

100 Years Ago: Lavendon Soldiers and the Village War Memorial

On Sunday 12th December 1920 the newly erected Lavendon Village War Memorial was unveiled by Major Harrold Hatton Hulse of Lavendon Grange who had served in the War and who was also a Boer War veteran. It was a bitterly cold afternoon. The '*short but impressive service*' was followed by an address given by the Rev John Herbert Davis, then Rector of the Parish. The Last Post was sounded and a contemporary newspaper report records that ex-Servicemen of WW1 "*honoured their fallen comrades by placing a wreath at the base of the cross and marching past the memorial with bared heads. Relatives and friends of the deceased soldiers also placed beautiful floral tributes at the foot of the cross.*"

The names of 21 Lavendon men who fell some 100 years ago in the Great War are inscribed on the village cross. Their ages ranged from 17 to 44; most were in their 20s, though there were 5 teenagers and 3 in their 40s. The majority of men died in France and Flanders on the Western Front, but two died elsewhere in the Middle East (Jerusalem and Mesopotamia), another in a German PoW camp and a fourth during pre-departure training in Suffolk.

As might be expected, many of the men served in the local Regiments such as the Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and the Oxford & Buckinghamshire Regiments. All of the men lived, worked or had family in Lavendon Parish, though some also had family associations with other nearby parishes such as Cold Brayfield, Clifton Reynes, Sherrington and Yardley Hastings. All of the men have memorials or gravestones located close by where they fell, carefully looked after by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. There are seven instances of inscribed memorials or plaques only, rather than graves with headstones; sadly this indicates that those seven men had no known resting place for their bodies. Four of the 21 men were married, two with children.

The first Lavendon soldier to die in the Great War was Private Frank Bowyer, a former reservist in the Royal Fusiliers; he was shot by a German sniper on 14th November 1914, a little over 3 months after war was declared. His half-brother Private Frederick Bowyer of the Bedfordshire Regiment died later in 1918. The last Lavendon soldier to die was Private William Wright, aged 19, who fell only 9 days before the Armistice in November 1918. Two other brothers, Privates Arthur and Everet Freeman, died in the War as did their nephew, Private Charles Freeman. Similarly, another two brothers, Privates Joseph and Richard Watts, also died in the war together with their nephew Private Alfred Watts.

With a focus naturally upon those who were lost during the War, it is easy to forget the sacrifices that other men and their families made during this period, as well as the overall impact that the War would have had on village life. A number of the Lavendon men who returned were discharged after being physically or mentally wounded; they were awarded the silver war badge as a result. Shortly before the start of the War, the 1911 census records that Lavendon had 160 households (compared to 535 today). It is a sobering thought that of those 160, some 107 households included one or more male members of the family who were in the age range 11-36 years in 1911 and so would have been liable to serve in the Colours during the ensuing war. The upper age range followed from the Military Service Act of 1916 which meant that with few exceptions men aged up to 41 in 1915 were subject to conscription if they hadn't previously volunteered. In practice several men from the village who were even older served voluntarily during the war.

Out of a total population of 687 in Lavendon, the census shows that some 459 family members were living in those 107 households noted above. Thus, at least two-thirds of all Lavendon residents could have been directly impacted by the call-up of a family member, not only single sons, but quite often a husband or father of a young family. By examining many different sources, it is possible to individually name over 130 men associated with the village who served in the War and who were at least fortunate enough to return. Given these sizeable numbers it is not surprising that there was a fine turnout and march past at the unveiling of the Cross to honour those 21 who did not return to their village.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that at least another 9 men associated with Lavendon died serving their country in WW1. Their names are not listed on the Lavendon Cross but in some cases they are recorded on other nearby village memorials, usually because they or their families had recently moved away from Lavendon. Sadly at least one soldier, L/Corporal Thomas Billing of the Lincolnshire Regiment, appears to have no local village memorial despite having lived with his family at Uphoe Farm for more than the first 20 years of his life. Thomas, who had later married and moved to Dunstable, was evidently severely wounded in late 1917 when it is recorded that he fell from a stretcher in the dark and was lost in the mud....

Individual tributes to our Lavendon soldiers will appear on the Lavendon Connection web site on the 100-year anniversaries of their deaths.