

## CHELSEFIELD'S CASUALTIES OF WORLD WAR I

We are fortunate that Shaun Brown has sent us a detailed and beautifully written account of the lives of his great uncles from the Hills family. One, William, is on our memorial, the other, John, was also born on Well Hill but for some reason doesn't appear, perhaps because he had moved to Stockwell.

### Well Hill Brothers in Arms

#### William Hills (1876 – 1917) John Thomas Hills (1880 – 1917)

*When my parents sent me to board at Cannock House School in 1960 I had no idea that the parish of Chelsfield, in which the school was located, had such a powerful connection to my family. My mother knew that her father, Albert Victor Hills, had come from this area and that an aunt still lived up on Well Hill but not that this had been the home of the Hills family for hundreds of years.*

*When I turned 16 I asked the local rector, the Rev Leslie King, if I could be confirmed only to discover that first I had to be christened! With my parents in Nigeria I arranged with the Rev King for the christening to be carried out at the parish church of St Martin of Tours in front of a small group of school friends and my relative from Well Hill. Lottie Parrott was the daughter of my grandfather's twin sister Beatrice. She took me aside from my giggling school friends and presented me with a prayer book. "You do realise," she told me "that your grandfather was christened at this very font. And if you look at the war memorial by the door you will see the name of your uncle William."*

*I'm sure I expressed suitable interest although, in truth, my youthful insensitivity meant I had already filed the information under "Whatever".*

*But 50 years later, when I began to investigate my family history I recalled Aunt Lottie's comment. Now I had many questions that, sadly, she was no longer able to answer. But she had planted in me not only the seed of a story that I knew deserved to be told but also the responsibility to be the one to tell it.*

Winter was receding and the promise of spring was in the air when Thomas and Elizabeth Hills celebrated the arrival of their second son William at their cottage on Well Hill overlooking the village of Chelsfield. Thomas Hills, like most of his neighbours was an agricultural labourer. He had married Elizabeth Baldwin from the adjacent parish of Eynsford just six years earlier. At first they lived with Thomas's parents, Richard and Ann in the Black Cottages, a terraced row that still stands today near the old Kent Hounds public house. But by the time William was born in 1876 they had moved to their own cottage along the road. Elizabeth's parents Thomas and Charlotte lived next door.

Times had been hard. Elizabeth had already lost two children, Ada Jessie (twin of their eldest son Richard) in 1873 and Charlotte Lilly in 1875. Neither had achieved their first birthday. They wasted little time in having William christened at the ancient parish church of St Martin of Tours on March 19, 1876.

The couple were to have another five children, ten in all, over just 16 years. Among them was another son they named John Thomas, born in December 1879 and baptised at St Martin's the following month.

While such an extensive family may have been a blessing it was also a considerable practical burden. When William was five and John just one, both parents were obliged to work as agricultural labourers to feed the growing family. But even that was insufficient, and so circumstances required that once the children reached their early teens they had to leave home and make their own way.

Not surprising then that in 1891, William aged only 15, was lodging with the family of John Mitchell, the foreman of Court Lodge Farm where he was employed to tend the horses. John, only 11, had also moved, although only next-door to live with his grandparents.

In February 1898, William now a young man just turning 22 married Susan Ann Hayes. Her father George had been born in Chelsfield although the Hayes family were now living in Orpington. That's where William and Susan first set up home in a house in Lower Road. But it meant William had been obliged to leave the land and work instead as a navvy on the railways.

He must have been keen to get back to farm work because he used his family connections to escape the grinding labour on the railways. By 1911 he was working for his uncle, John Baldwin, as a waggoner at Hulberry Farm. It meant he was back tending horses, the job he'd first enjoyed at Court Lodge Farm. Hulberry farm sits in the Darent Valley between Crockenhill and Eynsford and it was only a pleasant stroll through Lullingstone Park to his parents' home on Well Hill.

John had to move further afield to find work. By the time he was 21 he had followed two of his other brothers to Stockwell in London where he worked as a "contractor's carman".

He must have maintained some contact with the Chelsfield region because when he married in 1904 it was to a girl from Crockenhill. Emma Harriet Payne was the daughter of Frederick Payne, an agricultural labourer, and his wife Sarah Ann. John and Emma had their first and only child a year later, a little girl they called Dorothy.

But William and Susan had to wait an agonising 15 years before they had their first child. Florence was born in November 1913. But whatever sense of contentment this brought William was sadly short-lived. In less than two years his life was twice rocked by tragedy. Little Florence, the source of so much joy, lived only a few weeks and died in February 1914. The couple moved to another farm, Waldens, just three miles along Eynsford Road from Hulberry Farm. William had secured another position there, again as a waggoner.

Suddenly on Friday, August 7, 1915 Susan collapsed. The local doctor Alan Tennyson Smith was called but she was already dead. Dr Tennyson Smith certified the cause of death as a cerebral haemorrhage. In just 18 months William had lost his entire family.

This personal tragedy took place in the midst of a national crisis. Across the channel the savage conflict in France and Belgium was accompanied by daily reports of a staggering loss of life among the British forces. At the time of Susan's death the British army still comprised of volunteers. But within just a few months a new scheme was introduced, a precursor to conscription, and although William was now nearly 40 years old he would be caught in the net.

By the end of 1915, just three months after Susan's death, William had come forward to "attest" his eligibility for service. He was given a grey armband with a red crown to indicate he had volunteered and was placed in the Army Reserve. But he knew it was only a question of time before he would be mobilised and sent to the front along with hundreds of thousands of new recruits desperately needed to replace the growing number of British casualties. In July 1916 he received his orders. He was to join the British Expeditionary Force. Could he have avoided service? After all his age was borderline and his work on a farm might have given him grounds to challenge his eligibility. But he made no such attempt.

Perhaps grief played a role in resigning himself to fight or maybe it was purely a sense of duty? Or perhaps he had heard that his younger brother John had enlisted and was on his way to France.

John had joined the London Regiment of the 1/17<sup>th</sup> London Battalion. Known as the Poplars it comprised, at the outbreak of the war, recruits almost exclusively from the East End; civil servants, council workers, clerks from the docks and other members of the new urban respectable working class.

Although John came from south of the river, he would have had little difficulty fitting in. By now he was working for the local council as a dustman; his lifestyle, aspirations and values were very similar to those of his new mates from the East End.

By the late summer of 1916 Rifleman John Thomas Hills was thrust into the front line at the Battle of the Somme. On September 14 his unit was ordered into the trenches bordering a wooded area called Bois des Foureaux. But to the British infantry it was simply High Wood, the scene of such constant fighting that only a few blasted tree stumps amidst the mud and craters testified to its former status.

The trenches John found himself in had been constructed back in July in such a hasty and disorganised manner that the parapets comprised the bodies of fallen comrades scarcely covered with soil. Now two months later, the rain and enemy bombardment had exposed the putrefying corpses behind which John and his comrades sheltered. From this horrific base The Poplars joined the attack on High Wood. Despite the extensive bungling of those in command the wood was taken from the Germans – but at what a price. The 141 Brigade, which included the Poplars, lost two thirds of its troops, killed, wounded or missing.

John and the other survivors were relieved after five days at the front. They were given eight days to recover before being ordered into battle once more. His brother William was by now also in action. Curiously, on his attestation form William had described himself as an "excavator" rather than a waggoner. This, together with his diminutive stature (he was only 5 foot 4 inches tall) meant he was immediately identified for one of the most demanding jobs on the front - a tunneller.

Sapper William Hills joined the 254<sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Company of the Royal Engineers and was sent to Clipstone Camp in Nottinghamshire for a month's training before posting to Flanders.

In September 1916, while John was fighting at High Wood, William was engaged in an altogether different form of combat 40 miles to the north near the town of Bethune. Here by the tiny village of Givenchy the two armies had been waging a underground war since the start of hostilities.

Throughout the second half of 1916 William and his comrades in the 254<sup>th</sup> were digging tunnels deep under enemy lines. When the mines they placed in those tunnels were detonated everything and everyone immediately above was destroyed. The work was backbreaking and dangerous and the risk of a tunnel collapse ever-present. Sometimes it was just an accident but more often it was the consequence of enemy listening devices detecting the Allied digging.

As winter closed in William remained at Givenchy, digging tunnels, mending dugouts and creating listening posts to detect any enemy activity. At least underground he was sheltered from the snow and high winds that troops on the surface had to endure. John's company had been re-deployed to the Ypres sector that the high command had already identified as the location of the next big push.

And in May 1917 William's 254<sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Company was also sent to Ypres. When the tunnellers weren't working underground they were employed in building and maintaining trenches and roads just behind the front line. Ironically it was working on this mundane task rather than the infinitely more dangerous tunnelling work that placed William in mortal peril.

In the early hours of the morning of July 31, 1917 the British launched the third Ypres offensive and triggered the bloody episode now known simply as Passchendaele. Torrential rain was falling as the sappers of the 254<sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Company were sent forward to work on the roads in the front line. The company's war diary names the area of activity as around St Jean and Wiltje. These are two small settlements only a mile apart and now called Sint-

Jan and Wieltje that lie just to the east of Ypres. When the opening barrage began at 3.50 am on July 31 the front line ran north to south through Wieltje.

The sappers of the 254<sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Company were operating on the edge of the unfolding battle. On that first day British troops pushed forward behind the advancing artillery bombardment and by day's end had advanced the line several hundred metres. But German forces had not been completely eliminated. In isolated pockets behind the new front line there were machine gun nests and fortified farms still under their control.

The following day William Hills and his comrades were again deployed on roadwork, but now in the previously occupied area beyond Wieltje. The conditions were shocking. The terrain, already churned up by artillery fire and destroyed German fortifications, had been turned into a quagmire by the heavy rain.

Unexpectedly the team of sappers became exposed to enemy fire, probably from one of the isolated positions the Germans had hung on to during the British advance. Three of William's comrades were killed outright. He and another six sappers were wounded.

Suffering from gunshot wounds to the legs he was carried by stretcher-bearers through the mud first to a nearby dressing station and then to a Casualty Clearing Station behind the front line. But the severity of his wounds meant he had then to be transferred to the Base Hospital 140 miles to the south in Rouen.

It's hard to imagine the harrowing ordeal that William faced first by gunshot trauma and then by the lengthy transfer to Rouen. It's possible that he didn't survive the long trip south or perhaps he clung on for a day or so at the hospital the Allies had erected on the Rouen racecourse. The official records only show that on August 4, 1917 Sapper William Hills died from wounds. When William was shot, his brother John was just five miles away. His company was being held in reserve and was not called into action. John would not have known of his brother's fatal wounding. But on August 6, just two days after William's death, a telegram boy marched up Well Hill to the home of Thomas and Elizabeth Hills bearing the small envelope that parents throughout England dreaded receiving.

In February the following year Elizabeth received William's personal effects and his outstanding pay of just over 19-pounds. In 1919 a further payment of 3-pounds war gratuity was sent from the War Office together with a commemorative plaque and notification that he had been awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

Today William Hills lies alongside 12,000 of his comrades at St. Sever Cemetery in Rouen. John was to survive his brother by only a few months. As winter set in at the end of 1917 his company had endured the endless cycle of front line fighting around Ypres followed by a few days of rest behind the lines before returning to action. Casualties occurred on a daily basis, even when resting the Poplars would lose men to the constant enemy shelling.

In November the Poplars received orders to march south to the Cambrai sector. They would have been pleased to leave Ypres behind but fearful of what lay ahead. Seven days of marching, with only limited access to motor transport brought the Poplars to the Hindenburg Line just west of Cambrai where British forces had made significant advances. Still exhausted by the march south, the Poplars were ordered the following day to enter Boulon Wood to defend the newly won territory against the inevitable German counter attack.

When it came it was in the form one of the most terrifying weapons deployed at that time – gas. Throughout the night the Germans rained gas shells on the British troops packed into Boulon Wood. The thick foliage trapped the gas and prevented it from dispersing. At one stage 680 British troops suffering from the effects of gas poisoning had to be led from the woods to the nearest casualty station. So impregnated with gas were their uniforms that medical officers treating them were also overcome. No records exist that identify what wounds Rifleman John Hills received defending Boulon Wood. His position had been exposed not only to gas attack but also to conventional shelling and infantry engagement. But the records do state that he died of wounds on November 30, 1917. His burial place, just a few kilometres from Boulon Wood, is in a small cemetery at Orival Wood the probable location of the casualty station to which he was evacuated from the fighting.

Like William he was to receive the British War Medal and the Victory Medal and his widow Emma just a few pounds of outstanding pay and war gratuity. William's name was placed among those of his friends and neighbours on the list of the Chelsfield fallen at the parish church memorial. But John's name is not among them. The sacrifice of this son of Chelsfield is recorded only on the Stockwell War Memorial. Their father Thomas, who died three years later, did make sure his sons' names were jointly etched into Chelsfield history. On his gravestone, recently rediscovered by Geoff Copus leaning against the north wall of St Martin's churchyard, were added the words: "Also William Hills, killed in France 4 August 1917 aged 41; John killed in France 30 November 1917 sons of the above".



