

Death and Service Newsletter

Issue 42: November 2026

Autumn has definitely arrived, with the expected darker evenings, but warmer than usual temperatures.

A couple of trips away has, unsurprisingly, led to some more cemetery visits and more images of headstones. By now I really should have learnt to research the graves I have photographed, before taking pictures of more. But I am not afraid to take an opportunity when it is presented to me (which is probably why I have a catalogue of nearly 1200 grave photos from the last five years that I have yet to start researching!), and so on a short break in Gibraltar, I visited the stunning setting of the peninsula's North Front Cemetery.

In an older issue, I looked at how Oldway Mansion, Devon, was brought into use during the First World War, and a visit to Wiltshire unearthed a similar history for Bowood House, which you can learn about in this issue.

We remain in Wiltshire for this month's grave, and the unfortunate death of Second Lieutenant Samuel Ferris. There have been some interesting stories with WW1 connections in the last few weeks, and we look at three of them later in the newsletter.

The next few weeks of remembrance means a busy time of year for me, with a number of talks lined up across Somerset. If you are able to come along – or you know of anyone who would be interested in doing so – it would be lovely to see you.

Until next time.

Richard

Keep in touch:

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https://deathandservice.co.uk/

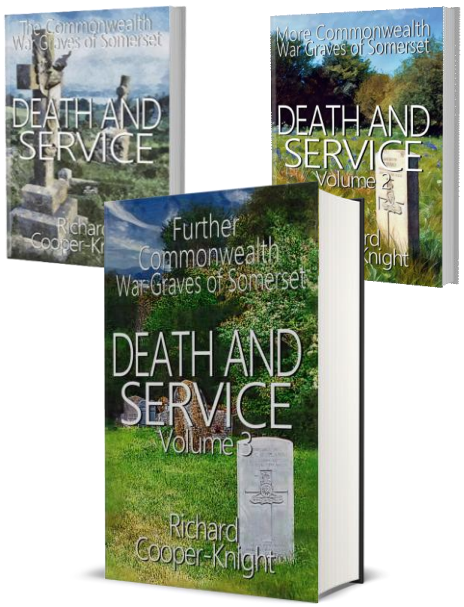
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BOWOOD HOUSE

Hidden in the Wiltshire countryside, between Calne and Chippenham, is the majestic setting of Bowood House. Initially constructed in the early eighteenth century, it became the property of the Fitzmaurice family – the Marquesses of Shelburne - in 1754, and has remained in the family ever since.

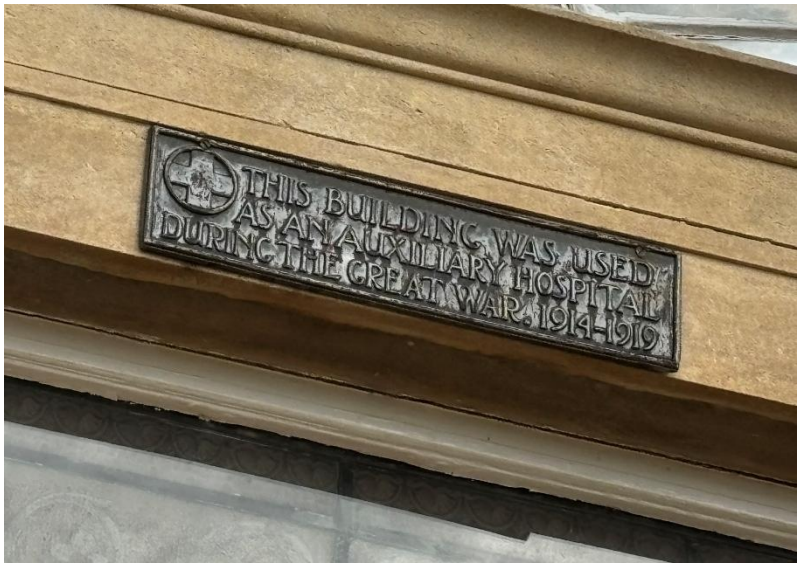


When war broke out in 1914, the then owners, Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, 5th Marquess of Lansdowne, and his wife, Lady Maud Hamilton, felt it their duty to help. Both of their sons were serving, and their youngest – Charles, was killed at Klein Zillebeke at the end of October 1914 (his wooden cross is displayed on the wall of the chapel).

Henry and Maud turned their home into a VAD hospital, initially with 20 beds for recuperating soldiers. Lady Lansdowne acted as Commandant of the facility, recruiting volunteers from the villages in the area as nurses.

The patients were convalescing soldiers, and they were provided with loose-fitting clothes of blue material with white lapels. By the end of the war, Bowood had more than 60 beds, and live entertainment, including music and singing, was put on to help them pass the time during their recovery.





During the Second World War, the Bowood was initially set up as a school, before being adapted by the Royal Air Force. When peace came again in 1945, the building was left empty and, by the mid-1950s, most was in a state of disrepair. The East Wing was demolished, and the family moved into the 'small house', an orangery, the chapel, and two two-story wings.

Still a family home, Bowood House, and its many acres of parkland designed by Capability Brown, is open to the public.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:
St Leonard's Church
School Close
Keevil
Trowbridge
Wiltshire

Name: Ferris, Samuel

Rank: Second Lieutenant

Regiment: 10th (Prince of Wales Own Royal) Hussars

Date of death: 6th April 1915

Age at time of death: 24

Cause of death: Accidental shooting

> *A verdict of accidental death was returned by a Coroner's jury at Tidworth on Thursday in the case of Second-Lieutenant Samuel Ferris, of the Cavalry Reserve. The officer was found in his room at the Barracks shot through the head, and died within the hour. Shortly before the occurrence he was in a cheerful mood, had been on parade, breakfasted, and was changing his wet clothes. Captain and Adjutant Barclay stated that he found a yard and a half from Lieutenant Ferris's feet an automatic pistol of the latest pattern. It might, he said, easily be discharged by a person who did not intend to fire it, and who had no reason to know it was loaded. Captain Barclay expressed his opinion that the discharge of the pistol was accidental. Lieutenant Ferris, who had been to the front and was much improved in health since his return, was a son of Dr John Spencer Ferris, or Warwick Dene, Ealing.*
>
> *[Wiltshire Telegraph: Saturday 10th April 1915]*

Samuel Bernard Clutton Ferris was born on 1st December 1890, and was the oldest of three children to John and Mary Ferris. John was a physician and surgeon from Wiltshire, but the family were born and raised near his practice in Uxbridge, Middlesex.

Mary died in 1910, by which time Samuel had taken up studies at Cambridge. Following in his father's line of work, he was reading natural science at the esteemed university. Outside of term time, John - now retired - Samuel, and younger sister Stella were living in an 11-roomed property at 2 Warwick Dene, Ealing, and were being supported by three servants - housemaid Mary Fisher, under housemaid Elizabeth Price, and cook Emma Lovejoy.

When war broke out, Samuel took up a commission in the 10th (Prince of Wales's Own Royal) Hussars. Sent to France early in the conflict, it is likely that he saw action during the First Battle of Ypres, possibly at Langemarck or Gheluvelt.

Whether Second Lieutenant Ferris was wounded in France, it is unclear. He may, however, have fallen physically or mentally ill, and the wording of the newspaper report suggests this might have been the case. Either way, his condition was grave enough for him to be sent back to Britain for treatment or recuperation.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:
St Leonard's Church
School Close
Keevil
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Back on home soil, Samuel was based at Tidworth, on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire. It was here, on the 6th April 1915, that the accident that ended his life occurred. He was 24 years of age.

The body of Samuel Bernard Clutton Ferris was laid to rest in the graveyard of St Leonard's Church in Keevil, Wiltshire. This is where Samuel's father had been baptised, and was his paternal grandparents' parish church. The above newspaper report noted that the funeral was well attended, but that Samuel's father was *"very ill and unable to be present." [Wiltshire Telegraph: Saturday 10th April 1915]* His sister - now Mrs Walter Spencer - attended, but his brother, John, was absent, although it is likely that he was serving his country at the time. Henry survived the war; he and his wife, Elizabeth, had two children, and he lived until 1939, passing away at the age of 52 years old.

Samuel's probate records note that he left an estate worth £1243 1s (around £166,000 in today's money). Interestingly, this did not go to a family member (his father did not pass away until the spring of 1921). Instead, the beneficiary was recorded as Mr Warner Herbert Taylor Ottley. A civil servant, it is likely that he and Samuel were friends.





North Front Cemetery

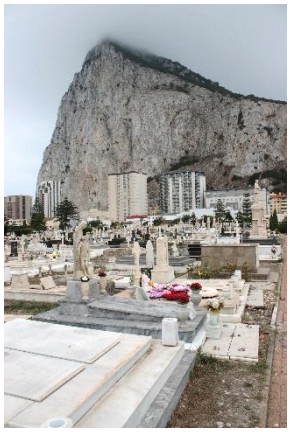
Any short break away inevitably results in a cemetery hunt, but on this occasion, it was definitely worth it!

Nestled between the runway of Gibraltar International Airport and the imposing façade of the Rock of Gibraltar lies North Front Cemetery. One of three cemeteries in the British Overseas Territory, it sits just south of what was once neutral territory, close to the border with Spain.

Established in 1756, North Front became the burial ground for people of all denominations as Trafalgar Cemetery (which is worth a visit in its own right) reached capacity. The peninsula has a strong Jewish heritage, and when Jews Gate Cemetery closed in 1848, with a new Jewish cemetery was established alongside North Front.

Today, it is an impressive site, and not only because of its location. Walking through the rows of headstones, it reminds you of the traditional Victorian cemeteries that can be found across Britain, just without their masses of vegetation.

Given Gibraltar's vital position as a garrison and staging post during both world wars, it is unsurprising that the cemetery has burials for servicemen who breathed their last there. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission tends some 674 graves there, including 320 from the First World War.







Did you know?

Gibraltar is one of many overseas territories that has CWGC graves. On Malta, another strategic location during both world wars, there are 3460 graves in 14 locations. Of these, 2243 date to the 1914-18 conflict.

In The News



Second Lieutenant James Kirk of the Manchester Regiment was killed during the Battle of Sambre on 4th November 1918.

The 21-year-old had made his way across the Oise Canal to protect members of the Royal Engineers who were trying to bridge the waterway. Despite having come under heavy machine gun fire, and with just four magazines of ammunition, James was determined to do all he could.

While making his way across the canal on a raft made of petrol tins and cork floats, he was shot in the face. He reached the other bank, and set up his Lewis gun at a range of just nine metres, but despite his best efforts, the Cheadle Hulme local made the ultimate sacrifice in what was to be the last week of the First World War. Wounded in the arm and the face, he continued to shoot continuously, but his position was badly exposed, and he was ultimately shot in the head and killed.

Second Lieutenant Kirk was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions, and his medals came up for auction this month. They made £130,000 at Noonans.

When a 12-year-old boy discovered a diary in a West Midlands rubbish tip in 1965, little would he know the story that the hand-written book would unlock.

Dudley Museum curator Colin Reid was given the book during a exhibition on the town's involvement in the Great War in 1995. It had a bullet hole through it, and was covered in blood. But little was know about its author, or what had happened to him after its final entry on 10th August 1918.



Reid's interest was piqued, and he set about trying to discover what he could about the man behind the diary. What he uncovered helped uncover a tragic tale.

Claude Nuttall was a Corporal in the 23rd Battalion of the Australian Infantry. While serviing in France, he was wounded in the right leg, and admitted to hospital in Stourbridge, West Midlands. As he recuperated, he met a woman called Violet. The couple married, but five weeks after exchanging vows, he was sent to war again.

Back in France and back in the fray, Corporal Nuttall was killed on 13th August 1918. He was just 23 years of age: the last entry in his diary was just three days before his death.

How the diary ended up in the Dudley landfill site is unclear, but from that pile of rubbish, it survived the decades since, and provides a poignant story to life.

A Blue Plaque has been unveiled to commemorate a Staffordshire town's 'most highly decorated serviceman'. Major Fred Davenport, from Leek, was awarded both the DSO and MC for his bravery during the First World War.

Born in the town in 1873, he had risen to become the head of a local silk manufacturer, before war took him to the Western Front. While fighting at Passchendaele, one of his bravest acts occurred when he was withdrawing his men from the front line under heavy enemy fire. A German shell landed in the unit's gun emplacement, starting a fire. "Without a second thought," local historian Neil Collingwood said, "[he] ran back to the gun pit together with a small group of brave men and put out the fire, preventing a huge explosion."



Davenport went on to die in the fighting at Passchendaele, and was buried at Ypres Reservoir Cemetery. The plaque was installed at the house in which he was born in Leek.



Local history groups are the keystone to keeping stories alive, and, as the autumn series of talks gets underway, I am indebted to the societies who have added me to their calendar of events.

In the coming weeks, I will be presenting to groups in Pensford, Midsomer Norton, Evercreech and North Curry, willingly tailoring talks to stories from those areas.

Are you involved with, or a member of, a local history group that might enjoy a talk about the WW1 graves in the area? If so, I'd love to hear from you! Please get in touch if you think it's something that would interest your fellow members.

And don't worry if you're thinking well ahead – my diary is already filling up, with dates booked through to autumn 2027, so there's plenty of opportunity to get something arranged!

UPCOMING EVENTS (CLICK ON THE POSTER TO LEARN MORE)

