

# Edgar Falconer

Lance Corporal

1<sup>st</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Herefordshire Regiment



Edgar Falconer's story is unusual in as much as he was not a native of Kington, but was in fact born in Eccles, a small village outside Attleborough in Norfolk. His father was Scotsman Allan Falconer of Dunnottar, a village not far from the fishing town of Stonehaven, Kincardineshire. Edgars mother was Sarah Tredwith Clarke who hailed from Poplar in London and it was here in 1883 that they married. When Allan moved to London is unclear but the 1881 census reveals that he was working as a cabinet maker however, in later census's his calling had taken a dramatic change and he had become a Butler. This line of work clearly suited Allan better and in subsequent census returns we find he has settled in this profession but frequently moved his family around the country taking positions as they became open to him. Their first child Allan, was born in Caterham in 1886 and the following year a second son, Roderick, arrived in Hoxne, Suffolk. The fledgling family then moved south to Lyndhurst in the New Forest where a third son John Malcolm, was born in 1888. Here too Allan and Sarah's only daughter, Christabell was born in 1890. Then in January 1891 Edgar, the focus of this biography, was born. Close inspection of this census reveals that on the 5<sup>th</sup> April 1891, the date of that year's census, the family were indeed living at Cuffnells Lodge in Lyndhurst, therefore why Edgar was born all the way across in Norfolk is unknown.



Hestercombe House and Gardens

Moving on a decade, the 1901 census shows the family having moved from Lyndhurst and relocating in the Somerset village of Gotton near Taunton. It is here that Allan decides to set down some family roots and is working as Butler at Hestercombe House, a large imposing house on the outskirts of the village.

With his young family growing up perhaps it was decided that some stability was required. Hestercombe House was the home of The Honourable Edward William Berkley Portman, eldest son of the second Viscount Portman. This stately gentleman had served in the army for fourteen years, attaining the rank of Major, and was a keen sportsman. His penchant for sporting activity was to have a particularly influential effect upon two of the Falconer boy's, Roderick and Edgar. In 1892 The Honourable E.W.B. Portman established the Hestercombe Cricket Club. He drew talent from the local area and the families and numerous workers on the estate. Contemporary newspapers inform us the team received coaching from family friend and talented Somerset batsman Lionel Charles Hamilton Palairret and go on to suggest that Hestercombe Cricket Club



were 'a club to be reckoned with in Edwardian England'. The relevance of this information is that Edgar, who eventually moved to Kington, became a star of Kington's Thursday Cricket Club, achieving the position of Captain in 1911. As for Edgar's older brother Roderick, so proficient at the 'Noble Game' was he, that between 1907 and 1914 a professional career at Northamptonshire County Cricket Club resulted. The training they received at Hestercombe clearly served them both well in later life.

It is believed Edgar moved to Kington in 1909. Kington seems a strange place for the son of a Butler from Somerset to frequent so we can only surmise he arrived in search of employment. His success is confirmed in the 1911 census when we discover he was working as an Ironmongers Assistant for Messrs, James Meredith & Co. at No 3 High Street. A report in the Kington Times dated 1<sup>st</sup> November 1913 tells us that Edgar was living in Duke Street and had been successful in a whist drive, raising funds for Kington Choral Society. The Kington Times also reveals in November 1914 that 'Men of 'D' Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the Herefordshire Regiment, had been



Kington volunteers 1914

assessed as fit and inoculated for foreign service'. Private 1566, Edgar Falconer was one of those men.

The 1<sup>st</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Herefordshire Regiment formed part of the Welsh Border Brigade and on the 16<sup>th</sup> July 1915 boarded the SS Euripedes in Devonport and shipped out to Gallipoli. Edgar was aboard that day and on the 9<sup>th</sup> August was involved in the initial landings at Suvla Bay. It was not unusual for the lads at the front to write home and Edgar provided a most valuable account of his time at Galipolli when he wrote to a friend in Kington on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 1915. This letter was later published in the Kington Times and although the letter is long I intend republishing it here, in its entirety, since it is an invaluable historic document and provides an insight into the highs and lows of life in the army and indeed of fighting for king and country. The Report starts with the excitable heading:

## **LANDING OF THE 1<sup>ST</sup> HEREFORDS**

### *THRILLING ACCOUNT BY KINGTON MAN*

*Pte. E. Falconer, of A Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Herefords, sends a long and interesting letter to a friend in Kington. Pte. Falconer, who enlisted on the outbreak of war, was formerly with Messrs. J. Meredith and Co. of Kington. Writing under date October 12<sup>th</sup>, he says:*

*I have kept wonderfully well since I have been out here and the voyage out I quite enjoyed. We passed through Taunton, my old home, on our way to embark and it brought back old memories, as I was practically brought up there. I went there when I was 7½ and left when I was 18½, when I came to Kington, so I ought to know a bit about it. You know we arrived at Devonport about mid-night, had to unload from train and reload on vessel, which was a job I can tell you. It took us practically till next morning. Had no sleep that night. Next morning we had a good look over our ship (TTS Euripedes) 15000 tons with cargo 29000 so quite a nice little boat. I was very seedy the first day but the sea was so nice and calm that we soon got over it and were all right for the remainder of the voyage. Most of the time was spent on deck, asleep, or having a hand of bridge, whist or nap and the days quickly went, we little thinking then that we should so soon be in the firing line. Gibraltar was a fine sight. Malta was very interesting and as for Alexandria, I did not care for it, seemed very dirty except one part which seemed a bit higher class. Port Said a much nicer place. One thing we liked it for was that we had two good dips in the sea. It was very amusing to see the mixed bathing here, blacks and whites, dogs, kids, males and females all together. You never saw a mixture in all your life, and all seemed to be enjoying themselves. It was very hot indeed all the way out here. Well, we did not know a bit where we should eventually land. We had biscuits, tin of bully beef, and an iron ration (which consists of tea, sugar and oxo cubes in a tin), issued out to us one day*

*just before arriving close here. But as it happened we ran on a sandbank, which delayed us practically two days. We could not get clear of this, so had to get on another boat to come here. We arrived here in the great Suvla Bay which you have read about, in the pitch darkness, we could see and hear the flash of the guns' firing miles in the distance, at a point which I afterwards learnt was Achi-Baba. We were very packed on this boat and could not either sit down or stand up, so you can guess that we did not feel up to much. Then we had orders to get on lighters to land at a given beach. It was by this time just getting light so I kept my eyes open to see all I could. There was great activity as you can just imagine, it being the point at which the troops had made a landing the previous day, so here I found myself with my mates just putting a foot on land after being a sailor for about three weeks, and quite pleased to feel terra firma again. We lined up and had the order to right turn, were led over the hill that skirted the beach, on top of which was a Turkish trench that had the day before been occupied by them. Here the Battalion lined up as they arrived en masse. Had order to take kit off and had the chance to lie down or make a cup of tea.*

#### *UNDER FIRE*

*I being rather fond of my teapot, boiled myself some water in my mess tin and then just imagined I was on Mr. Edwards' ground, the moors at Barton, but there was not the nice green grass and more than that, almost before we had finished a Turkish shell came whizzing over. This was something fresh for us, although the chaps acted very well under it. We soon had another and it began to feel a bit warm. This didn't suit so we soon got the order to get kit on and had to move along under a hill. Here was about the only battery that had arrived at this land so you can guess they were busy retaliating. We stayed here and had a bit of dinner and had to go to the beach to fetch water. Then I was on a fatigue, fetching the Divisional Headquarters kit and goods up to the headquarters. Before we hardly had time to do this we heard the order 'Every man to be ready to move at any time', so had to look round a bit to be ready. I believe it was somewhere about 4 that we got the order and were ready to move off. We started out and went round the crest of the hill to be very soon met by shrapnel shells.*

#### *IT WAS AWFUL*

*Here it was awful. Your mates would fall by the side of you and you unable to remain with them, as our orders were to keep going and if anyone dropped he was to be left as the stretcher bearers were following and would attend to all cases. We were on the open plain with no shelter at all, and the only thing to do was to go on until we came to some shelter. I was on the extreme right and had several fall around me. Poor Ted Hamlet was caught as you know. Taylor, another man went down, and then Bevan from Hereford received a shrapnel bullet in the heel of his boot, which bruised his heel, but he was able*

*to come back to the Battalion a day or so after. When I saw him fall I had to stop just a minute and give him a cheery word, as we had been billeted together at Irchester and I had got to know him. He is still with us and well I am pleased to say. It was in this advance that Senior Captain (Captain Yates) got wounded also Adjutant Nott, and our Colonel. The Colonel has been back some time but I hear Capt. Nott and Capt. Yates are on their way or else in England. We lost heavily this day. Our platoon numbers only 19 now, including three NCO's and also the men that we have had from Alexandria, left there to reinforce us. Sergeant Major Chipp caught it as you have seen. Our Junior Captain (Capt. Lewis of Hereford), received his wound in the trench, I believe I was not with him at the time as our platoon was sent out of the trench we arrived at to find the fire trench. It was here that Lance Corporal Longford and other caught it. I followed Corporal Wargent, who is now acting as our Platoon Sergeant. We soon came across some more Herefords and two of our officers. They told us to follow them and they went down a steep gully into a hollow and up the other side where we met an awful sight. Men covered in blood, some being carried on stretchers, other hobbling, and some with the look on their faces which cannot be described. This trench had only just been taken off the Turks by the South Wales Borderers, fine fighting chaps. They were glad to see us as they had sent for reinforcements as they had lost a lot of their men. We soon got our orders here. We lined the trench and had our orders to fire. It was by this time getting dark. We could not see the enemy but heard them in the distance entrenching themselves. They must have lost heavily here as they did not trouble us with a counter attack, but plenty of rifle fire and snipers banging away. It was here that Dick Rast of Whitney, got wounded in the head. It appears that our Battalion had the order to left wheel before they got to this point and were holding the line immediately in our rear, and had to dig themselves in. The South Wales Borderers lost heavily in this attack. Two poor chaps lay next to me the first night dead, with bayonet wounds, and no fewer than ten were buried the next day in the little hollow just below us.*

#### **A DIFFICULT JOB**

*We stayed with the Sout Wales Borderers three days and then got orders to rejoin our Battalion. We had a job as you could not move without being sniped at or shelled. Three poor chaps got killed here through the snipers and one killed by a shell bursting in the trench that he was digging in to place a machine gun in. We started out and had some narrow escapes. You would first get one whizz over your shoulder then one by your feet and the next might just go over your head. Anyway, I am thankful to say our little party arrived back safe and took its place with the Battalion again. We held this position until the next day or the day after when we were taken back to the beach for a short rest and as far as I can remember it was the next evening that we advanced again to another position a little on the left. We remained at this point for some days. During the advance we had shrapnel and snipers to*

*contend with of course. Lost some more of our men and it was here that Majow Carless was missing. I have not heard any more of him but I hope that he may be a prisoner as I hear two of our men are in Constantinople. Poor Tommy Cook, of Headbrook, got shot in the chest and must have died almost as soon as they got him to hospital. The rations and water were very short at first but I am pleased to say they have improved a good deal lately. There are not many luxuries with them though. We always look for parcels from home like a schoolboy looks for them when at school. We have had several rests since being here and have taken our place in the firing line, and have lost several but not the numbers we did when we first landed. You would not know the Base now; there is so much activity and a lot more troops. We are at present at the Base doing fatigues and digging large dugouts.*

Clearly Edgar was an educated, eloquent man who paints an elaborate picture of life at Gallipoli full of detail and information useful to those back home. What started as glamorous and exciting soon became tedious and very dangerous. The Gallipoli campaign went badly and as Edgar identified, many Herefordshire men were killed or fell seriously ill. On the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1915 the regiment, by then seriously depleted, were evacuated from the peninsula. They were transferred to Alexandria in Egypt via the island of Lemnos. From there they moved to Wardan, north of Cairo, where they regrouped, replenished their numbers and were given the task of helping defend the vitally important Suez Canal. As 1916 progressed so the Turkish army, supported by German commanders, grew in strength and confidence. Together they advanced across the Sinai Desert and started to threaten the canal. Attack being the best kind of defence, the allied army, including the Herefords, marched east to halt this advance and in July 1916 the battalion were heavily involved in the Battle of Rumania on the mediterranean coast. Following this success General Sir Archibald Murray's forces moved further north and embarked upon the Palestine Campaign of 1916/17, this designed to rid the middle east of Turkish and German forces. The battalion was involved in the first two Battles of Gaza in March and April 1917 and were heavily involved during the Battle for Beersheba, the precursor to the third Battle of Gaza. Prior to the Battle of Beersheba Murray had been relieved by General Edmund Allenby and under his command the Herefords were to push on toward Jerusalem and supported the liberation of this sacred and religiously significant city in December 1917, two years after their ignominious evacuation from Gallipoli.

Whilst this explains the bigger picture it would be useful to examine the involvement of the Herefordshire Regiment in the Palestine Campaign and in particular the fighting at Beersheba and the events which led to the death of Edgar Falconer. I would now like to turn to the excellent publication *Manu Forti*. This book, written by Lieutenant-Colonel T.J.B. Hill MBE, provides an historical account of the regiment from 1860 – 1967. A large section of the book deals with the regiments involvement in the Palestine Campaign and provides a blow by blow account of their involvement in the fighting. As stated earlier the allied forces had driven the enemy back out of the Sinai Desert, but then became bogged down at the small



coastal town of Gaza. Gaza had been heavily fortified by the enemy and provided stiff resistance, halting the allied advance. Following two unsuccessful attempts to capture Gaza in March and April 1917 a new plan was devised. Sir Archibald Murray had been relieved by General Sir Edmund Allenby, his plan was to attack Gaza from the east since two direct attacks from the south had failed. To achieve this the town of Beersheba and the high ground to the north had to be taken. An advance upon Gaza could then be enacted by attacking the heavily fortified Hureira-Sheria line, then forging on toward Gaza. Troops to the south would harry and advance upon fortress Gaza whilst also protecting the left flank of the forces fighting around Beersheba. The Herefordshire Regiment formed part of the 158th Infantry Brigade of the 53rd Division. The 60th and 74th Divisions were set the task of taking Beersheba with the 53rd providing defensive support on the left flank of the attack, west of Beersheba.

Extreme secrecy surrounded the preparations for the advance on Beersheba and as the troops of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) started to concentrate for the attack, subterfuge was the order of the day. Confusing troop movements and signals were employed and bivouacs and tents were left in place in campsites once the men had left. Skeleton teams were tasked with regular patrols and activity in the camps to mislead the enemy into thinking the camps were still fully manned. 158th Infantry Brigade started the advance on Beersheba on 20th October with slow and steady progress being made toward their objective. The Herefords, closely followed by the rest of the 158th Brigade, led the way as they looped around the south and west of Beersheba. Final positions for the three Divisions were achieved by sunrise on the 31st October, all was set for a massed attack on Beersheba. The 60th and 74th Divisions advanced on Beersheba, which was routed of Turkish defenders with little resistance.

The 53rd Division were then ordered to advance to the north of Beersheba to occupy the Khuweilfe hills overlooking the enemy forces in front of them. By 3.15pm on the 31st 53rd Division, supported by the Imperial Camel Corps on their right, had advanced onto the high ground and were in position. Upon arrival, the Herefords were thrust forward to outposts, guarding the Division behind them. Conditions on the hills for the Herefords were hard and water was in short supply, the only good source was back in Beersheba. All horses were evacuated from the hills and sent back to Beersheba, as for the men, they had to suffer until supplies could be brought up to them the following day. Being rather exposed in their outposts, and regularly harried by enemy forces, it was decided to draw the Herefordshire Regiment back into the protective fold of the Division. In front of the 53rd Division lay the Khuweilfe Heights with a strategically important flat topped hill named Tell to the left. The Heights were heavily defended by enemy forces and a plan was devised to take these two important points and thus set the scene for the encirclement of Gaza.

The Battle of Tel el Khuweilfe began on 1 November. The map on the next page, produced by Messrs. Cyril Falls and A.F. Beck, shows the deployment of forces at



Cyril Falls and A.F.Beck

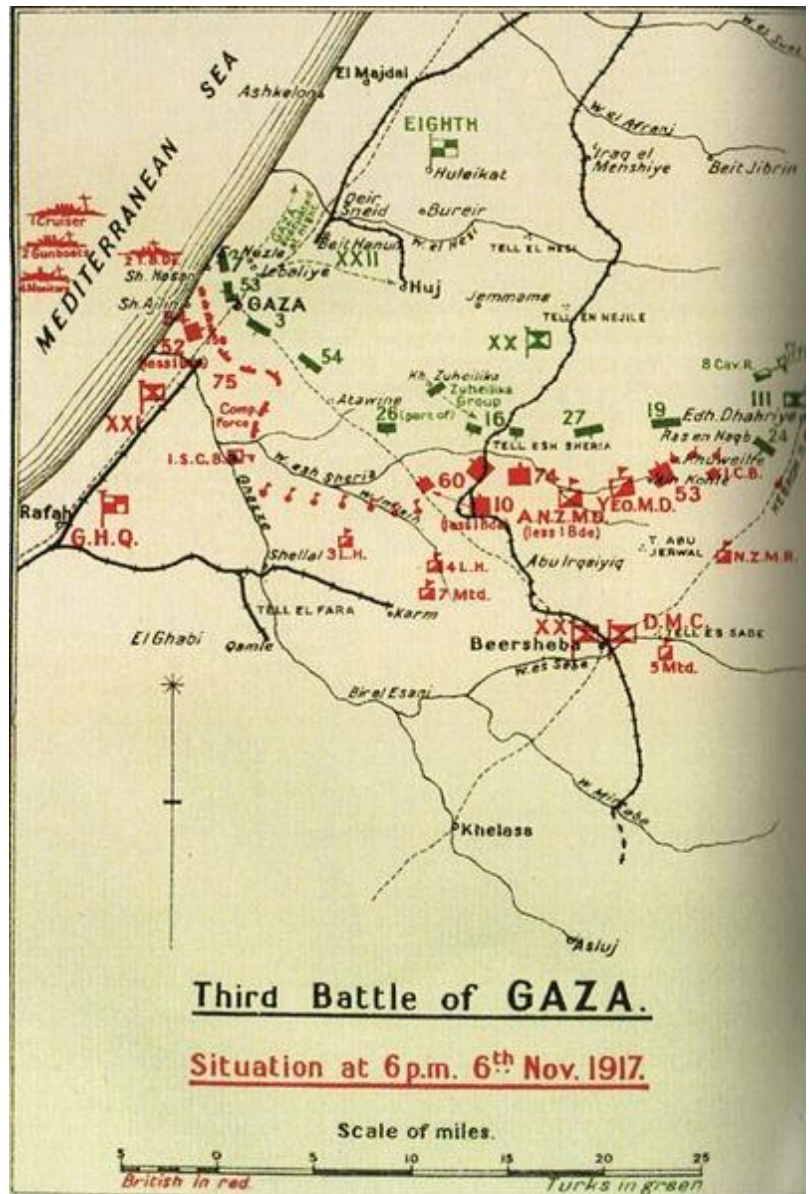
6pm on 1st November. 74th and 60th Divisions hold Beersheba and the 53rd are to the north of the town on the high ground. Gaza lies to the west and is being encroached by allied forces from the south. Early on the 4th November the division started their push forward with 160 Brigade taking the brunt of the enemy's wrath and 158, including the Herefords, in reserve supporting the advance. The advance on the Khuweilfe Heights was murderous with the 160th Brigade taking the full force of the enemies wrath. As the heights were approached command made the decision to make the final assault using fresh troops, that being 158 Brigade. However, 160 Brigade made strong representations stating that after their efforts all day they should be given the honour of taking the heights. The

original order was rescinded and 160 were given the order to attack the heights on 5<sup>th</sup> November. At this point local weather conditions intervened. The khamsin is an oppressive, hot, dry and dusty south or south-east wind which intermittently occurs in north Africa, around the eastern Mediterranean and Arabian Peninsula. This wind is prevalent in late winter and early summer, but most frequent between April and June. On 5th November, the khamsin was at its strongest making operations impossible and consequently the assault on the Khuweilfe Heights was postponed until the 6th. The original plan for 158 Brigade to attack was reinstated and with support from the whole of the divisional artillery the brigade, including the Herefords, advanced upon the Khuweilfe Heights.

In the included map on the next page, Gaza can be seen on the left with Beersheba centre right. The 53<sup>rd</sup> Division can be seen pressing the Khuweilfe Heights to the north of Beersheba. At 4am on the 6<sup>th</sup> an intense bombardment of the slopes commenced shortly followed by a withering fire from all available machine guns on the near face of the ridge. At 8am the battalion moved into their allotted attack



position. The four companies were arranged in platoon waves with each of the companies having one platoon in the front line. As the 158<sup>th</sup> Brigade advanced up the hill so the artillery and machine gun companies lifted their barrage onto the reverse slope of Khuweilfe. D company the Herefords, in conjunction with the 6th Royal Welsh Fusiliers, moved over the top of Tell el Khuweilfe shooting and bayonetting the enemy as they advanced. They happened upon nine Turkish guns limbered up in a ravine, ready to be extricated by the enemy. The company charged the scene and took control of the guns. As this happened a thick mist descended upon the hill and confusion ensued. Units became confused and mixed up such that the 7th Royal Welsh Fusiliers mistook the Herefords in the ravine as the enemy and called in artillery support. The company commander Capt. Berney and others from his company were killed but, in the fog of war, it was unclear if it was a friendly fire incident. The remainder of Berney's team were forced to leave the guns and retreat. In amongst all this confusion enemy snipers played their part in disrupting the advance of the Herefords, to devastating effect. The attackers, reinforced by the 2/10th Middlesex Regiment, were ordered to hold at all costs and spent the rest of the day consolidating their new positions. All day the 158<sup>th</sup> Brigade suffered atop the Khuweilfe Heights, under galling enemy fire and numerous counter attacks. The brigade casualty count of 620 was inevitably high with the Herefordshire Regiment alone losing six officers dead and five wounded. Incidentally another Kington casualty, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Charles Vaughan, was one of those battalion officers killed on the Khuweilfe Heights. His biography, also available on the Kington Remembers website, makes facinating reading revealing the bravery and sacrifice of another Kington man. That evening the battalion was relieved by the 5th Royal Welsh Fusiliers and moved back behind brigade headquarters. These brave men had performed gallantly in appalling conditions with extreme heat, dust and a severe



Cyril Falls, A.F.Beck

lack of water making their task even more harrowing. As for Edgar Falconer, it would appear he was injured during this battle but survived the fighting. He was evacuated to a casualty clearing station only to succumb to his injuries on the **13th November 1917**. Gaza and Tel el Khuweilfe finally fell to the allied forces on the 7th November with the Turkish army putting up limited resistance in the end. For

the Herefordshire Regiment the third battle of Gaza was over but had cost them so dear.

News of Edgars demise quickly arrived in Kington with the trusty Kington Times reporting the sad event.

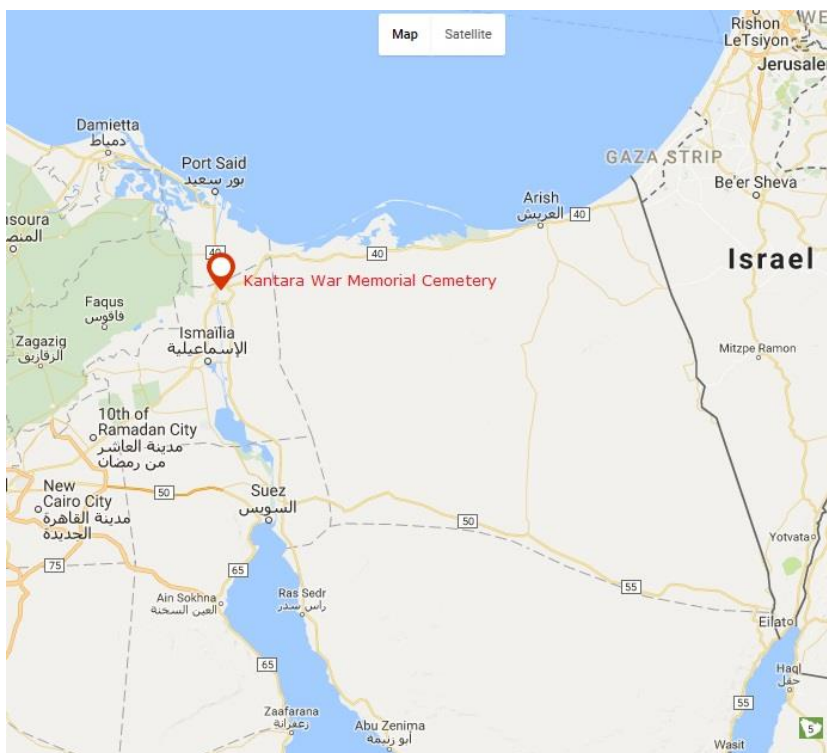
### **Kington Times**

### **24th November**

*Information has been received that Lance-Corporal E. Falconer, of Kington, died of wounds in Palestine on the 13th inst.*

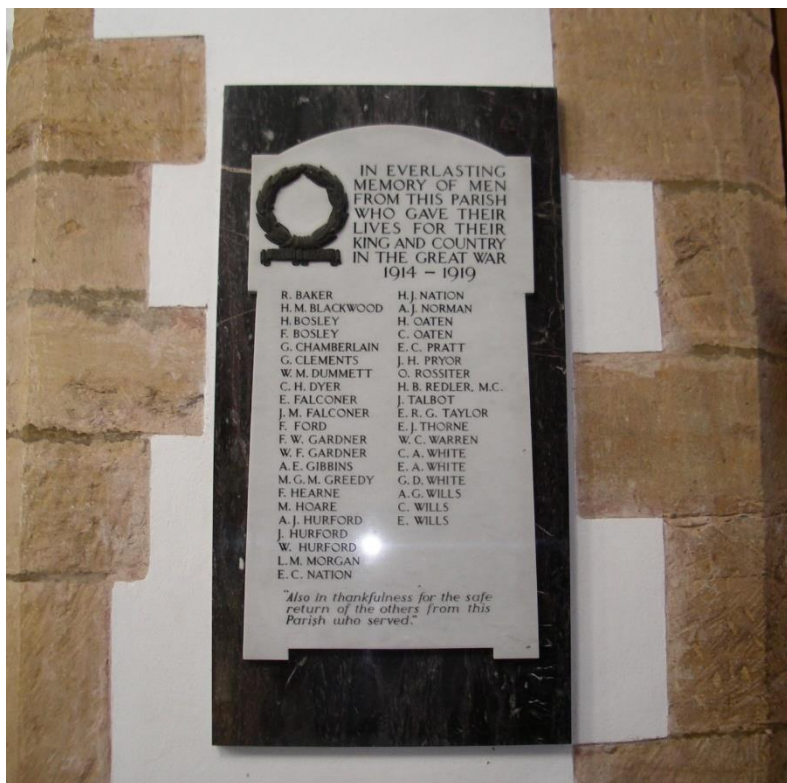
*Corporal Falcolner was previous to the outbreak of hostilities in the employ of Messrs. James Meredith & Co., Kington, as an ironmongers assistant. He was well built, standing over 6ft. and joined the Herefordshire Regiment in August 1914, being present at the Suvla Bay landing and during the Gallipoli Campaign. He was an enthusiastic cricketer and golfer.*

Edgar is buried at Kantara War Memorial Cemetery, grave reference E28. This large Commonwealth cemetery is located on the east side of the Suez Canal some 30 miles from Port Said. Kantara was an important location for allied forces defending the canal against enemy attack and a major hospital concentration grew up around it. It was from this point that the fight back began in 1916 and the point the Herefords started their move eastwards to confront the Turks at Rumani. The cemetery was started in February 1916 and took burials from many hospitals in the area. It remained in use until late 1920. After the Armistice, the cemetery was more than doubled in size when graves were brought in from other cemeteries and desert battlefields, notably those at Rumani, Qatia, El Arish and Rafa. There are six burial plots at Kantara, A – F. Edgar’s burial plot, E28, may





suggest that his was one of the burials relocated after the armistice. The photograph above shows Kantara with its manicured rows of gravestones and topiary with palmtrees in the distance all of which seems incongruous for a lad from green and pleasant England to lay at rest in.



For his suffering and bravery through two long years of conflict Edgar Falconer was awarded the 1915 Star, British War and Victory medals. He was clearly held in high regard by the people of Kington who ensured his name was one of the first added to Kington War Memorial. A Peace Service was held at St. Marys Church on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1919 where his name was read out along with 60 other brave Kington men. Edgar was also remembered by the people at Hestercombe. His name appears on a memorial at St Augustine church in West Monkton, the nearest village to

Hestercombe. If you look closely at this memorial you will see another Falconer is also remembered. This does not bode well for the Falconer family.

No one can suggest that the Falconer family did not do their duty during World War One. Edgar died for his country and it transpires so too did his older brother John Malcolm Falconer. Like Edgar, John had moved away from Hestercombe and had taken up a position as a legal clerk at a law firm in Redruth. It was from here that he joined the 2<sup>nd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. Formed in Truro in September 1914 this regiment was designated as a 'second line' unit for home service. However, on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1914 they boarded ship in Southampton and sailed for India arriving at Karachi on the 9<sup>th</sup> January 1915. Their duty in India was to garrison the country while the regular Indian army were released for fighting abroad. By all account this they did with zeal and devotion. John Falconer died on the 21<sup>st</sup> February 1918 in the Meerut region. It is unknown what he died of but conflict is not suspected, therefore it appears he died of more natural causes. He is buried in Delhi War Cemetery, grave reference 8.B.10.

So, Allan and Sarah had suffered dearly during the war, two of their boys giving the ultimate sacrifice however, their torment was not over. Roderick Falconer, their second son, had also enlisted in 1914. As with Edgar he too had been trained and played for Major Portman's Hestercombe cricket team and by all accounts made a fine right handed batsman and bowler. He moved to Oundle in Northamptonshire

and between 1907 and 1914 played for Northamptonshire Country Cricket Club. A promising professional career was cut short with the outbreak of war in 1914 and Roderick enlisted shortly after. In December 1914 he joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Northampton Regiment but spent most of the war on British soil. On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1918 he and his regiment were shipped out to France and on the 17<sup>th</sup> October that year Roderick received a severe gunshot wound to his left leg and was immediately evacuated back to England. He made a partial recovery and continued to serve in the Northamptonshire Regiment until April 1920 when he was discharged as 'physically unfit for service'. He attained the rank of Sergeant, married and had three children, Roderick, Geoffrey and the youngest Edgar, born on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1920. A fitting tribute to his brave younger brother. Roderick had a long and productive life until he died in Malvern in 1966.

Allan and Sarah's grief can only be imagined. They continued to live in Taunton for the rest of their lives. Sarah passed away in 1926 aged 73 and was followed by Allan who died on the 24<sup>th</sup> September 1934 at the parsonage in Hestercombe, he was 77 years of age. The sacrifice made by Edgar Falconer, a talented sportsman and eloquent author, must never be forgotten.

