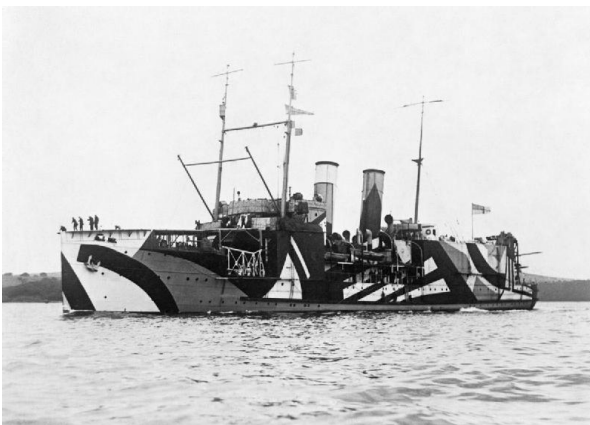


## High Wych History – 42 – WW1 - Surviving soldiers.

Most of my WW1 research has been concentrated on the soldiers from our village that perished. High Wych was particularly hard hit by that awful conflict. One in every two young men that went off from our village to fight did not come back. There were however, quite a few that did return. This article concentrates on some of them: William Smith, George Howe and Ernie Ward

**Thomas William Smith** was born in 1888, the second oldest of the ten children of Charles Smith, the High Wych blacksmith and his wife Annie. After attending High Wych School he became an apprentice at his dad's forge by High Wych village green. The 1911 census registers him as a "journeyman blacksmith" obviously working with his father.

Most probably William did not join up straight away. But by March 1917 he was in the navy at Folkestone. There is little documentary proof of his early days there. From family contacts I found out though that he was employed as a blacksmith on an aircraft carrier. Further research revealed that must have been the Pegasus. Blacksmiths were very necessary on board early aircraft carriers or as some of them were referred to: seaplane carriers. William and his colleagues were necessary to make and repair the chains used for launching and recovering the aircraft.



The photograph on the left shows the Pegasus, on which William Smith served. Note the "dazzle camouflage" which looked strange but was very effectively used to confuse German U-boats. The system invented by a Norman Wilkinson made it difficult to guess a target's range, speed and heading. The picture on the right shows three blacksmiths on board Pegasus, William Smith being one of them.

HMS *Pegasus* was bought by the **Royal Navy** in 1917. She had been laid down in 1914 at **John Brown & Company, Clydebank, Scotland** as SS Stockholm for the **Great Eastern Railway Company**, but construction was suspended by the start of the war. The ship was converted to operate a mix of wheeled aircraft from her forward **flying-off deck** and floatplanes that were lowered into the water. *Pegasus* spent the last year of the war supporting the **Grand Fleet** in the **North Sea**, but saw no combat. Later, Pegasus was based in Archangel and between May to September 1919 supported the British intervention in the Russian Civil War. After tours of duty in the Mediterranean and Singapore she was eventually sold for scrap in 1931.

According to the one document I found that pertained to him, William Smith served on the Pegasus from 14<sup>th</sup> August 1917 until 31<sup>st</sup> March 1918. He was then transferred to the RAF. As the RAF itself dates from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1918 it is very possible he continued serving on the Pegasus until the end of the War.

After the war William returned to High Wych and worked with his father at the forge as a farrier blacksmith. He also got married to Anna Louisa Rose Brown aka Rosa. William and Rosa had two girls Gwen and Dorothy. In the early twenties they moved to Watford where in 1924 their son Raymond David Smith, better known as David was born. The business in High Wych must have closed down around that time; in 1925 James Dixon bought it and made it into a garage. William himself lived on in Watford until he passed away in 1955.

**Arthur George Howe**, better known as George, was born in 1894 in Allens Green, the son of George and Caroline. In 1901 the address given is “the school house”, in 1911 it was the Queens Head public house. George Sr’s profession is given as agricultural labourer or horsekeeper. Arthur George joined up on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1915. The form was countersigned by local dignitary Edmund Barnard and by an officer of the Bedford Regiment. George did not remain in that regiment for long though, most of his time in the service was with the 10<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Royal West Kent.



George Howe (crossed) with friends

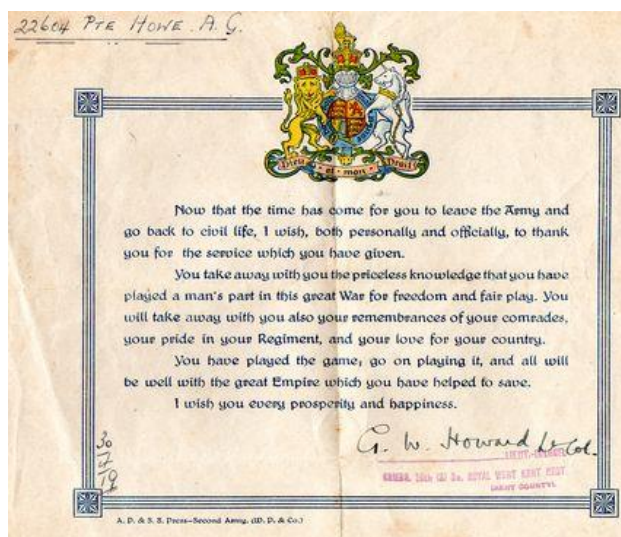


George and his comrades visit Allens Green

The Royal West Kent Regiment was a line infantry regiment and the 10<sup>th</sup> battalion was only created in May 1915. George and his comrades subsequently fought at Flers on the Somme in September 1916. Then, in November 1917 after having spent a bitterly cold winter in the trenches, they were moved to Italy but returned to France in March 1918. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March the 10<sup>th</sup> battalion was “annihilated” (literal quote) on the third day of the German spring offensive also known as the “Kaiserschlacht”. George survived and it was probably on that occasion, as he told family members later, he had to climb over the corpses of his comrades and survived by eating chocolate from the ration packs of the dead. That was by no means the end of the story though. The 10<sup>th</sup> went on to end their active part in the war at Rooverst in West Flanders. This then was followed by a tour of duty as part of the Army of Occupation on the Rhine. George was stationed in Cologne. The 10<sup>th</sup> battalion was finally disbanded in November 1919.



So it must have been in late 1919 that George turned up at on the doorstep of the Queens Head in Allens Green. He was covered in lice and in a very bad physical condition. His family had given him up for dead, but somehow he had survived. His daughter Ethel, born before her dad went to war, remembered the occasion well and told her own daughter of it. "He was dressed in filthy clothes and obviously had walked a long distance".



George Howe's commander says thank you.



George's medals and watch

Once at home, George Howe again went to work with his father on the land and also at the Queens Head Allens Green. George Sr. had been the main licensee of that hostelry since 1908. Records mention a George Howe in charge there from that date until 1930. It is not clear when George Jr. took over from his dad as he must have done at some point.



Young George Howe tending the horses



Arthur George Howe in later years

**Ernest Ward** was born in High Wych in 1889, the 7th of 10 children. He was a younger brother of Thomas William, the 4th child in that family, who is mentioned on the plaque in St. James's Church listing the fallen High Wych soldiers from WW1. The family initially lived in Redricks Lane but later moved to Vicarage Lodge opposite the Church. Ernest ran away from home and signed up on March 5, 1906 at the age of 16. He was assigned to the 2nd Battalion F Company of the Bedford Regiment. Between 1906 and 1912 he served in Gibraltar, Bermuda and South Africa.



**Left to right: Ernest(standing) in Gibraltar in 1907, Ernest and Minnie on their wedding day in 1919, Ernest Ward in WW1.**

In August 1914, as part of the 1st Bedford FR, he was sent to France. In November of 1914 he received a gunshot wound to the neck and after being hospitalized and patched up was sent back out to battle. In April of 1915 he was wounded again (shrapnel to his left shoulder) and was once again hospitalized. He was released from hospital in September 1915 and did not return to battle. He remained in the military though being first transferred to the Suffolks, then the Labour Corps and eventually the Royal Flying Corps, the predecessor of the RAF. Ernest was eventually discharged on April 30, 1920. He married his wife, Minnie Alice Lukehurst of Bilsington, on July 29, 1919. It seems that from that time he had little contact with his High Wych Family. Father Arthur had already died in 1917; mother Alice passed away in 1928. Ernest and Minnie remained in the area however; they spent the rest of their lives in Radlett raising 4 children, she a housewife and he a mailman. Minnie died March 6, 1964 and Ernest died July 28, 1978.

In the mid eighties Ernest's WW1 adventures were researched by his son Bob and grandson Tim who also retraced his steps during a trip through Northern France and Western Flanders. The resulting essay, passed on to me by Alan Ward, another grandson who now lives in Canada, has been posted on the background page on my website.

Sources for this article were: Margaret Jones, Graham Smith, Alan Ward, Wikipedia, Ancestry.co.uk and as always county archives aka HALS. Do not forget: the High Wych History Project needs your personal contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism, be it positive or negative. Get in touch!! Contact me at: [theo@vandebilt.co.uk](mailto:theo@vandebilt.co.uk) or phone me at 01279 725468. You can also check my blog at <http://vandebilt.co.uk/history/>