



DEATH AND SERVICE NEWSLETTER

Exciting times lie ahead, as the first draft of Further Commonwealth War Graves of Somerset – the third volume of the Death and Service series – is ready to be sent to the publisher!

Preparing this book has taken me to all corners of the county, and there are some wonderfully hidden gems of churches and chapels to be found out there.

In this month's newsletter, I have taken a look at some of the shorter-serving servicemen: those who died before getting the opportunity to serve their country.

I also venture back to South West Wales for a double-burial, and a potential mystery to be resolved.

Until next time.

Best wishes,

Richard

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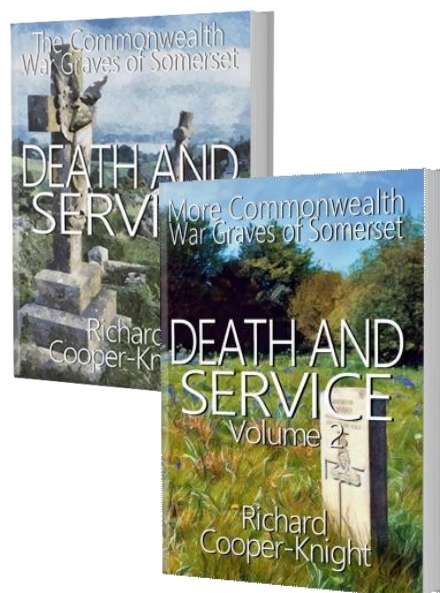
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Death and Service:
Volumes 1 and 2 are available in
paperback and eBook.



GONE TOO SOON

The research I have recently has uncovered a spate of servicemen who had died within an incredibly short space of time. A fair proportion of the ANZAC troop buried in the churchyard extension of St Mary's Church in Codford, Wiltshire, passed away from illness within two of three weeks of arriving in Britain, but they had enlisted at home, before enduring a two- or three-month sea voyage.

Turning my attention to British servicemen, story after story is pieced together where someone had enlisted, gone off for training, and then died before even leaving home soil. The First World War was the first time that men from across the country came together in one place – as opposed to troops being sourced and trained locally. They were housed in cramped barracks and billets, and disease had the perfect opportunity to run rampant. In a world before the discover of penicillin and the widespread use of antibiotics, the soldiers' immune systems had little fight in them, and men rapidly succumbed to the likes of pneumonia, influenza and meningitis.

Jack Gauntlett enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps in January 1917, leaving his home in Norton Bavant, Wiltshire for a training camp in Farnborough, Hampshire. Training as an Air Mechanic 2nd Class, he contracted pneumonia, and died on 11th May 1917. He was just 19 years of age.

Thirty-eight-year-old Private Amos Vickery joined the Royal Army Service Corps in June 1917, and was sent to the Remounts Unit in Bristol. On 28th August he had a stroke and died: his body was taken back to his home town of Bishops Lydeard.

Thomas Fleet enlisted in the Royal Navy on 30th March 1917. Also 38, he was sent to the barracks at HMS Vivid in Devonport, and suffered heart failure there. Ordinary Seaman Fleet passed away on 13th May 1917.

Albert Sampson was following in his father's naval footsteps when he enlisted in January 1916. Sent to Plymouth for training, he contracted quinsy, and died on 13th February: Boy 2nd Class Sampson was just 15 years of age.

Fred Pidgeon enlisted in the Grenadier Guards on 7th December 1916. Leaving his home in Lopen, Somerset, he was sent to barracks in Caterham, Surrey, and it was here, just 44 days later, that he passed away from pneumonia.

Private Joseph Tyler has been one of the first to enlist in the Hampshire Regiment when war was declared. He was sent to a camp in Wiltshire for his training, but died of heart failure on 13th October 1914: he was 32 years of age.

George McFarlane enlisted in the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders on 18th September 1914. As a Private, he made the lengthy journey from Dumbartonshire to Wiltshire for his training. Within a matter of weeks, he contracted pneumonia, and died in the camp hospital on 4th October 1914. He had been in the army for just 16 days.

All of the stories I have been fortunate to uncover over the last five years have had tragedy attached to them: however, there is the added poignancy of a life wasted, when the service personnel have not even had a chance to serve their country in the way in which they had longed to do.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:

Llanwnda Cemetery
Goodwick
SA64 0HU

Name: O'Keefe, Arthur

Rank: Fireman

Regiment: Merchant Navy

Date of death: 22nd November 1917

Age at time of death: 38

Cause of death: Killed in action

O'KEEFE Fireman Arthur. SS "Hartland." 22nd Nov., 1917. Age 38. Son of John and Mary O'Keefe of Cork.

The search for information about Arthur O'Keefe has proved a challenging one. He does not appear with his parents on any census records, and there is precious little documentation about his life.

Arthur found work as a Fireman in the Mercantile Marine, and served on board at least four ships. In the autumn of 1917, he was based out of Glasgow, Scotland, and was attached to the SS Hartland. She had been requisitioned by the Admiralty, and was put to use transporting wheat from India.

On 22nd November the Hartland was travelling from Glasgow to Barry, South Wales, when she was hit by a torpedo from the submarine U-97, 21 miles south west of Bardsey Island. The ship was damaged, and two of the crew - Fireman O'Keefe and Fireman Thomas McGaw - were killed.

An American destroyer, the USS Conyngham, was at the head of the Hartland's convoy, and managed to rescue the remaining 28 members of the crew, taking them to Holyhead. The Hartland was towed to Fishguard Harbour and refloated.

Arthur O'Keefe was 38 years of age when he was killed. He was laid to rest in Llanwnda Cemetery, not far from Fishguard, Pembrokeshire.

Did you know?

Fireman O'Keefe's headstone notes that he was buried with an unknown sailor of the Great War. There is no indication who this might have been, but there are no records of his colleague Thomas McGaw being laid to rest. Given both men died in the same incident, and their bodies were transported to Fishguard with their ship, it seems likely that they may have been buried together.

FURTHER COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES OF SOMERSET

The time has come, then, and the third volume of the Death and Service series is about ready to be sent to the publishers!

The process of writing seems to get easier with each book, I guess because the overall format is the same. However, the geographical journey has been much longer than the previous excursions, mainly because I have covered 120 churchyards and cemeteries across all corners of the county.

Publication is still planned for the autumn, and I am looking forward to see how the next chapter (no pun intended) unfolds...

DEATH AND SERVICE Volume III: Further Commonwealth War Graves of Somerset

By Richard Cooper-Knight

FOREWORD

The first two volumes and women who feel i larger cemeteries and them – where multipl

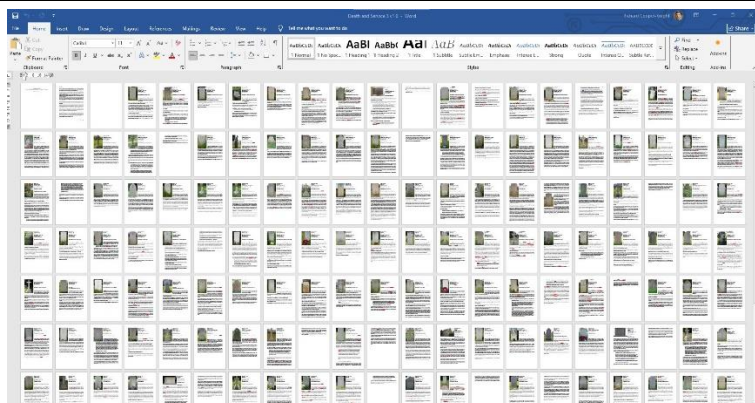
In this third volume, I track graveyards with and hamlets, from Lu and Hinton St George

The stories, however, the deaths were cau: wounds they received

The impact of these d Frederick Crook from town, it is likely that i therefore felt a more j a collective grief taker

As with the previous i

COMING SOON!



Nicely set up in Taunton Castle, the Museum of Somerset is a hidden gem. Detailing the county's history, it is a great place for a locals and visitors alike.

Once the barracks for the Somerset Light Infantry, the museum has a gallery dedicated to the regiment, including some unique mementos from the First World War.

The museum also holds regular events and talks, and you cannot suggest there is nothing to do!

Learn more [here](#).

