

The President's Column

My maternal grandfather was born and lived for his entire life in a small, but ancient, hamlet in Herefordshire. Nestling between Ross-on-Wye and Hereford itself, Sellack is a geographically-large parish (recorded in the Domesday Book), with a very old pre-Reformation church (dedicated to the Welsh martyr Bishop St Tysilio, AD 640) which keeps up the unique tradition of Easter pax cakes. It is built alongside the winding and beautiful river Wye. The small homesteads are clustered around the orchards of the local cider brewers, Grove Common and the convergence of two Ross-to-Hereford roads, known as Pict's Cross, where a war memorial remains. The local school where my mother and aunt were taught closed in the 1960s. As children in the 1960s, my twin sisters and I spent much time in our grandparents' company, especially in the summer. Exploring the local footpaths and fields and woods was exciting, taking in those that skirted and meandered through the local estate known as Caradoc Court. The Court had elements of a former Tudor manor house belonging to the gentry family of the Scudamores, including an ice-house, a walled garden and, supposedly, ghosts in the old building. It was while being in service there that my grandfather met his wife Alice, lady's maid, born in Derbyshire.

As a child I walked past the war memorial many times, noting how many of my grandfather's brothers and other extended family, and neighbours were recorded as dying in the First World War, and how few in the Second World War, presumably because there were few of fighting age who survived the first conflict. My grandfather would never talk about his brother Charles Davies, but very recently I made an idle enquiry of Google to see if anything was known. The family belief was that he had died in Gallipoli. Far from the truth, although the tragedy of that battle did indeed overshadow later conflicts and losses in Mesopotamia.

Through the good services of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), I discovered a good deal. and indeed it was a very moving process. Suddenly with a few clicks I had found a record of his military number 150699, his date of death, the place of burial and the



Gunner Charles Davies, the President's great-uncle, in 1917.

letters confirming correspondence with my great-grandmother Matilda Davies concerning the wording of the simple cross-and-badge headstone. There were 55 words, including 'The knowledge now of sins forgiven, and a home prepared in heaven'. The headstone cost 16 shillings. Charles had died on 5 November 1917, aged 19, outside Baghdad. He was a gunner with the Royal Garrison Artillery, 384th Siege Battalion. This, even nearly a century later, was stunning news. How had a young man, who had almost certainly joined up before he was 18, from a tiny, profoundly rural parish, die in battle in Iraq? The other names, the Joneses, the Edwards, the Lewises were known to me from still living descendants.

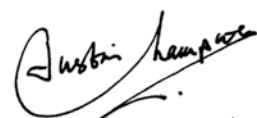
Digital resources have allowed a small measure of historical enlightenment and personal remembrance. Although there are commercial websites that charge a fee for searches, there is open access to the CWGC and indeed it provides digital scans and a certificates for each individual. The chances of anyone in the family visiting North Gate Cemetery (plot 14, row, L, grave 2), in Baghdad are slim, given the turbulence of the location. There lie the remains of 7,185 men from all over the British Empire, who died in action during the First World War. According to the CWGC the figures break down as 4,533 Britons, 2,614 Indians, 48

Australians and New Zealanders and one South African. The graveyard has suffered disrepair and decay during the recent conflicts, and the CWGC has been unable to attend to restoration. The Stone of Remembrance, designed in 1917 by the eminent British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens to commemorate 'those of all faiths and none', has been damaged, as individual headstones have been. The memory of Charles Davies will live on in younger minds for new generations. Hopefully, other families will explore the remaining names to discover their family stories too.

The power of public monuments to commemorate national events and the sacrifices associated with them are important, but the private emotion and sense of loss prompted by their consideration is powerful at an individual level too. The ability to access further contextual records and evidence is a wonderful incentive to all of us to explore these pasts and remember the fallen in our own families, often in remote and unfamiliar parts of the world.



Image courtesy of Amy Lanchbury



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