

Lest we Forget – Robert James Footman

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

This is the rather sad story of Robert James Footman, a Private in the Worcestershire Regiment.

Robert was born around 1897, the first child of Robert Charles and Hannah Footman, when they were living in Dudley. His father had been brought up in the countryside of Worcestershire but had moved to the town, along with a younger brother, to find work as a labourer in the area's Iron foundries.

A year after Robert James was born, along came his sister Dorothy. His youngest sister Gwendoline arrived in 1905 but by then tragedy had struck the family as young Robert's father died at the age of 36, before the birth of his last child.

With three children to support and now a widow, Hannah must have been desperate to think how she would bring up her children and it seems the decision was made that young Robert, now aged 8 years old, would go off and stay with his paternal Grandparents who were working on a farm around Astley near Holt Heath. Hannah kept her two daughters with her and went to Wells in Somerset where she found employment as a boarding house keeper in a large property around the Cathedral Green.

From then on, young Robert was brought up by his grandparents, Robert and Emily Footman, and his maiden aunt, Gertrude. Robert attended the local school in Astley for several years and, as was common in those days, left at the age of 14 to take up farm work.

By the outbreak of the War, it seems that Robert had moved to Wick and at this stage we can only surmise as to why this was. Research has so far failed to identify any of Robert's family living in or around here at that time. Given his experience of working with his Granddad it is probably the case that he had found employment on one of the local farms as an agricultural worker. What we do know is that Robert enlisted in the Army at the recruiting station in Pershore and from there Private 20365 Robert J Footman was attached to D Company of the 12th Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment.

The 12th Battalion was formed in Plymouth in November 1914 as a Kitchener New Army battalion. Almost as soon as it formed a decision was made that it would be a home-based reserve battalion whose role would be to train new recruits and send them as replacement drafts to the fighting battalions as the war progressed.

Below is a photograph of soldiers from a couple of sections of D Company of the 12th Battalion. Was Robert one of the young faces or not? We can only guess.



In researching the military history of servicemen from WWI we are sometimes limited by what information is still available because 60% of the records held centrally from that time were destroyed by enemy bombing in WW2. As every record was held on paper, the county regiments did not normally hold copies of files sent off for central storage, particularly for the lower ranks of soldiers. Like so many, Robert's records were amongst those destroyed but it is unlikely there would have been much information held in his file in any event.

It seems that Private Footman never passed out from training and even though he had made it as far as Plymouth he did not leave the shores of England. Sadly, on 9th June 1915 Robert died of pneumonia at the age of 18 years old and was buried in a military grave in Plymouth.

Although he was not killed in action, Robert is remembered for his service to his Country and his name is displayed on not one but three War Memorials. Along with other ex-pupils who lost their lives, his name appears on the plaque at Astley school. His details are also included on the impressive War Memorial on the edge of Astley village. Finally, as we know, his name appears on our own Memorial in the Church grounds.

Another poignant find on researching Robert's short life was his name also is inscribed on two gravestones. Besides his military gravestone in Plymouth, when visiting the Church of St Peter in Astley we discovered the gravestones of his grandparents. His grandfather died less than three months after Robert on 5th September 1915 and one can just make out the inscription on the lichen-covered headstone that remembers

both the life of Robert senior, the grandfather, and also Robert James Footman, the grandson.



Coming back to why Robert Footman's name appears on the Wick War Memorial it has not yet been possible to discover why this is. It might have been that a relative asked for his name to be added. Equally it could have been a local farmer who wanted to ensure that one of his young workers was always remembered by our community. Whatever the reason, it seems to have worked as nearly hundred years later we recall the life and death of Robert James Footman.

If you know any more about Robert and his time in Wick, the History Group would be delighted to hear from you.