

November, and Remembrance Day comes round again and prompts us to discuss some war stories, especially about those on the Bicton memorial:

On and off during this series we have mentioned Denis Jetson Blakemore, son of George Lloyd Blakemore, the Bicton Schoolmaster. Denis is also listed on the St George's Memorial, since, at the time of his death, in July 1917, the family had moved to Frankwell.

The special aspect of his story is that he was the only soldier from Shropshire who was 'shot at dawn' for desertion. In view of the county-wide significance, Toby Neal of the Shropshire Star has discussed him more than once in that paper, so that one wonders what more could be said in these pages now. We will nevertheless try...

In the War, many of those condemned for desertion were actually reprieved, but in the case of Denis, this had already happened after a previous attempt. Therefore, after being caught again so soon after being released from detention, the authorities perhaps thought they had no choice. He had absconded from his platoon as they prepared for the attack on the Messini ridge south of Ypres, famous for the detonation of huge mines whose craters still scar the landscape. He got as far as the ferry in Boulogne before being arrested.

This was a stressful time for all concerned, but the troops just had to get on with it. The question is, why did Denis behave the way he did in spite of coming from such a respectable and public spirited family? Perhaps a closer look at this background may provide some clues.

Father George, born 1858, was eldest son amongst six children of William and Emma Blakemore of Shrewsbury, where William was employed as clerk to a cabinet manufactory. At first, the family lived in Benyon Street, Castlefields, but by 1871 they had moved to College Hill. Where George received his education is not known, but it could have been the Lancasterian School which had developed the training of pupil teachers.

Meanwhile, in 1857, future wife Sophia Henley was born in Montgomeryshire, where very soon after, the 1861 census recorded her living with grandparents in Llandrinio from whom she took the name Jetson (later passing on to Denis). What family circumstances caused this change is not known, perhaps some tragedy. While many girls like this might have gone into domestic service in some 'big house' Sophia instead became an apprentice dressmaker in Shrewsbury with Walter Davies, who was also a Baptist preacher.

Somehow a few years later, she met George and they were married at Bicton in June 1879, by which time her apprenticeship would have finished, while George had become headteacher of Bicton School.

Here, he had already developed a close friendship with the family of William and Mary Lewis across the road in Old School House. There is even a family memory of Frederick, their second eldest spending some time with George when he had just arrived and was a little nervous of being in a big house on his own. Frederick could also escape from a crowded cottage filling up with younger siblings! However, George and Sophia soon began filling the school house with eight children of their own in a similar 'Victorian' fashion.

In such households the pressure of large families was often relieved by the eldest leaving home early, especially girls, who could find 'living in' domestic service, but this household was different. Sophia helped as a sewing mistress, for which she was obviously well qualified, while her children were not only educated here, but tended to stay home afterwards. Moreover, eldest daughters Florence and Alice were actually retained as assistant teachers recognised by the local authority. The school was almost becoming a 'family business'!

The boys did, however, go on to pursue careers outside: George and Ernest the oldest became apprentices (George as a watchmaker perhaps followed Ernest Lewis across the road), Denis a grocer's assistant and Frederick a gents' outfitters assistant. Sister Sophia followed her mother's trade, while Gertrude did secretarial work. All of the jobs were in Shrewsbury 'just down the road' so there was little incentive to leave home early.

One wonders if such a mixture of home and school life 'under one roof' actually shielded the boys in particular from the challenges of the outside world. Also, how was their relationship with their peers affected by being the children of the headmaster? Whatever the high motives and big plans involved in waging war, actual behaviour at the 'sharp end' revolves around the mutual support between 'mates'. This was recognised in the official recruitment of 'pals' for instance. Perhaps Denis had not been able to develop this kind of social skill because of that good upbringing, which unwittingly undermined his ability to cope. In this way behaviour is said to be conditioned by a mixture of 'nature, nurture and networks'. Perhaps in a similar way his sisters continued teaching and remained single.

More recently such deaths by firing squad have been commemorated at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire, where Denis now appear on yet another memorial list.

This war story apart, there remains a lot more which could be written about the Blakemore period in Bicton School, which spanned 38 years. Volunteers needed!

Special thanks must go to volunteers from the Family History Society who help in Shropshire Archives.

Humour at
the front

EXTRACT FROM
THE WIPERS TIMES

NOVEMBER 1917



Three Tommies sat in a trench one day,
Discussing the war, in the usual way,
They talked of the mud, and they talked
of the Hun,

Of what was to do, and what had been
done,

They talked about rum, and—'tis hard
to believe —

They even found time to speak about
leave,

But the point which they argued from
post back to pillar

Was whether Notts County could beat
Aston Villa.

—o—o—o—

The night sped away, and zero drew
nigh,

Equipment made ready, all lips getting dry,
And watches consulted with each passing
minute

Till five more to go, then 'twould find
them all in it ;

The word came along down the line to
“ get ready ! ”

The sergeants admonishing all to keep
steady,

But out rang a voice getting shriller and
shriller :

“ I tell yer Notts County can beat Aston
Villa ! ”

continued...

