

Once again in November we remember the fallen in past wars, although this year the focus has already been upon the events starting in 1914. The Bicton memorial boards inside the church record that 58 men from the parish joined that war but that 11 did not survive it, so there must be many personal stories to tell. For instance, that of Len Cooke of the Grange has already featured in this history series.

The national and international commemoration of the war has already boosted the growing 'Battlefield Tourist industry', so that many key sites now have improved facilities to cater for visitors, such as those around Ypres and the Somme area (Menin Gate, Tyne Cot, Thiepval). These will, of course, be the focus of particular attention, but many smaller and 'out of the way' sites may be overlooked. Since some of these contain Bicton men, perhaps we ought to draw attention to them with two examples.

Harry Yewbery died in October 1916 aged 21 and is buried in a small cemetery in woodland near the village of Aix-Noulette in northern France. It had been originally established by a casualty station set up in the sheltered position just behind the front lines, which were enduring the usual 'stalemate' and 'war of attrition' rather than by set piece battles. These had already taken place at Loos, nearby to the north, while at this moment most action was taking place at the Somme area further south.

Today the nearby hill overlooking this cemetery is crowned by the great French memorial and cemetery of Notre Dame de Lorette, which is never short of visitors and is highly visible from the Paris autoroute anyway. Most British tourists are more likely to visit the nearby Canadian memorial at nearby Vimy Ridge.

By contrast, Arthur Henry Bason, who died in October 1918, aged 21, lies in a larger cemetery, but one further from the front near Kassel, into which those who died as prisoners of war have been concentrated from other sites in Germany. He may have been wounded and captured in the German 'Spring Offensive' of March 1918 which saw so many British positions overrun.

Like Harry, he could have died from his wounds in spite of medical care. Infected wounds could be a particular problem in those days before the development of penicillin and may have contributed to the excessive death toll of the war. Also, even the best medical facilities could have been overwhelmed at times.

This cemetery, well maintained to the usual 'British and Commonwealth' standard, shares a small hill with a less well presented Russian plot, near the village of Niederzwehren, now almost absorbed by Kassel. This is a very central location in the Country and for the same reason, the surroundings include a railway and important motorway intersections, while a long distance footpath passes the gate. The equivalent German POW cemetery in this Country is likewise centrally located, but on a much quieter site on Cannock Chase.

The War Graves Commission recorded Harry as son of William and Mary Yewbery of Grange Cottages, Bicton (opposite end of Bicton Lane) and then Arthur Bason as grandson of Mrs Yewbery, so there must have been a family connection. In fact, Arthur was actually Harry's nephew in spite of their similarity in age!

The explanation of all this involves the typical lifestyle of 'Victorian' agricultural labourers, i.e. moves between different employers, small 'tied' or rented cottages filling up with large families, and the

need for the eldest to leave home early in order to make room for younger siblings. In the case of girls this would usually involve 'living in' domestic service, which sometimes left them with unwanted problems.....

The families in question included that of William and Rhoda Bason who moved into Walton near High Ercall in the 1870s and that of William and Mary Yewbery who followed them from Shifnal in the 1890s. Their youngest son, Harry, was born here in 1895, by which time elder sister, Mary Jane had probably already left home. However, in circumstances which are not clear and rarely talked about in families anyway, she gave birth to a son Arthur Henry in 1897, while still single. The child was therefore taken in by her parents in a way not uncommon in those times, when families had to provide their own 'social services'. The alternative would have been the 'workhouse'! Arthur was therefore only slightly younger than 'uncle' Harry, but otherwise just one more 'Yewbery'.

In late 1901, circumstances began to change when mother Mary (26) married neighbour George Bason (30), whom she must have already known for several years. Between them they went on to produce nine more children during the following 20 years. Meanwhile, William and May Yewbery moved to Bicton sometime around 1907, but Arthur may not have joined them. He now took his mother's new name but did not join her new household in High Ercall as far as is known, but instead went into domestic service. In 1911 he was recorded as a fourteen year old 'page boy' at a 'big house' on the London Road in Shrewsbury. Other records suggest he was living at Harlescott, before becoming old enough to 'join up' for the war. This could have been his way of escaping a world in which he had little normal family life apart from that provided by grandparents.

Meanwhile 'uncles' Harry and Frank Yewbery, now from Bicton, also joined up, but only Frank returned. He had already married Mary Groom just before the war and now continued life as cowman at the Woodlands. Mother/Grandmother Mary moved to Corner Lane by Bicton Heath, where she died in 1930 aged 80.

The nearest neighbours around Grange Cottage likewise experienced both joy and tragedy during the war: two Cassels boys from Bicton House returned safely, as did Arthur Edge from Calcott Lane, although his brother Harry only returned to die from his wounds and now lies in our churchyard. Across the road at the school the master's son Denis Blakemore was 'shot at dawn' for desertion and lies in another small 'out of the way' cemetery in Belgium. We could discuss the details some other time.

If any readers have their own family stories from the war do let us know.

Niederzwehren cemetery



