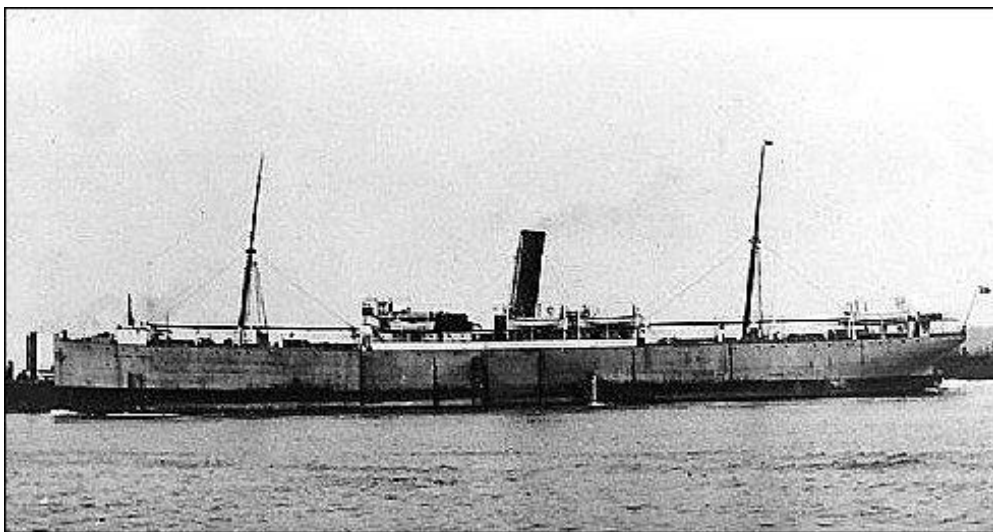


Lest we Forget – Howard James Hall

We continue with our occasional articles on those who lost their lives in military service during World War 1 and are remembered on our War Memorial in the grounds of St Mary's.

Howard was the eldest of the two sons of Benjamin and Sarah Hall and, like his father and grandfather, he was born and brought up in Wick. Benjamin earned his living as a shoemaker but when it came to his turn to find work, rather than follow in his father's footsteps, Howard gained employment as a farm labourer. No doubt he would have continued to work on the local land if it were not for the outbreak of the "Great War" but at the age of 20, Howard joined up with the Worcestershire Regiment.

He gained his stripe and became a Corporal in the 9th Battalion and in June 1915, along with the rest of his unit, finished training on Salisbury Plain. The battalion had been given orders to reinforce the Mediterranean Expeditionary and these troops embarked on the transport ship "SS Cawdor Castle" leaving Bristol Docks on the 24th June. The ship stopped over in Malta and Alexandria to take on fresh supplies before heading to its final destination – the island of Lemnos, just off of the main Turkish coast.



SS Cawdor Castle

From here on 13th July they were ferried across by battleship at night to join in the infamous Battle of Gallipoli. It was during this campaign that Howard and his men first saw action in the trenches of Gully Beach as they fought against the army of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. With intense fighting, heavy casualties were sustained on all sides, but Howard managed to survive and the battalion were then withdrawn.

They were sent to Egypt for a period and then given their next mission; to continue the fight against the Ottoman army but this time in Mesopotamia.

At that time, Turkey was an ally of Germany and their empire encompassed the area now known as Iraq. The politicians were of course keen to gain victory over Turkey but a key factor behind the conflict in this part of the Arab world was a reason well known to us in more modern times – the supply of oil. Securing the flow of oil was paramount in WW1 if the British Navy was to maintain its dominance on the high seas.

The battalion was assigned to the 13th (Western) Division that joined up with a division of the Indian Army to fight on this front. The conditions were appalling and the heat caused many casualties through illness and disease.

The troops had seen no heavy fighting during the Summer and Autumn of 1916. The earlier disastrous campaign for the relief of Kut had left both the opposing armies exhausted; and the heat of the ensuing months had been too severe to permit much movement of troops. So both British and Turkish forces lay quiet and waited for the cooler weather of Winter before hostilities began again.

Howard's battalion had been drawn back from the front to the camp at Amara, a town which lay on the left bank of the River Tigris. There training was carried on keenly throughout October and November and by the end of this period the Division was once more in good fighting trim and received the orders to move to the front line.

They marched out of Amara on 29th November and over the next ten days covered a distance of around 100 miles. At the outset, the march begun in hot sun and sand but when on the 8th December they reached their final destination of the "Twin Canals", they encountered heavy rain that turned most of the ground on this desolate plain to a muddy slush, six inches deep. It was then that they began the task of trying to overcome the Turkish troops who were well dug in around the canals.

The following day, 9th December 1916, Howard, aged 23, was killed in action.



This picture of Howard was published in the Berrow's Worcester Supplement on 27th January 1917.

Howard Was finally laid to rest in the War Cemetery at Amara (see below) and would have had the "usual" military grave. Unfortunately, due to the salt in the soil in the area, all of the headstones were found to be deteriorating and were therefore removed in 1933 and, due to the unrest in that part of the world in recent decades, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission have not found it possible to maintain the Cemetery.



Perhaps then it is even more important that Howard's loss is recalled on our War Memorial.