



DEATH AND SERVICE NEWSLETTER

Welcome to another edition of the newsletter. With the evenings getting steadily lighter, I trust you and yours are doing well.

Following on from last month's query around information about Private Thomas Besley, his death certificate was to prove the key that unlocked the mystery surrounding him. His life is explored in this issue.

As the website reaches 1250 stories, I have expended my horizons beyond Somerset for recent research. In sifting through documentation for one of the Channel Island graves I photographed last year, I came across a surprising find. More of that later too!

Do please get in touch if you have any questions, or thoughts about what you would like to see in future editions. I'd love to hear from you.

Until next time.

Best wishes,

Richard

Did you know?

Research has led me to add three more regiments to the website this month, as I uncovered the lives of service personnel from the Manchester Regiment, the Royal Irish Regiment and the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry. Head over to deathandservice.co.uk to find out more.

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GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:

St Andrew's Church
Church Street
Wiveliscombe
TA4 2LR

Name: Besley, Thomas

Rank: Private

Regiment: Somerset Light Infantry

Date of death: 16th February 1915

Age at time of death: 20

Cause of death: Drowned

The short life of Thomas Besley is a challenge to unpick. He was born in Bampton, Devon, early in 1896, one of ten children to farm labourer Steven Besley and his wife, Fanny.

Steven's work took the family around the region, and the 1901 census found the Besleys living on Cordings Farm in Wiveliscombe, Somerset. The document records Thomas as being 5 years of age, sharing the accommodation with his parents and six of his siblings.

The 1911 census records Thomas working as a live-in labourer at Manor Farm in Huish Champflower, a village just three miles outside of Wiveliscombe.

Meanwhile, his family are still recorded as living in Wiveliscombe itself, Steven and Fanny residing with four of their children. Now, however, another Thomas is listed with them: seven years old, he is the only child of their oldest son, William and his late wife, Elizabeth. She had died in 1904, around the same time as young Thomas' birth, and it would appear that Steven and Fanny adopted their grandson (he is listed on the census as their 'son'). William went on to marry again, but his new wife, a widow called Hannah, had seven children from her first marriage. The couple would go on to have a son of their own, but it was a crowded house, and so Thomas lived permanently with his grandparents.

The older Thomas Besley signed up almost as soon as war was declared in 1914. While his service records are sparse, he joined the 3rd/5th Battalion of the Somerset Light Infantry.

What *can* be determined from the records is that Private Besley drowned. His death certificate - which mistakenly records his surname as Beasley - confirms that Thomas' body was found in the River Tone in Taunton on 16th February 1915, and the cause of death noted as 'found drowned'.

While research for Besley draws a number of blanks about the circumstances of his death, the misspelled surname featured in a contemporary newspaper report:

On Tuesday afternoon, around four o'clock, MJ Chapman... while passing the Locks at Firepool, Priory, Taunton, observed what appeared to be the body of a man floating in the swirl caused by

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the overflow of the Locks into the pool... The body had evidently been in the water for a considerable time and was much decomposed. The deceased was subsequently identified as Thomas Beasley... He was a private in... the Somerset Light Infantry, and was 40 years of age. He had been in ill-health for a considerable period, and latterly had been depressed. He disappeared on January 16th...

[At the inquest] Stephen Beasley, a farm labourer... gave evidence of [Thomas'] identification. He said that his son had lately been ill. Three months ago he was taken from Salisbury Plain to Bristol Hospital, where he remained for about a month. After his discharge from Hospital he went home, where he remained about a fortnight, and for the last two months he had been quartered at Taunton. In this time witness had seen his son twice, but he could not say that he had been well since he came out of Hospital. He was low-spirited, but never told witness that anything troubled him.

Captain Burrige stated that deceased was sent to hospital from the Plain about September. About the middle of October he had a wire from Bristol Infirmary informing him that he was dangerously ill and dying. However, he got over that, and he was discharged on October 28th. He was sent for 22 days' furlough to his home and returned to duty on November 22nd. Ever since that time he had not been in the best of health, but nothing had been noticed of his mental condition. He believed at one time there was a talk of his being discharged as medically unfit..

The Coroner asked [how] long deceased had been in the service, and witness answered that he joined on June 1st, 1913. His complaint when removed to Bristol Hospital was double pneumonia.

On the suggestion of the Coroner, the jury returned an open verdict.

Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser: Wednesday 24th February 1915

In addition to the Besley/Beasley surname, the report features a couple more discrepancies. Thomas' father's name is given as Stephen, when it was Steven. The deceased is also recorded as being 40 years old when he died, when he was actually half that age. These discrepancies also follow Thomas to his entry with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Their records note that he died on 16th February 1917 - two years after he actually passed away. They also give his age as 17, not 20.

Thomas Besley was laid to rest in the peaceful graveyard of St Andrew's Church in Wiveliscombe. It gives his age as 17 years old and the date of his death as 16th February 1917.

A SURPRISING FIND

When researching the lives of those who have fallen, there are some documents you become used to relying on for information. Census returns, birth and marriage certificates, service records, all are pretty common terms of reference.

Occasionally, as the January newsletter highlighted, a portrait of the person survives. More rarely, military record may outline an inquest into the unusual death or suicide of a serviceman.

Recently, however, I have come across a first in the 1250 people I have researched so far.

Private Philip le Cornu served with the 14th Battalion of the Canadian Light Infantry. In August 1917 he was badly wounded in the fighting on Hill 70 near Lens, France. His injury, a fracture of his left femur caused by a gunshot wound, necessitated medical evacuation to Britain, and he spent the next year in a number of hospitals, having at least three operations.

The fact that his service records survived is not unexpected – Canadian Expeditionary Force documentation being pretty meticulous and well kept, from what I have found – but in with the paperwork was the original x-ray of his thigh, showing the injury and the shrapnel that caused it.

Philip ultimately passed away from complications surrounding his injuries. He died on 14th September 1918, and was buried in St Mary's Church in Jersey, where he had been born.

