

## The Lost Men of Pillaton (1914-1918)



This is the text of one of the readings given at the special church service held on 4th August 2014 to remember the seven Men of Pillaton who were killed in action during WWI. We are very grateful to Don King for providing it.

### The Lost Men of Pillaton

After the excitement and apprehension of August 4th 1914, the British Expeditionary Force was rapidly embarked for France and on August 22nd the first shots were fired by British soldiers. The German advance across Belgium and France was stopped by November and the war turned into a relatively static confrontation between the two great power groups dug into defensive positions facing each other across a narrow no-man's land. A new kind of warfare was being developed.

Although Pillaton soon had volunteers trained and ready on land, it was the sea that claimed Pillaton's first fatal casualties. First was the second son of the very deaf and fierce Rector of St. Odulph's, Richard Hocking and his wife Frances. WILLIAM HOCKING had decided on a career in the Merchant Navy and signed on as an apprentice at the age of 16. After three years "before the mast" in a square-rigged ship, he transferred to steam in 1911, becoming 3rd officer on the "Queen Maud" until January 1915. He then got his 2nd Mate's Certificate. William soon afterwards enlisted in the Royal Navy but chose to join the newly formed Royal Naval Air Service. He gained his Aviator's Certificate in December 1915 and then began training in Sea Planes. These, in the early days, were flimsy wood, wire and fabric bi-planes fitted with floats and operated either from shoreside bases or were launched from modified war-ships. Accidents were very common, and William, a keen young Flight sub-lieutenant was killed in an accident in his seaplane at Gosport on April 21st 1916, aged 23.

Only six days later there came the second fatality. WILLIAM JOHN HIGMAN was born in 1881 to Tobias and Mary Higman of Landrake, and 20 years later was working as a carter and farmhand for the Downing Family at Cuttivet Farm. By 1911, William had joined the Royal Navy and had worked his way up to be a Stoker Petty Officer, at that time serving on a river gunboat on the upper Yangtse River at Chungking. Back in England on leave, he married Alberta Kate Stephens of Rick Park Farm in 1913. With the coming of war, German submarines and mines were proving to be a major threat to Great Britain's supply routes and many new mine-sweepers were built. "HMS Nasturtium" was launched in January 1916 and William Higman was assigned to her crew sweeping in the Mediterranean. Mine sweeping is a dangerous task, and within 3 months, HMS Nasturtium was sunk by a mine off Malta on April 28th 1916 with the loss of 8 men, all stokers, including William then 33 years old. He left a widow and a young son.

The Third loss was the result of one of the largest naval battles that has ever taken place, the Battle of Jutland. GERALD THURSTAN COLLINS was born in late 1891, the eldest son of and Ellen Maud Collins. Shortly before the outbreak of war, Mr Collins, a successful solicitor, had inherited the Newton Ferrers estate from Mr Digby Collins. Gerald had by then already joined the Royal Navy and had trained as a Gunnery Officer. He was a serving officer when the war began and in 1916 was a Gunnery Lt. in the destroyer "HMS Tipperary". The story of the Battle of Jutland is a complex one, but it was the one great sea battles between the German High Seas Fleet and the British Grand Fleet. The first shots of the battle were fired at about 2.15 pm. on May 31st 1916 when a German destroyer was sighted off the Danish coast. The German High Seas Fleet, some 108 strong including 22 battleships, was attempting to break the British naval blockade and ravage shipping in the North Atlantic. The British Grand Fleet, with 150 ships, converged and attacked, with heavy firing from about 4 pm. to 6 pm. during which two British battle cruisers were sunk with the loss of over 2,250 men. By 6 pm, the bulk of the British fleet was engaged, but accurate German salvos sank HMS Invincible with the loss of another 1,000 sailors. In declining visibility and a thick German smoke screen, the German fleet turned for home and was soon lost to sight. A little after 11 pm, in zero visibility, a British destroyer flotilla lead by HMS Tipperary suddenly found itself crossing the middle of the German Grand Fleet and was immediately trapped in floodlights from German battlecruisers. Tipperary suffered direct hits on its bridge and forward control areas, and the captain and most senior officers were all killed. Gerald Collins probably died at this time, aged 25 years. The fore part of Tipperary was ablaze, and in spite of being later rammed by a German cruiser, stayed afloat for another two hours. 185 of the crew were killed or died of injuries but about 30 were picked up by a British destroyer. By dawn the German Fleet had disappeared never to venture out again. The cost in British lives at 328 officers and 5,671 men was twice the size of German losses, but the objective had been gained

The next two Pillaton men to be lost died during one of the most costly battles of the war, the First battle of the Somme which was launched on July 1st 1916 and was to struggle on until November. This was intended to be the great break-through of the German lines which would end the static trench warfare and perhaps end the war itself. There were 60,000 British casualties on the first day alone, but men were sent over the top over and over again only to lose ground that had been captured

earlier. ARTHUR JOHN CHUBB was one of the seven children of George and Elizabeth Chubb living at Higher Kernick Cottage in 1911. He enlisted in the 1st Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment within 2 or 3 years of leaving Pillaton Village School at the age of 14. The third phase of the Battle of the Somme began on July 14th with an unusual and initially successful night attack on a 14 mile front between two German strongholds, the woods of Bazentin le Petit on the left to Delville Wood on the right with the looming High Wood set back in the centre. The 5th Division, which included the Devonshires, was involved in unsuccessful and costly attacks on High Wood and Delville Wood on July 20th and 23rd and was then put in as reserve to the 1st Australian Division, the ANZACS, which began its historic attack on Pozières on July 23rd. Arthur Chubb was killed somewhere in this mêlée – he was 18 years old – his body was never found, and he is commemorated along with 73,000 others on the huge British, French and colonial war memorial at Thiepval.

PERCIVAL GEORGE FENWICK COLLINS was the second son of Thurstan Collins and in the 1911 census is listed as a boarder at Rugby school, aged 18. Five years later he has left the public school playing fields and is serving as a Lieutenant in the 6th Battalion of the Devon & Cornwall Light Infantry. On August 18th the 6th DCLI was given the objective of capturing the Northern edge of the notorious Delville Wood (now called Devil's Wood by the men). The Battalion went over the top in two waves and within 100 yards were hit by an enemy barrage. Pushing through this, they began a bombing exchange at close range with the enemy which was at first successful, but the ground gained was mostly lost in a German counter attack. In this single day's battle, the battalion lost 70% of its officers and men killed, wounded or missing and was reduced to a fighting strength of 150 all ranks. Percival Collins, aged 23, was one of those missing, believed killed - his body was never recovered. He is commemorated along with Arthur Chubb on the great Thiepval memorial. His death had a devastating effect on his family, and the loss of both potential heirs was to lead to the sale of the Newton Ferrers estate in 1924.

The battle of the Somme dragged on until late autumn 1916 when weather and the exhaustion of men and materials lead to a pause in an action that had cost 400,000 allied casualties in return for 7 miles gained across the front. Sporadic fighting over the winter gave way to Spring and a new British offensive, this time in the Ypres sector. On Easter Monday April 9th 1917, British and Canadian soldiers launched a major attack at Arras and at Vimy Ridge following an innovative "creeping" barrage that involved the artillery steadily moving its targets forward with the infantry advancing closely behind. Unfortunately the barrage did not always moved forward as fast as the troops. There was some initial success and the third line of the German Hindenburg defensive system was reached in some places and many prisoners taken. This 3rd defensive line however, proved stronger and many assaults on it failed.

Our 6th Pillaton man, EUSTACE TREHANE ELLIOTT had been in France and Flanders since August 1916. He was born in 1884, only son of James and Catherine Elliott, at Smeaton Farm, where he lived with his 3 younger sisters. After school in Plymouth he went to the Ashburton Agricultural School and had some formal training in farming. At the outbreak of war he was still single and working on his father's farm. He was with some of the first local men to enlist in September 1914 as a private in the DCLI aged 30. His battalion was sent to India where he served as a Company Quartermaster Sergeant. He clearly impressed his officers, because after returning to England in November 1915, he was gazetted 2nd Lieutenant in the East Yorkshire Regiment and sent to France. His battalion, the 8th, was one of those engaged in the bloody second day, April 10th, of the battle for Arras and he was killed in action at Guemappe, aged 32. He is commemorated on the Arras Memorial at Fanbourg d'Amiens Cemetery along with 35,928 others with no known grave. On April 14th, three British Generals protested directly to General Haig about the scale of the casualties suffered and, the day after, Haig called the offensive off.

Our 7th man to remember is CHARLES AMBROSE PEARCE. He was born at Rowse Farm in 1899 where he lived with his father and mother, Charles and Eliza Pearce. Charles had two older brothers and three sisters all working on and around the farm. In 1914 Charles was 18 years old and a good friend of Arthur Chubb who lived nearby. Charles enlisted in the DCLI but at some point was transferred to the Queen's Own (Royal West Kent) Regiment. His regiment was involved in successful operations with the 24th Division over April 12th to 17th in the area to the East of Ypres. This was two months before the Battle for the Messine Ridge, and we must remember that skirmishes and shelling were taking place almost continuously along the whole of the front. We don't know the exact circumstances of Charles' death, but he is reported as having died from shell wounds on May 24th 1917 aged 21 years. He is buried in the Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery near Poperinge, just a few rows from where one of my uncles is buried.

These have been a few details about the Seven men on the Pillaton war memorial and on the church plaques. Only three of them have a known final place of rest.

Don King

PLEASE NOTE. Don King and Ann Henderson plan to publish a booklet giving more details about these men and of some of those who returned from the war. They would like to find photographs and personal details of men from the Pillaton and St.Mellion parishes who served in the Great War and are trying to make contact with relations and descendents of their families. If you have any information that you are willing to share, please get in touch using the "Contact Us" link below.