



DEATH AND SERVICE NEWSLETTER

Here we are then, the closing weeks of the year are upon us.

It has proved a month of opposites. The nights and weather have closed in, and I hope that the month's heavy snows and Storm Bert managed to avoid you too much.

I am closing in on the last of my Somerset research – at time of writing I have just three of the county's graves to research, all situated in the sweepingly majestic Locksbrook Cemetery in Bath. This will bring to a close 3½ years of photography and online detective work. I am, of course, expanding into neighbouring counties, and those further afield and, as it happens, have already drawn up a list of Pembrokeshire graveyards for an upcoming trip to South Wales.

In the last edition, I spoke of my return visits to some of my earlier graveyards, the intention being to upload video diaries to the [YouTube Channel](#). At the time I had started re-recording some films to stop them being saved as Stories (portrait-filmed online clips shorter than 60 seconds). When I came to upload them this weekend, however, it was only to discover that YouTube had increased the maximum length of these clips to three minutes. It goes without saying, of course, that the eight videos I had taken were all shorter than that, and so I need to start again.

Life is all about learning lessons, and I freely admit to being new to uploading content to the video website. All I need is a dry few hours to get back to the cemeteries for a third visit!

Until next time.

Best wishes,

Richard

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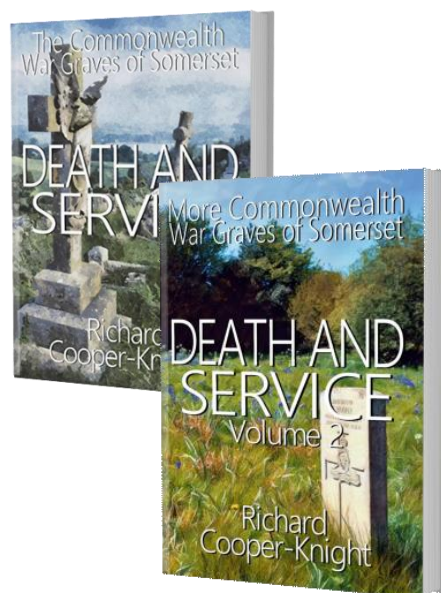
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Death and Service:

Volumes 1 and 2 are available in paperback and eBook.



THE CHATHAM DRILL HALL AIR RAID DISASTER

Chatham is a town located at the mouth of the River Medway in North Kent.

The town developed around the Naval Dockyard and several Army barracks, together with 19th-century forts which provided a defensive shield for the dockyard. The Corps of Royal Engineers is still based in Chatham at Brompton Barracks.

Chatham Drill Hall sits to the north of the town, and was built in 1902 to provide a covered parade ground for HMS Pembroke, the training establishment for the dockyard.



About 250yds (230m) long and 25yds (23m) wide, it was constructed with solid brick walls and a glass roof. In its time it had various uses: naval store, building supplies warehouse, exhibition centre and overflow barracks.

In September 1917, with the war at its height, the Drill Hall was being used as a temporary overflow dormitory for sailors from HMS Pembroke. The problem of housing the men had been exacerbated by two events: men who had been earmarked to join the HMS Vanguard had been forced to remain at the barracks after the ship had been sunk at Scapa Flow: an outbreak of 'spotted fever' in the barracks meant that the sleeping accommodation had to be increased in an effort to avoid further infection.

The situation meant that, on the night of 3rd September 1917, there were nearly seven hundred men in the Drill Hall, either asleep or resting in their hammocks.

At this point in the conflict, the Germany Air Force were trialling night raids with their bombers; they had suffered high losses during daytime flights, and so moonlight raids seemed a viable option.

At around 11pm, four bombers passed over the Isle of Sheppey, heading up the River Medway towards Chatham. Not expecting a night raid, the whole of the town was illuminated and none of the local artillery were prepared for an attack.

Chatham Drill Hall took a direct hit. The glass roof shattered and those inside stood little chance. Ninety-eight men died instantly, while a further thirty-five subsequently passed away from their injuries.

Survivors tore at the rubble with their bare hands in their efforts to find those lost beneath the rubble. The rescuers continued to work through the night and the search was only completed some seventeen hours after the explosion.

Onlookers reported a tragic, moonlit scene – officers and men carrying bodies into buildings transformed into temporary mortuaries, while the seriously wounded were placed into ambulances which sped to the hospital - flying glass and falling debris accounting for many of the casualties.

The funerals of 98 of those killed in the air-raid were held at the Woodlands Cemetery in Gillingham on Thursday 6 September 1917. All the men were buried with full military honours and were followed by a procession of marching soldiers and sailors with thousands of people lining the streets.

The stories of the men who lost their lives, and who were laid to rest in Woodlands Cemetery can be found on the website [here](#).



The photographs used in this article are from Wikipedia and the Imperial War Museum.



UPDATE

In last month's Grave of the Month, I inadvertently used headstone photograph from the previous edition, instead of that belonging to Fireman Robert McQueen.

The correct image, photographed at the Woodlands Cemetery in Gillingham, can be seen on the left.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:
St Mary Cemetery
Church Lane
Codford
Wiltshire
BA12 0PJ



Name: Fletcher, Harry

Rank: Private

Regiment: Australian Infantry

Date of death: 29th July 1917

Age at time of death: 33

Cause of death: Illness

Harry David Fletcher was born in Leichhardt, New South Wales, Australia, on 1st November 1883. The seventh of ten children - and the only surviving son - his parents were Daniel and Charlotte Fletcher.

There is little information about Harry's early life: he found work as a labourer when he finished school and, on 11th March 1911, he married Lillian Bosworth. The couple went on to have a son, Harold, who was born the following February.

When war came to Europe, the British Empire was called upon to play its part. On 19th February 1917, Harry enlisted in the Australian Infantry, although he did so under the alias of Harry Conway. His service records show that he had dark brown hair, hazel eyes and a medium complexion. He was also 5ft 7.75ins (1.72m) tall and weighed 140lbs (63.5kg). He had two noticeable scars: one on the inside of his right arm, the other on his right shin.

Private Conway/Fletcher set sail for Europe on 10th May 1917, arriving in Britain two months later. His unit - the 13th Battalion - was billeted in Wiltshire, near the village of Codford. Tragically, his time in the army was to be brief: he suffered issues with his gallbladder, and died in the camp hospital from cholecystitis and septicaemia on 29th July 1917. He was 33 years of age.

Harry David Fletcher was laid to rest in the Australian section of the new churchyard of St Mary's Church in Codford. His burial records note that the service was officiated by Chaplain Captain Collins, with six of his friends from the battalion acting as pallbearers. He was buried in an elm and brass coffin, with a small oak cross being erected over the grave.

Did you know?

The extension to St Mary's Churchyard is dedicated to the ANZAC troops who were based in the area. There are 99 recorded First World War graves there, from a variety of Australian and New Zealand battalions.

RECENT TALKS

A big thank you to both the Fuschia and Pelargonium Society in Taunton and the Somerset Coalfield Life at the Radstock Museum for their warmth during my most recent talks.

It was a genuine pleasure to expand on stories of the fallen of both areas, and I was honoured to be asked to talk at the recent meetings.

The 2025 calendar is starting to build, and I have two presentations booked in for February. Details below:

- [12th February 2025: Bridgwater & District Civic Society](#)
- [17th February 2025: Milborne Port History and Heritage Group](#)

I look forward to seeing you there!

