

William Andrew Turner

Private

1311

1st Herefordshire Regiment



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

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



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

massed gatherings, were typical techniques used to defeat this unprecedented virus. As the men returned home, relieved of the agonies of warfare, so Spanish Flu took hold and ensured many of those brave men did not have long to enjoy the sweet taste of freedom. William Andrew Turner was one of those who succumbed to the virus. He died on the **24th November 1918** at Kington Cottage Hospital, Victoria Road.

William came from a large Kington family, born in 1896 he was the fourth child of John and Amy Turner. John, a Kington man, had married Amy Watkins from New Radnor, in 1891. Their first child Bessie arrived shortly after, born 1892. The following year Margaret (Maggie) arrived 1893, then John 1894, William Andrew 1896, Albert 1898, Edith 1900 and finally, the baby of the family Alfred (Sydney), who was born in April 1908. William was christened on 22nd March 1896 at St. Micheal and All Angels church in Lyonshall. The 1901 census shows the growing family were living at The Hope, a large farm in Lyonshall, where John worked as a shepherd. Tragically, even before Sydney had reached his first birthday, John the patriarch died on 30th March 1909. Amy was left with the unenviable task of bringing up her large family alone. By the end of 1909 she and her offspring had been forced to move away from the farm in Lyonshall and to relocate in Kington, at No.3 Balls Yard, a tiny house which backs on to Oxford Lane. It is here the family are identified in the 1911 census. William attended Kington Boys' School, which was rather conveniently located just behind his home. But as war approached in August 1914, William, then aged eighteen, was rapidly approaching the age where volunteering to fight for your country was expected.

Sadly, few of Williams service records survive, many such documents having been destroyed in World War II bombing raids on London. However, by piecing together those fragments of information which do survive it is possible to gain a picture of his involvement in the war. An inclusion in the 7th November 1914 edition of The Kington Times hints at the commitment of local men to enlist into the forces. Williams desire for adventure ensured that at the age of just eighteen he was one of the first to volunteer. At a recruitment meeting held at Burton Hall, now The Burton Hotel, he enlisted into 'A' Company, 1st Herefordshire Regiment, as Private 1311 Turner. The next document which illuminates his service is the British Army World War I Medal Index Cards (MIC). This invaluable resource contains the names

of almost five million people who served during World War I (WWI) and received an award in recognition of their service. The collection was created by the Army Medal Office towards the end of WWI to keep in one place details of soldiers and their medal entitlement. An inclusion on Williams MIC reveals he first entered the Balkan theatre of war on 1st September 1915. This suggests William served at Gallipoli, a phase of the war the Herefordshire Regiment were heavily involved in. It is worth noting that William was just nineteen when he set foot on Turkish soil.

Little more is known of Williams service other than at some point he was transferred into the 569th Home Service Employment Company and his service number changed to 267257. Men who were injured during service, and consequently placed in medical categories B3 and C3, were considered unfit to serve in frontline units. Home service employment would typically include such tasks as Cook, stores operatives, sanitary, tailors, shoemakers, laundry workers, telephone operators etc. all tasks ideal for soldiers who were medically reduced. We do not know when William returned to England but we can make an informed assumption that it was before 1918. Civil records indicate that in early 1918 William married Violet Ellen Coombe, in Kington. Violet was the daughter of John Coombe a gas fitter living in Brecon, but sadly their marital contentment was short-lived.

One further military document of interest is the Army Register of Soldiers Effects. This record details the money owed to soldiers of the British Army who died in service from 1901 to 1929. Following death, a soldier's account was 'made up' and any proceeds were forwarded to their next of kin. In Williams case this was his wife Violet Turner. In May 1919 Violet received £32 15s 4d and in the December of the same year a further £16 War Gratuity was advanced to her. This document also reveals Williams employment at his time of death, in the 420th Agricultural Employment Company. The war had a huge demand for young fit men, many who worked the land prior to war. Units such as the 420th comprised soldiers unfit for combat duties but fit enough to work the land. The role of Agricultural Employment Companies was vital if soldiers and civilians were to be fed. The men worked on farms and farmers paid for their services. Some were trained in tractor driving, a skill many older farmers were reluctant to learn. This is how William was employed. His obituary in the Kington Times dated 7th December 1918, is reproduced below and sheds light upon his military career and particulars of his funeral and family.

Funeral of Private William Turner

The funeral of Private William Turner, of Duke Street, Kington, whose death was reported last week, took place at Kington Cemetery last Thursday afternoon (5th December). The deceased saw service with the Herefordshire Regiment in Egypt and has of late been engaged with an Agricultural Company and has been driving a motor plough in the district, where he was well known, having resided there for a number of years. The funeral was of a semi-military character. The coffin, which was covered with a union jack, was conveyed to the cemetery on a motor lorry belonging the Food Production Department, the bearers being comrades of the deceased belonging to the Agricultural Company in Kington. The mourners included his wife, mother, two sisters and a brother. To further brothers of the deceased are in France and were unable to be present. At the conclusion of the service a firing party fired three volleys over the grave and bugler sounded the "Last Post". There were a large number of floral tributes.



This touching memorial shows the esteem afforded William within the community. A sad end for a young man who served his country and latterly the people of Kington. In recognition of that service William was awarded the Victory and British War medals along with the 1915 Star. He is at rest in Kington Cemetery where a Commonwealth War Graves headstone identifies his plot.

The distress Williams death must have caused his mother can only be imagined. Two of her other sons also served in the army and fears for their safety must have been equally challenging. John Turner, Williams older brother, also served at

Gallipoli with the Herefordshire Regiment and was in the initial landings at Suvla Bay on 9th August 1915. A letter from John to his mother was published in The Kington Times dated 4th September 1915. The letter graphically tells of the dangers encountered and experiences he and his comrades endured and is recounted below.

HAD A VERY ROUGH TIME

Private John Turner, also of A Company, 1st Herefordshire Regiment, writing to his mother at 3 Balls Yard, Kington, says: "We went into the trenches Monday night. We had a very rough time as we advanced under shrapnel fire all the way. There were a lot of our chaps knocked out but thank God I got through it safely. The worst is we cannot get enough water to drink. About 70 of us got cut off from our Battalion and are back at the beach, but are going back tonight. I saw poor Sergeant Hamlet and another of our chaps wounded. The shell that caught them just missed me. Reg Mainwaring went with several others out of our trench for water but never returned, so we do not know what has become of them. Their snipers are about the worse danger we have to put up with as they have one hiding nearly everywhere, they possibly can. It is a sight to see all the shells bursting at night time, but you have to keep your head low or you soon get caught. Most of the Kington chaps are safe as far as I know".

Sergeant Hamlet was Edward Hamlet who had been a sawyer for Hatton's timberyard at Sunset. Edward was evacuated to St. David's hospital in Malta where his injuries were so serious his left arm had to be amputated. He did however, make it back to Kington. Unlike Reg Mainwaring, who was taken prisoner by the Turkish army at Gallipoli and died in captivity in November 1916. John Turner survived the war and returned to Kington where he became a railway shunter at Kington station. He passed away in 1952, at the age of 59 and is also buried in Kington Cemetery.

Williams younger brother Albert also served, but in the Somerset Light Infantry. He survived the war and was discharged service on 1st January 1920 with a disability pension. The 1939 Register informs that he became a carpenter and

joiner and that he lived with his mother and younger brother Alfred (Sydney), a painter and decorator, at 41 Duke Street. Albert died in 1969 while Sydney, who was too young to fight in the war, joined his brothers in 1975. As for their mother Amy, she never remarried but continued to live in Kington until her death in 1933, aged 65. All three were laid to rest in Kington Cemetery. Violet, Williams wife of less than a year, did remarry, to William Townsley in 1921. She moved away from Kington and had four children, William, Jack, her namesake Violet and Ivor. Violet Townsley died in Nuneaton in 1965, at the age of 66.

William Turner may not have died on the battlefield but he did die fighting a battle with an invisible enemy, a virus which later became known as Spanish Influenza. May he rest in peace.



Biography researched and produced by Mark Wheatland

N.B.

At the time of producing William Turner's biography, November 2020, the world is once again fighting an invisible enemy. This one is known as Covid 19, and just as the pandemic of Spanish Flu swept across the globe in 1918, so too is Covid 19. The similarities between the two are remarkable, both are equally indiscriminate and both equally deadly.