



DEATH AND SERVICE NEWSLETTER

Somehow, we have made it to the middle of the year, and, with August fast approaching, it's time for the next edition of the newsletter.

Over the last few weeks, I have had the privilege to speak to two lovely groups of people, one in Wincanton and the other in Taunton. Thanks to Christine Scott, one of the attendees in the first of these talks, I have been able to flesh out some of the details for one of the servicemen I knew little about. Read more in this issue.

Behind The Research moves on to the behemoth that is Ancestry, and I look at the basics for this genealogy site for the uninitiated.

In 2023, Michael Palin released a biography about his relative, Harry Palin, who was killed in France during the First World War. An interesting insight into the life of a Victorian 'teenager', you can find my review of the book in the coming pages.

With a bit of a break until my next talk – in Taunton this coming October – I have begun to compile a series of video diaries, short insights into the cemeteries and graveyards I have visited during this project. They can be found on my Facebook and Instagram feeds (for links, see right), but I have plans afoot for bigger things...

Until next time.

Best wishes,

Richard

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Keep in touch:

Web:

<https://deathandservice.co.uk/>

Facebook: [@deathandservice](https://www.facebook.com/deathandservice)

Instagram: [@deathandservice](https://www.instagram.com/deathandservice)

Email:

deathandservice@outlook.com

Death and Service:
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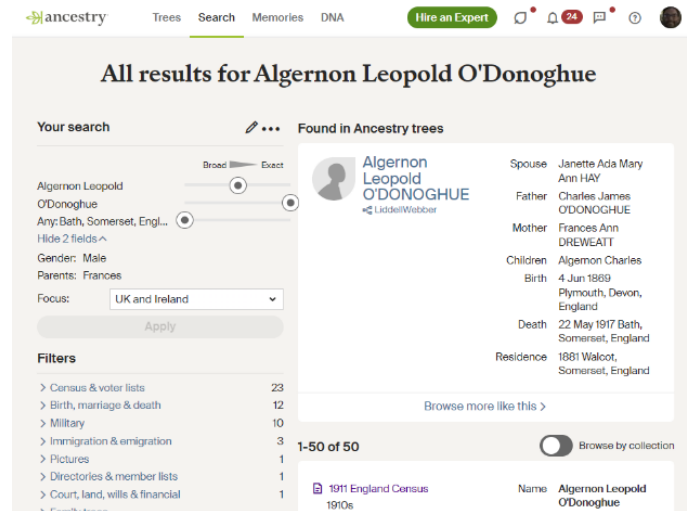


BEHIND THE RESEARCH – PART 3

With the cemetery and headstone identified, and the photo taken, the research can begin in earnest. Once I am back home, I straighten and resize the image, upload it to Wordpress – the site I use to manage the *Death and Service* website – and set up a draft page for the person concerned.

The key tool I use to undertake the research is the Ancestry website. This holds countless digitised records from around the world, and has proved time and again to be a great resource for uncovering people's lives.

As a general rule of thumb, I start with the serviceman's name, year of birth, location and, where I have it, the names of their parents and/or spouse. Usually, this will bring up a range of results and, if I am lucky, a family tree or two from others who have researched the same person.



One of these family trees may form the backbone of my entry on Death and Service. However, Ancestry will often provide access to documents to corroborate that information – or contradict it. Where new records come online, the tree itself may become out of date, and so, where I double check the information, new details come to light, to flesh out the previous research.

First & Middle Name(s) Last Name

Place your ancestor might have lived Birth Year

e.g. London, England

Search Show fewer options ^ Match all terms exactly

Add event: Birth Marriage Death Lived In Any Event More v

Add family member: Father Mother Sibling Spouse Child

Keyword

Occupation, street address, etc.

Gender Race/Nationality

-- Select --

Collection Focus

UK and Ireland

☒ Historical Records ☒ Family Trees

☒ Stories & Publications ☒ Photos & Maps

Search Clear search

The range of records that Ancestry holds is impressive. Census returns from 1841 to 1911 (the rights to the 1921 census currently being held exclusively by the Find My Past website) are the most common go-to. These will provide details of the person being researched, along with other members of the household at the time the of the census. The document will generally include the name, age, place of birth, marital status, occupation and relationship to the head of the household.

Other details on the censuses my seem surprising for 21st century researchers. They routinely asked for details of a person's physical and mental capacity were recorded in the way that only the Victorians and Edwardians could ('Deaf-and-Dumb', 'Blind', 'Lunatic, Imbecile or Idiot'). Irish census records asked whether someone could read or

write and what their religion was. The 1911 census, which, for the first time, gave a separate page to each household, and asked for the number of rooms in the residence.

Censuses allow you to track a person's growth over time, changes in relationships that they may have, and also their social standing. Household occupants may not just be family members, but visitors and staff – maids, cooks, governesses and pages are often found recorded.

Through Ancestry it is often possible identify baptism, marriage and death records for the person I'm researching. Occasionally school records flesh out their education, workhouse admissions and prison records outline the low points in someone's life, probate details show the legacy they have left behind them and who they have chosen to take on that legacy.

However, the key resources that Ancestry gives access to are the service records for the soldier, sailor, airman or nurse that I am researching. And they can prove interesting in their own right.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:

St Mary's Church
Church Hill
Templecombe
BA6 0HG

Name: Templeton, Robert

Rank: Private

Regiment: Royal Scots Fusiliers

Date of death: 1st November 1914

Age at time of death: 20

Cause of death: Illness

Robert Muckart Templeton was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1894. He was the fourth of five children to shipyard labourer William Templeton and his wife, Agnes.

There is little information on Robert's early life: the family's 1911 census records are lost, so it is not possible to identify what work he took on when he left school. It is, however, reasonable to assume that he joined his father in the shipyards.

When war broke out, Robert was one of the first to enlist. He joined the Royal Scots Fusiliers, and, as a Private, was assigned to the 8th (Service) Battalion. His troop was sent to Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, for training, and he was camped at Codford St Mary.

Towards the end of October, the 8th Battalion was moving to Bristol, and it was at this point that the fates intervened for Private Templeton. Suffering from an acute bout of appendicitis, he was admitted to the Abbas and Templecombe hospital. The condition was to prove his undoing and, on 1st November 1914, he passed away. He was just 20 years of age.

A shipyard labourer's wages were not going to be enough to transport a body halfway across the country, so the Templetons were let with little choice but to have their son buried close to where he died. Robert Muckart Templeton was laid to rest in the quiet graveyard of St Mary's Church, in Templecombe, Somerset.

Did you know?

There is only a finite amount of information available when researching the war graves. Some records produce a wealth of details, others scarcely anything at all. However, I am indebted to the fellow researchers I come into contact with – Christine Scott, Patricia Richards and Lesley James amongst them – whose additional insights have helped me build a better picture of those I am researching.

GREAT-UNCLE HARRY

Michael Palin's biography of his Great-Uncle Harry not only breathes life into a name engraves into the Caterpillar Valley Cemetery near Longueval, France, but it sheds light on the restless nature of a Victorian son who had lived his life in the shadow of his older and more high-flying siblings.

Michael is no stranger to the written word, and his travels around the world over the last thirty-five years have stood him in good stead to explore the unknown world of his not-so distant relative. Henry William Bourne Palin was born in September 1884, the youngest child to Edward – a reverend – and his Irish-born and American-raised wife, Brita.

Henry – who was better known as Harry – was sixteen years younger than his oldest sibling, Michael's grandfather Eddy, and his life was forever tainted by the death of his only other brother, Richie, who passed away from typhoid at just eighteen years of age. He grew up in a household of women, and seems to have within him a listlessness driven by the inability to emulate Eddy, who became a doctor, or to meet the expectations of the man Richie might have become.

In the book, Michael explores Harry's life, which takes him across the globe, from India to New Zealand. Using extracts from his diaries and from those who served alongside him, we follow Private Palin first to Gallipoli, then to northern France, where he ultimately met his end, at the age of 31.

Great-Uncle Harry is a fascinating read: less a war biography than an exploration of what it was to be a teenager, decades before the term was coined. Michael has the ability to bring his relative's story to life, exploring the futility of the Dardanelles and the horrors of the Western Front without any sense of maudlin reflection. In this he is guided by the short and practical nature of his relative's diary entries. This makes the tale easy to read for the uninitiated of the conflict and prompts further exploration for those, like myself, unaware of the specifics of the battles he was caught up in.

While I explored some of the books about the conflict in an earlier edition, Michael Palin's Great-Uncle Harry is definitely worthy of its own review.

