

# Archibald Thomas Davies

Sapper

184903

Royal Engineers, 11<sup>th</sup> Pontoon Park



For fighting men, the threat of death was always present, regardless of which theatre of war they fought in. Bullet, shell, gas or even the dreaded Western Front mud, were all ways the lives of young men could be extinguished in wartime. But towards the end of the war another threat emerged in the form of an influenza pandemic which decimated populations across the world. Where the virus started is unclear but the first recorded observations of the virus occurred amongst American military personnel in February 1918. By the time it was brought under control in April 1920 it is estimated Spanish flu had accounted for some fifty million



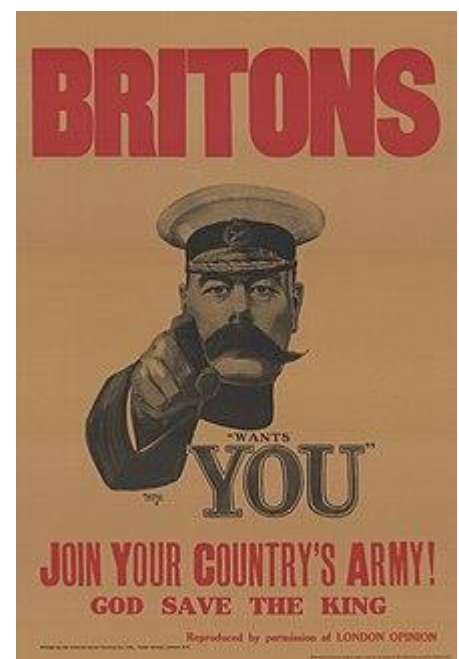
American soldiers suffering the effects of Spanish flu at Fort Riley, Kansas  
Courtesy Otis Historical Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine

lives worldwide. What is not in dispute is that four years of war had exhausted populations and made them susceptible to the virus. With no vaccination programme's available to medical professionals, treatments were limited to non-pharmaceutical interventions. Isolation, quarantine, personal hygiene, disinfectants and limiting massed gatherings, were typical

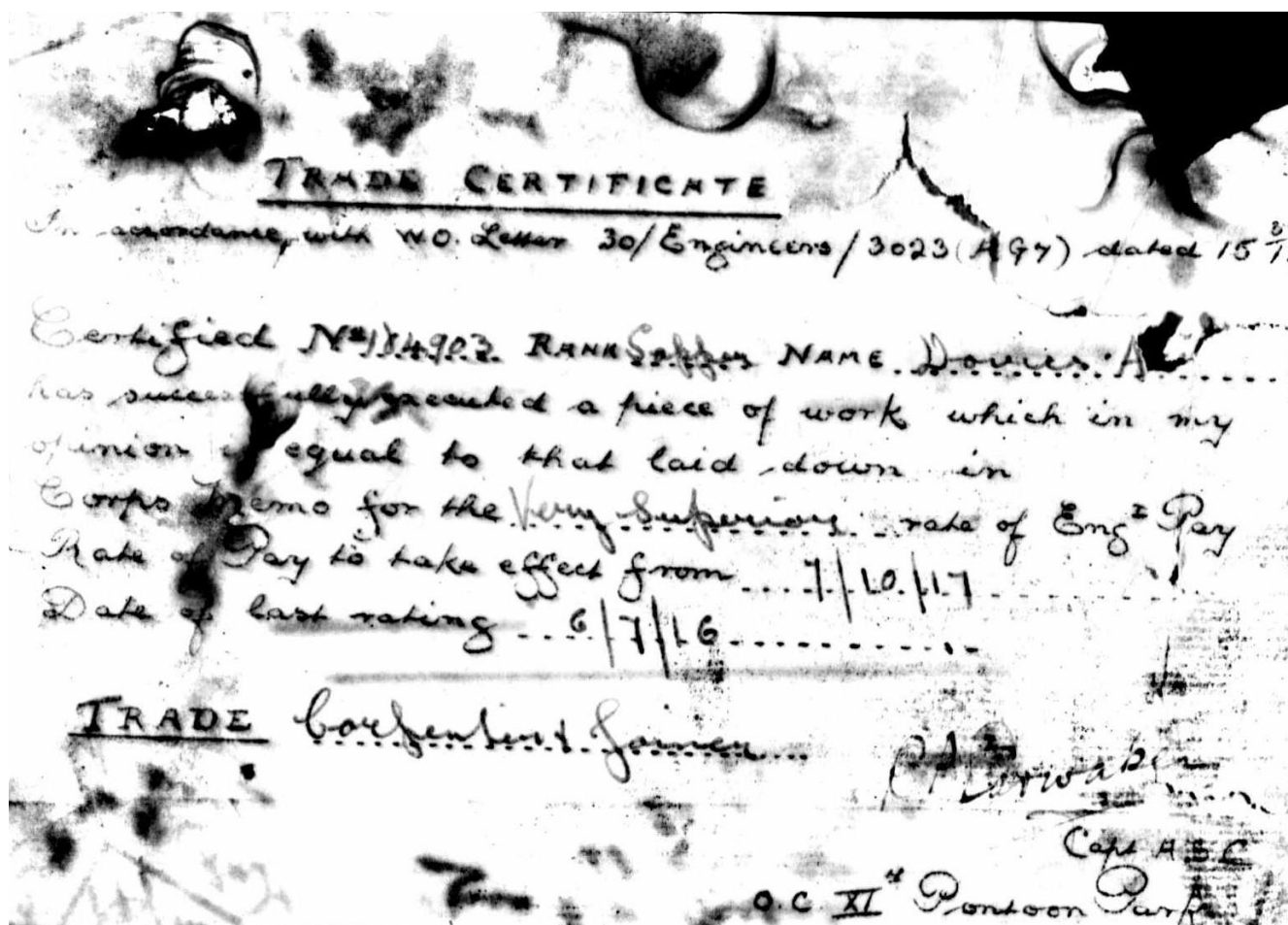
techniques used to defeat this unprecedented virus. Archie Davies was one of those who succumbed to the virus on the **11<sup>th</sup> November 1918**, armistice day.

Archibald Thomas Davies was born in Kington in 1888 but details of his early life in the town are scarce. Lady Hawkins' School were proud to count him as one of their own but evidence of his family life is vague. The 1891 census reveals that at the age of three he was living with his grandmother, Hannah Davies, in Market Square, behind what is now The Lion Hotel. Hannah was a widow and had opened her home to boarders. Her clientele ranged from elementary school teachers and general labourers to spade tree maker's; workers who turned spade handles on a lathe. Ten years later, Hannah had married William Lewis and Archie, now thirteen, was recorded as her son. Whether this indicates his parents had died is unclear but it is likely he was an only child since no other children are identified. The family were living at 1 Oxford Terrace, Market Street, where just one lodger is identified, Howard Buck a greengrocer and fishmonger. At some point Archie joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Hereford Volunteers, almost certainly Kington's local army contingent, 'D' Company. The 1911 census was held on the evening of 2<sup>nd</sup> April, by which date Archie had moved away from Kington and was living at 3 Providence View, Copthorne Road, Shrewsbury. Here he lodged with widow and boarding house keeper, Mrs Jane Peele. Archie was single and employed as a 'joiner working on government contract's'. It is while living in Shrewsbury that Archie met the love of his life Miss Elsie May Preece. Elsie, a twenty-two-year dressmaker in 1911, lived with her widowed mother Caroline at 23 Rea Street, Shrewsbury. More about Elsie later.

When war broke out Archie's military commitment ensured he was one of the first Kington men to formally enlist into Lord Kitchener's New Army. In December 1915 he was living at Station Road, Queensferry near Chester and on the twelfth he took one step forward and enlisted, he was 27 years old and a Foreman Joiner. Archie's practical capabilities were clearly recognised and he was recruited as a Sapper, service number 184903, into the Royal Engineers. His services were not



immediately required so he was stood down and not formally mobilized until 6<sup>th</sup> June 1916, at which point he was placed in the 11<sup>th</sup> Pontoon Park, classified as a Joiner, superior. Archie's service record survives and documents contained within suggest he was not totally satisfied with this posting. On 28<sup>th</sup> June 1916 he wrote to his commanding officer requesting a transfer to the Royal Engineers section of the Flying Corps. Prior to mobilization he had worked as a foreman joiner for T. Lowe and Sons of Shrewsbury, this he considered qualified him to be posted to the prestigious Flying Corps, the nation's fledgling air service. It appears his request was not successful but the included certificate attests to his considerable practical abilities. On 7<sup>th</sup> October 1917 he completed a trade test which his commanding officer considered was sufficiently competent to achieve the grade of 'Very Superior' and ensured he received an enhanced rate of pay as a certified Engineer Class I.







Royal Engineers build a pontoon bridge across a Belgian river

Archie first became a member of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) when he embarked for France on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1917. The battlefields of the Western Front were criss-crossed with rivers and ditches, obstacles which had to be traversed if advances were to be achieved.

Pontoon Companies provided

the means of crossing these impediments to progress and were an essential tool of war. Towards the end of 1918 Archie was allowed to take some home leave. He travelled to his sweetheart Elsie at 23 Rea Street, Shrewsbury, it was here that he was taken ill on the 4<sup>th</sup> November. His doctor reported to the military that Davies's health had gradually deteriorated, the influenza developing into pneumonia which ultimately caused his death at 1pm on 11<sup>th</sup> November. The physician also stated Elsie Preece was his fiancé, next of kin and sadly present at his death. The Royal Engineers Depot at Chatham was informed the following day. In January 1920 army bureaucracy tried to establish Archie's parental and kinship status and who indeed was his next of kin. The last known person was his mother, Emma Davies, of Oxford Terrace, Kington, who Archie had nominated when he enlisted. Elsie responded, stating he had no living relatives and she was his fiancé and indeed his next of kin. After many years of wrangling Archie's financial effects of £27 1s 2d were passed to Miss E.M. Preece of 23 Rea Street, Shrewsbury. Archie was buried at Shrewsbury General Cemetery,



plot 197.8.G. There were many military hospitals within and surrounding Shrewsbury and 125 burials from the First World War are recorded by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as being 'scattered around Shrewsbury General Cemetery, with a large group towards the eastern end'. The photograph of Archies headstone suggests he is surrounded by fellow comrades and therefore buried in the eastern part of the cemetery; an area set aside for military burials. It is comforting to think that even in death he is surrounded by his brothers in arms.

We can only imagine the devastation Elsie felt at the death of her beloved. He had suffered the trials of war only to die of an invisible killer while on leave. Elsie appears to have stayed loyal to Archie and never married another. As with her beloved Archie, Elsie May Peerce's life was also cut short when she died at the age of thirty-nine in early 1928. As for Archie, he was posthumously awarded the Victory and British War medals, his sacrifice was acknowledged at the Kington Peace Service in July 1919 and his name will forever be remembered on Kington War Memorial. Long may he rest in peace.

