



DEATH AND SERVICE NEWSLETTER

Here we are, then. The November edition of the newsletter.

It has been a little more than four years since the first Death and Service book was published, and just over two since its follow-up was released. The third volume will be out imminently, and I can't wait for you to read it.

Last month's newsletter spoke of Drummer Malcolm Vacher, and, with the much-appreciated insight of a war forum, I am now able to expand on what happened to his sister in the years that followed her brother's passing.

We also shine a light on multiple graves in one, with a headstone in Staplegrove, Somerset, that commemorates three people laid to rest in the local graveyard.

Until next time.

Richard

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Keep in touch:

Website:

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

Facebook: [@deathandservice](#)

Instagram: [@deathandservice](#)

YouTube: [@deathandservice](#)

Email:

deathandservice@outlook.com

Death and Service:

Volumes 1-3 are available in paperback and eBook.

The new series of talks and presentations are getting ever closer, with an exploration of the stories I have uncovered while researching the third book.

1st November: [History Hut](#)

10th November: [Pilton Village History Group](#)

12th November: [Somerset Western Front Association](#)

It will be lovely to see you there.



SHARED KNOWLEDGE

In last month's edition, I focused on the story of Drummer Malcolm Vacher, of the Sherwood Foresters. He had been orphaned when he was just 14 years of age and, when he died from a combination of appendicitis and heart failure in the autumn of 1919, this left his sister, Gladys, alone in the world.

At the time of researching, I had been unable to find any additional information about Gladys: her unusual surname did not appear on the 1921 census, and all of the avenues I tried resulted in dead ends.

A short while after the newsletter went out, I was contacted by Peter Calver of the [Lost Cousins](#) site. Intrigued by the Vacher story, he included it on the website forum. A couple of the members dug a bit deeper and managed to find some further information about Gladys. It seems only apt to share her story now.

The 1921 census recorded Gladys – with her surname incorrectly transcribed as Lacher - living at 1 Corporation Street, Kidderminster. Boarding with Jane Smith, she was working as garage assistant for the motorcycle department of the Castle Motor Co Ltd on Vicar Street.

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. Please read the Instructions and Examples shown on the back, and then fill up the Schedule carefully and in full.

NAME AND RESIDENCE	RELATIONSHIP TO HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD	AGE	SEX	REMARKS	BIRTHPLACE AND NATIONALITY	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION	EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT	PLACE OF BIRTH	EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT
1. Jane Smith	Head	76	F	Widow	Worcestershire	Home duties	Private	Worcestershire	Private
2. Gladys Lacher	Daughter	46	F	Single	Worcestershire	Garage Assistant	Private	Worcestershire	Private
3. Gladys Lacher	Daughter	29	F	Single	Worcestershire	Garage Assistant	Private	Worcestershire	Private

I declare that this Schedule is correctly filled up to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Signature: Jane Smith
(Head of Household, Manager of Establishment or other person responsible for making the return.)

In the spring of 1925, Gladys married radio engineer and dealer George Whitford. By the time of the 1939 Register, the couple were living at 81 New Road, Kidderminster. Gladys was helping her husband with the business, and was recorded as being a radio dealer and travel agent.

Gladys Whitford, née Vacher, passed away in the spring of 1960. An obituary outlined the life she had forged for herself after losing her brother:

Mrs Gladys Mary Whitford, who has died at her home in New Road, Kidderminster, aged 63, had conducted one of the oldest travel agencies in the Midlands for 30 years. The firm, founded by her husband's grandfather in 1856, arranged emigration for many families seeking a new life in the Commonwealth.

Mrs Whitford joined the Women's Legion in 1916 and was one of the first motor-cycle despatch riders attached to the Royal Army Service Corps. She was a member of the Kidderminster Chamber of Commerce and of the committee of the Kidderminster Retail Traders' Association. She is survived by her husband, Mr George Whitford, a radio and television dealer.

[Birmingham Daily Post - Tuesday 12 January 1960]

My thanks to Peter and the Lost Cousins members for their help in filling in details of Gladys' life.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:

St John the Evangelist's Church
Manor Road
Staplegrove
Taunton
Somerset
TA2 6EJ

Name: Hill, Francis / Hill, Harold

Rank: Private / Private

Regiment: Somerset Light Infantry / Somerset Light Infantry

Date of death: 18th February 1916 / 23rd October 1916

Age at time of death: 48 / 19

Cause of death: Accident / Illness

Francis Robert Hill was born in the spring of 1868, the middle of seven children to William and Mary Hill. William was a shoemaker from Wiveliscombe, Somerset, and this is where he and Mary raised their family.

When Francis finished his schooling, he found work as a baker. However, he wanted bigger and better things and, in June 1886, he enlisted in the 1st Battalion of the Oxfordshire Light Infantry. Private Hill would have cut a striking figure: at eighteen years old, he was 5ft 10ins (1.78m) tall and weighed 136lbs (62.6kg). He had light brown hair, grey eyes and a fair complexion.

Francis did not spend any time overseas, instead working in the regiment's depot in Alverstoke, near Gosport, Hampshire. He spent seven years in the military, and was stood down on 16th June 1893.

By the end of 1895, Francis was back in Somerset as, on Boxing Day that year, he married Florence Ida Giles, a shoemaker's daughter. The couple were both living in Milverton at the time, and Francis' profession was noted as storekeeper. On 23rd November 1896, the couple had a son, Harold, and the family were living on Fore Street, the village's main road.

The 1901 census shows another change in work for Francis, who was now noted as being a house painter. This was a career that seemed to stick with him, as he was still employed in the role by the time of the next census, in 1911. The Hills had moved to Staplegrove, on the outskirts of Taunton, by this point. Florence had taken in work as a glove maker, Harold, now 14 years old, was employed as an office boy, and the family had a boarder, Reginald Cave, who was a nursery foreman.

At this point Francis' trail goes tantalisingly cold. When war broke out, he enlisted once more, this time joining the Somerset Light Infantry. The only other confirmed document gives a tragic hint as to his death, at the age of 48. His entry in the Pension Ledger reads simply "*18.2.16: Accidentally killed by passing train while on military duty.*" There are no other records to back this up, and no contemporary newspapers report on his passing.

However it happened, Francis Robert Hill's body was brought back to Somerset for burial. He was laid to rest in the graveyard

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:

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Manor Road
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Taunton
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TA2 6EJ

of St John's Church, Staplegrove. His grave is lost to time, but he is commemorated on a special memorial, close to the entrance of the church.

Tragedy was to strike a second time for Francis' widow, Florence, when, in October 1916, Harold was also to pass away.

Harold James Hill was born 23rd November 1896 in Milverton, Somerset. He was the only child to former army man turned storekeeper, Francis Hill and his wife, Florence.

When he finished his schooling, Harold found work as an office boy. By the time of the 1911 census, the family had moved six miles east of Milverton, to the village of Staplegrove. Francis was employed as a house painter, Florence had taken in work as a glove maker, and the Hills also had a boarder, Reginald Cave, who was a nursery foreman.

Storm clouds were brewing by this point and, when war broke out, Harold was keen to play his part, possibly because he wanted to emulate his father's army life. He enlisted in the Somerset Light Infantry and was assigned to the 2nd/5th Battalion. Private Hill's medical records show that he was 5ft 10ins (1.78m) tall, and weighed 140lbs (63.5kg). By coincidence, these are almost exactly the same measurements as those of his father, when he joined the army 28 years before.)

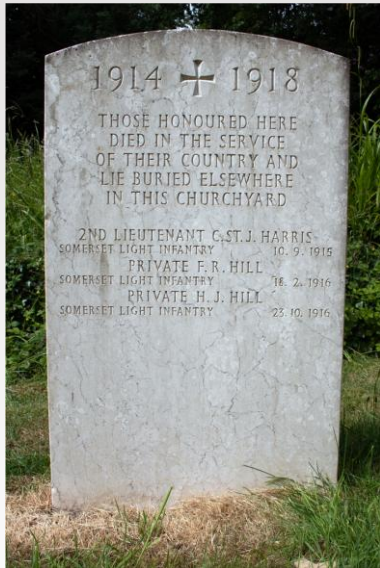
After three months' training, Harold's battalion was sent overseas, and he arrived in India on 12th December 1914. Within a matter of months, his health began to suffer and, between May 1915 and February 1916, Private Hill was admitted to hospital on six separate occasions, all but one for intestinal problems.

In the end, Harold was taken back to Britain for treatment: he arrived on home soil at the end of March 1916, and within three months had been medically discharged from the army.

At this point, Harold's trail goes cold, although he did return to Somerset. His illness continued, however, and he passed away from his stomach condition on 23rd October 1916. He was just 19 years of age.

Harold James Hill was laid to rest in the graveyard of St John's Church, Staplegrove. His grave is lost to time, but it can be assumed that he was buried close to his father, who had died just nine months before. Father and son are commemorated on a special memorial, close to the entrance of the church.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



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The headstone commemorating father and son also mention another burial in the churchyard:

Name: Harris, Cecil

Rank: Second Lieutenant

Regiment: Somerset Light Infantry

Date of death: 10th September 1915

Age at time of death: 24

Cause of death: Appendicitis

Cecil St John Harris was the son of Reverend Percy and Constance Harris. Born in Kilver, Staffordshire, on 13th July 1891, he was one of nine children, although, by the time of the 1911 census, four of them had passed away. The Harris family had, by this point, moved from Staffordshire, to Devon, to Cornwall, and had settled in Staplegrove, Somerset, where Percy had become the rector at St John's Church.

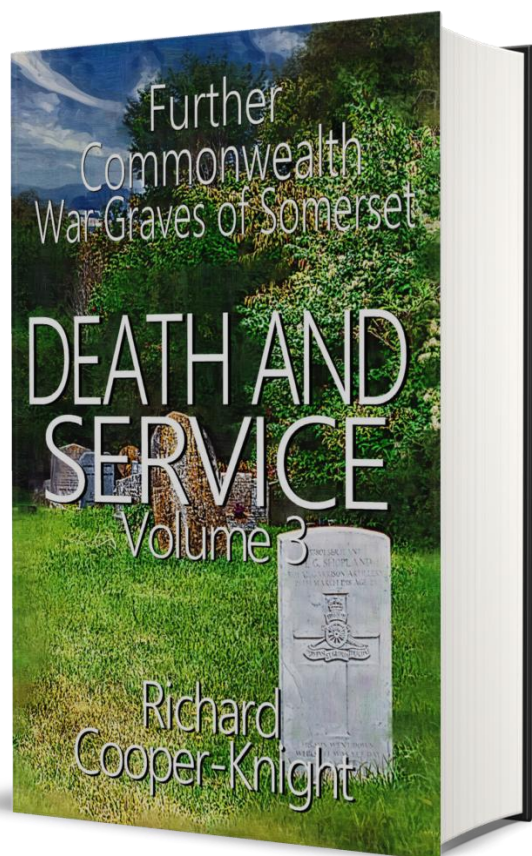
According to the census record, Cecil was studying engineering. He was keen at sports, being a keen member of the village's cricket club. When war broke out, he enlisted in the West Somerset Yeomanry, but soon took a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Somerset Light Infantry.

Cecil's troop, the 3rd/5th Battalion remained on home soil, and he was based in Somerset for the duration of his time in the army. This was not to be for a long time, however, as, in the summer of 1915, he fell ill with appendicitis. He underwent an operation, and made a slow recovery, before relapsing. He passed away on 10th September 1915, aged just 24 years old.

Cecil St John Harris was laid to rest in the north east corner of St John's Churchyard, Staplegrove, where his father was still the vicar. His grave is now lost to time, but Second Lieutenant Harris is commemorated on a special memorial, close to the entrance of the building.

Did you know?

Headstones with multiple war fallen on them are uncommon, but not unusual. They may commemorate those who are buried in unknown graves within the churchyard or cemetery, such as St John's Churchyard, Staplegrove, and Ss. Peter & Paul's Church in Aylesford, Kent. Brothers Albert and George Stockley, were buried together and commemorated on a single headstone in Old Church Cemetery, Corfe Mullen; siblings Lilian and Henry Chinn were laid to rest with their family in Middlezoy; Arthur O'Keefe was buried with an unknown sailor in Llanwdna Cemetery, near Fishguard.



DEATH AND SERVICE VOLUME 3: FURTHER COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES OF SOMERSET

In the churchyards and burial grounds of Somerset lie more than 840 men and women who gave their all in the war that was supposed to end all wars.

In this third volume of the Death and Service series, we visit more than a hundred graveyards and cemeteries from across the county: hidden gems from the Quantocks to the Mendips, from the coast to the countryside.

Each of the graves tell a story of a life cruelly interrupted. In these close-knit communities, the loss of one of their own is even more harshly felt, and the courage and sacrifice of their loved ones becomes all the more poignant.

Their lives of these men and women may have been cut short, but they were lives well lived, and are as important to remember today as they were to experience more than a century ago.

This third volume in what will be a five-book series builds on what has gone before. As I have mentioned before, the first book was never actually planned: as a project, Death and Service was a website, but it wasn't reaching the audience I wanted for it. When I initially thought about producing a published version, there was no big plan. I liked the idea it becoming a book, and, when Mirador Publishing agreed it would be an interesting idea, I basically lifted-and-shifted the blog's content into a Word Document.

Volume Two delved further into the county's graveyards and I included towns had not featured in the first book. There were also some of the larger cemeteries in Book One, where I hadn't been able to include all of the burials, and so I took the opportunity to sweep up those missing stories.

In this third book, I have taken a different tack. Looking away from Somerset's larger towns, we instead focus on some of the smaller communities. Here are 120 churchyards and burial grounds, often in the middle of nowhere, down country lanes that even satellite navigation warns you against. In the depths of the countryside are some beautifully tranquil churches, and it has definitely been worth the time and effort taken to locate and reach them. Here are buried just one of two of the WW1 dead, but their stories are no less important than the sweeping cemeteries of the larger towns. If anything, their remoteness has made me all the more determined to get their stories more widely known.

When it comes out in the next few weeks, I hope that you enjoy reading *Further Commonwealth War Graves...* as much as I did researching and writing it.