothers of some men in Holt whose sons are stopping at home doing nothing, whilst boys like yours have responded to their country's call and gave their lives at 17 years of age"

An elder son of Mr. Smith, Corporal Llewellyn Smith, is with the Forces, having been for over two years with the Royal Engineers.

Mr. and Mrs. Herbert L. Smith and Family desire to return their sincere thanks for the great kindness shown and the many expressions of sympathy extended to them in the terrible loss sustained by the death of their son Frank, killed in action on August 10th.

Lyndhurst, Holt, Sept 6 1915

The Late Sergeant W. W. Ash

Sergeant Ash was the second son of Mrs. E. J. Ash, and previous to his enlistment was employed at Messrs. Beaven's works, where he was a general favourite. Although a married man with one daughter, Sergeant Ash heard the call of duty, and as in the case of his patriotic brothers, home and comforts were put aside for the hardships of the trenches. He enlisted on August 21 in the Wiltshire Regiment, and such was the zeal and energy with which he entered upon his duties that within a few months he had risen step by step to the full rank of sergeant. In June he with his regiment left England for the Dardanelles, and within a few hours of landing he was doing duty in the trenches. For some time after he was missing and grave doubts were entertained as to his safety, any remaining hope being dispelled by the official announcement of his death. That he died nobly fighting for his country is certain, a comrade who was wounded in the same action and has been brought to England, stating that "all the officers of the company were either killed or wounded, and at the time of his death Sergeant Ash was gallantly leading the men in a heroic but futile charge." Of the five sons of Mr. and Mrs. Ash four have given their services to their country, one son being with the Canadians, one in India with the 4th Wilts and another with the Wiltshire Yeomanry. The youngest boy is but 16, his chief trouble being that his age prevents him from enlisting.

Many expressions of sympathy have been received by the widow and parents of Sergeant Ash, Mr. Tom Beaven, his employer, in his letter of condolence says:- "His death will be a blow to all of us. He was a fine fellow and very popular with his workmates, and whilst in the regiment his good qualities had endeared him to everyone."

Mrs. Walter Ash and Family and Mr. and Mrs. E. J. Ash, desire to return their sincere thanks for the many expressions of sympathy shown them in the severe loss sustained by the death in the Dardanelles of Sergeant Walter Ash.

*Had He asked us, well we know,
We should cry, O spare that blow;
Yes with streaming tears would pray,
Lord we love him, let him stay*

The Midlands, Holt, Sept.7 1915

Another home where the dread tidings of death have been received is that of Mr. and Mrs. J. Higgs, The Common, whose second son at the age of 20 has also been killed in the Dardanelles.

The Late Private W .G. Higgs

Private William George Higgs was previous to the war a nurseryman, employed by Messrs. Williams. On August 16th he, in company with his friend and comrade Frank Smith, visited Bradford and attended a patriotic meeting in the Market Place, and as a result offered his name as a likely soldier. He was then sent to Devizes and enlisted in the 5th Wilts, with whom he fought and died. For about eleven years a chorister in the Parish Church, and a scholar at the Church Schools, a teetotaler and non-smoker, he was an exceedingly well conducted lad, and very popular in the village. He gained the school medal and bar for regular attendance, never having missed for three years. An enthusiastic footballer he was a promising member of the local team and gained a silver medal in the competition under the auspices of the Trowbridge and District League.

Mr. J. Higgs is an old Volunteer and is at present with the National Reserves guarding bridges, &c, at Winterbourne.

In addition to Private Higgs, Mr. and Mrs. Higgs have another son with the forces, Henry being on H.M.S. Terrible. He has been in the Navy for the past six years, and has done duty on minelayers and submarines. He was previously on the ill-fated Irene, and left that boat a few days before the disaster.

Much sympathy is felt in the village for Mrs. Higgs, who has given a husband and two sons to her country, one of whom she will never see again.

In addition to the deaths recorded above, Privates A. Usher, H. Vanderstein and S. Pretty. 5th Wilts, were wounded, the last two severely.

Two other Holt lads, Corporal William Moore, son of a former schoolmaster, and Private Owen Grimshaw are known to have been in the same action, and they belonged to the very small number who came through safely. We congratulate them on their good fortune.

Yet another Holt lad, Private Victor Grimshaw, Welsh regiment, is lying in hospital at Alexandria. So far as is known, he and those mentioned above as wounded are steadily recovering.

Wiltshire Times 11.9.15

[Private Usher survived but subsequently died of wounds in 1917. Private Vanderstein also survived but subsequently died, killed in action in 1917]

MEMORIAL SERVICE TO FALLEN HEROES

They heard the call of duty

A memorial service to the soldiers fallen in the war, with special reference to the three from the village, namely Sergeant Walter Ash, Private Frank Smith and Private William G. Higgs, whose deaths were reported in our last issue, was held at the Parish Church on Sunday evening, Private Higgs having been a chorister at the church for over 11 years.

There was a large and sympathetic congregation, including the relatives and many friends of the dead soldiers. The service was of a solemn and impressive character. Special hymns and psalms were sung,

and the hymns chosen were “ Christ will gather in His own” and before the sermon “Brief life is here our portion”

The Vicar (Rev. T. Roberts), in the course of an address based on the words in St. Mark's Gospel, “These things must needs be “, said human nature being what it was and nations being sometimes ambitious, as the Germans were at the present day, it was only natural that there should be aggression and national aggression led to war, bringing all the calamities of trouble and death in its wake. There were other words in the Gospel to which he asked them to concentrate their thoughts- “He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem”. Our Lord pursued the course of duty to the end; duty leading to personal danger, and danger culminating in death, although He foresaw what the end would be. So it was in the case of those soldiers whose deaths they were mourning. They heard the call of duty. That duty was attended by great danger, yet they willingly undertook it, fully conscious of the great danger surrounding them. They fulfilled their duty and met a hero's death, setting a noble example to those who came after.

Since the publication of our issue of the 11th last, containing excellent photos of the dead soldiers, many further expressions of sympathy have been received by the bereaved parents. Amongst others who have written personal letters of comfort to Mrs. Higgs is the Bishop of Salisbury, who, writing from the Palace, Salisbury says:-

“I am most grieved to hear of your sad sorrow. And yet it is not all sadness for your dear one has died for others, and you can trust him to the loving care of One Who died for him, and for us all. May God comfort and sustain you and help you to wait patiently till the great reunion comes”

*Private J. Higgs and Mrs. Higgs desire to return their heartfelt thanks to their many friends for their numerous expressions of sympathy and condolence in the sad loss occasioned by the death of their dearly loved son, Private William George Higgs
The Common, Holt, Sept. 14, 1915*

Wiltshire Times 18th September 1915 Page 12

He has no known grave and is commemorated on the Helles Memorial, Turkey. Panel 156 and 158.

William George Higgs, Private, 9490, 5th Battalion, Duke of Edinburgh's (Wiltshire Regiment)

References

Ancestry
Commonwealth War Graves Commission
FreeBMD
Wiltshire Times