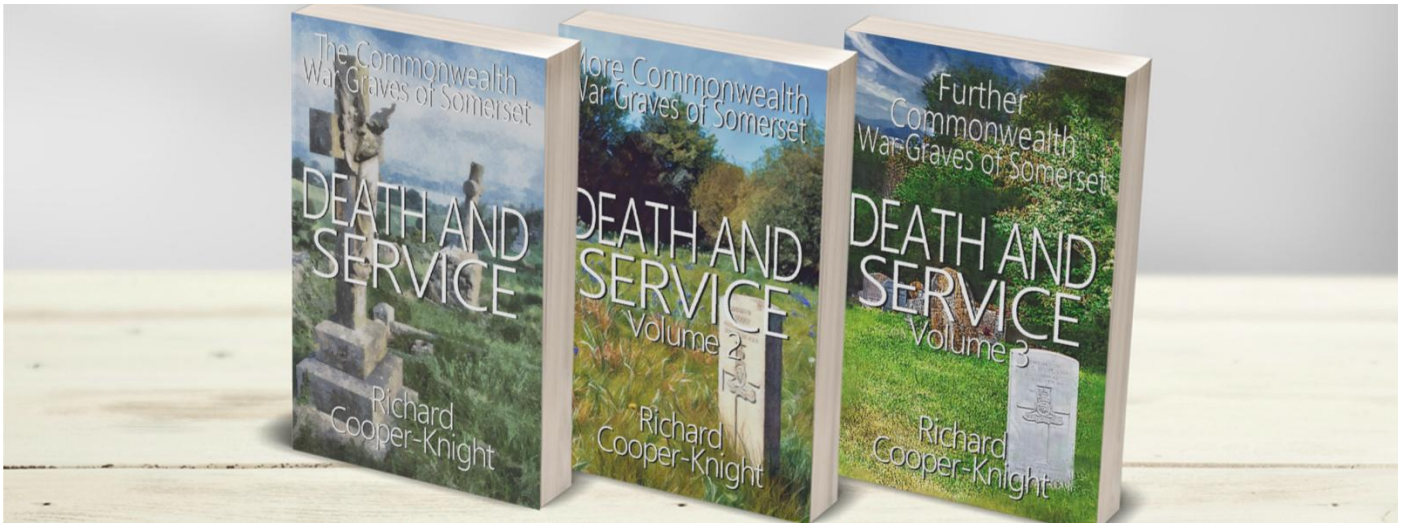

Death and Service Newsletter

Issue 33: February 2026

The new year has begun in its familiar sombre fashion, with heavy skies seeming to linger throughout the month.

Even so, the unsettled weather has offered a welcome chance to press on with research from the comfort of my office. In recent weeks, I have been examining graves in Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset, while a weekend spent in Dilwyn allows me to add Herefordshire to the growing list of counties I have visited.

I am also developing a new project focused on the German air raid on Chatham, Kent, in September 1917. During my research, I have uncovered some photographs of the mass funeral held for the victims, which are included later in this edition.

The photographs I encounter frequently reveal unexpected details, and this newsletter features a small selection of such discoveries.

This month's featured grave belongs to a young serjeant of the Tank Corps, laid to rest in the Wiltshire village of Mere.

Looking ahead, the 2026 calendar is already taking shape, and the following pages include a list of forthcoming talks, with links to further details.

Until next time.

Richard

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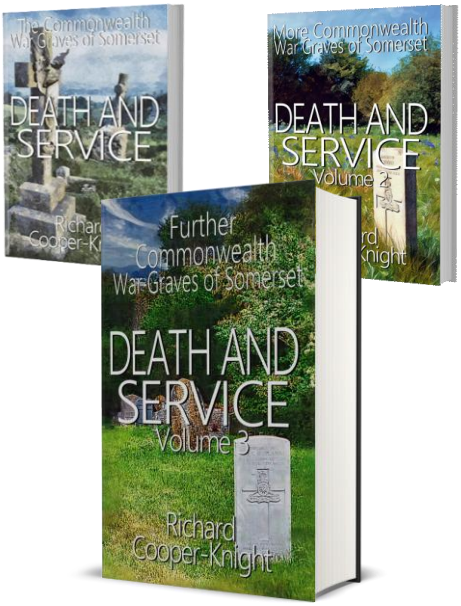
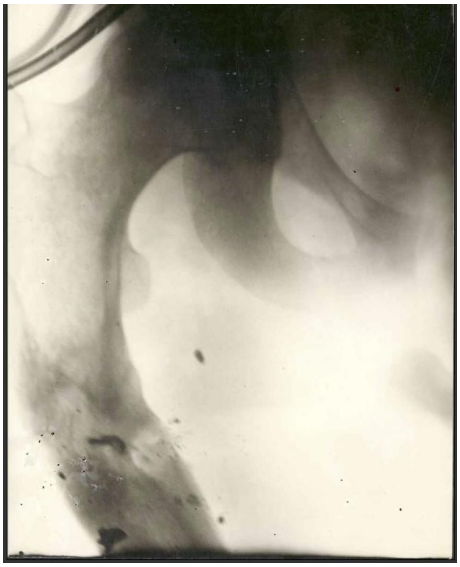


UNUSUAL FINDS

Occasionally during my research, I am fortunate enough to uncover photographs of the servicemen. This is relatively rare—so far, I have been able to match a little over 200 faces to 1,750 names. When such images do surface, they bring the story to life, ensuring each individual is remembered as more than a name on a headstone and affirming the life they lived before it was cut tragically short.

Once in a while, however, my fact-finding throws up a curveball, and I have located something far more personal to the individual.

Private Philip le Cornu had been born in Jersey, but had emigrated to Quebec by the time war broke out. He joined the Canadian Infantry, and was assigned to the 17th Battalion.



He was caught up on the Battle of Hill 70 in the summer of 1917, and badly wounded in his thigh.

Initially treated in Camiens, he was medically evacuated to Britain for treatment, and went through three operations on his leg. These would prove ineffective, and Private le Cornu would die from his wounds more than a year after Hill 70.

While I wasn't able to find a photo of Philip himself, his service papers *did* include a copy of the initial x-ray taken following his injury, showing the damage to his femur and the bullet that had wounded him.

https://deathandservice.co.uk/2024/02/20/cwg-private-philip-le-cornu/

Captain Percy Rawlings was born in Surrey, and educated at Cambridge. The son of a gentleman, he acted as an engineer in the Sudan before joining the Royal Engineers. His commission took him to the Royal Naval Reserve, and the Royal Naval Air Service, and he became a Captain when the Royal Air Force was formed.

After the war, Percy remained in the RAF, and was key in testing some of the rapidly-developing technology. In May 1919 he was working on a Tarrant triplane in Farnborough, Surrey, when it toppled forwards during take-off burying itself in the ground. The aircraft had two pilots and both – Captain Rawlings and Captain Dunn – were killed.

Again, I was unable to find a photograph of Percy himself, but the aeroplane crash *was* captured on film, and outlines the severity of the incident.

https://deathandservice.co.uk/2025/08/24/captain-percy-rawlings/

James Godden came from Bridgwater, Somerset, and was a keen athlete and cyclist. When war broke out, he initially joined the Somerset Light Infantry, but his skill on two wheels made him a perfect candidate for the Army Cyclist Corps, and he soon transferred across.

Private Godden spent three years in the army, and, given the risks involved in his unit, is likely to have seen some unbelievable things. His mental health suffered, and he was medically discharged in the spring of 1917. Admitted to the Somerset & Bath asylum, James quickly contracted bronchitis and died less than three weeks after being sent to the mental institution.

An obituary in a local newspaper detailed his athletic career, and, following a talk in Bridgwater, I was approached by one of the audience – John Boyland – who mentioned that James had featured on a cigarette card. John was kind enough to forward a copy to me: while a photograph of Private Godden's military career doesn't exist, one of him in his cycling get-up does.

https://deathandservice.co.uk/2021/03/16/cwg-private-james-godden/

The calendar of events is taking shape nicely, with a growing programme of talks and presentations confirmed across the next eighteen months. Below is a list of events, and you can click on the links to learn more.

- 21st April 2026: Friends of the Museum of Somerset
- 29th April 2026: Minehead Conservation Society
- 2nd May 2026: Dorset Western Front Association
- 13th May 2026: Somerset WFA - Chatham Air Raid
- 11th June 2026: Clevedon Civic Society
- 22nd October 2026: Wellington Museum & Local History Society
- 3rd November 2026: Radstock Museum
- 17th November 2026: Evercreech History Society
- 18th November 2026: North Curry Society

New dates and locations are being added regularly, so you can check back **here** to stay up to date with what's coming up and where to find me.

If you would be interested in a tailored presentation, or know of a group or society who would be, please **drop me a line**.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH

Grave Location:
Mere Cemetery
Angel Lane
Mere
BA12 6DH

Name: Newman, Herbert

Rank: Serjeant

Regiment: Tank Corps

Date of death: 18th May 1918

Age at time of death: 27

Cause of death: Illness

Herbert James Newman was born at the start of 1891, the fourth of five children - all sons - to Charles and Mary Newman. Charles was a general labourer, and the family lived on Well Head, to the north of Mere, Wiltshire.

Charles died when Herbert was just a boy, and Mary was left to raise the family on her own. By the time of the 1901 census, the family had moved to a cottage on Old Hollow, and she had taken work as a charwoman. Herbert's older brother, Theodore and William, had also taken jobs to help with money.

In 1911, her boys had all grown up and were moving on, and Mary found more secure employment as a live-in servant to 80-year-old Anna Collard, a single woman who was living on her own means.

Herbert, meanwhile, had left Wiltshire for the capital, and was working as a compositor. He was boarding with widow Mary Ann Day and her two children, all living relatively comfortably at 41 St Thomas' Road in Finsbury Park, Middlesex. Amongst the other lodgers were Jeweller John Tipping, conductor Wilfred Mustill and cycle mechanic Lester Rule.

When war came to Europe, Herbert stepped up to play his part. Full details of his military service have been lost to time, but it is clear that he had enlisted by December 1917. Initially joining the Tank Corps, It seems likely that Private Newman had seen service overseas, although there is nothing to confirm this either way.

As the conflict drew into its closing months, the now promoted Serjeant Newman seems to have been based in Dorset. In the spring of 1918, he fell ill, and was admitted to the Military Hospital in Wareham. The cause of his illness is unclear, but it would prove fatal: he passed away on 18th May 1918, at the age of 27 years old.

The body of Herbert James Newman was taken back to Wiltshire for burial. He was laid to rest in Mere Cemetery, on the outskirts of the town he had called home.

FUNERAL PHOTOGRGAPHS

I'm currently researching material for a future project on the German air raid on Chatham on the night of the 3rd September 1917. The devastating – and, it has to be said, chance – bombing of the town's Drill Hall killed dozens, and a mass burial took place three days later.

Newsapers reported on the funeral, and photographs of the memorial service have been kept by the Imperial War Museum.

Did you know?

In the research I have carried out so far, I have been able to identify 230 photographs to match to a person I have been researching. These images come from a variety of sources: online sites such as Find a Grave *and* Ancestry*; contemporary newspaper reports; and* de Ruvigny's Roll of Honour*, which I will be exploring more of in the next issue.*