

George Albert Nash Skillicorn

Private

54533

1st/7th West Yorkshire Regiment



In the mid-19th century there was a large contingent of Skillicorn's living on the Isle of Man. About 1865 John Skillicorn moved from Ramsey on the Isle of Man to London, we presume to seek his fortune. Here he met Annie Marie Pike, a local girl from St Pancras and in 1870 they married. Later that year on the 14th of August they were blessed with the birth of a little girl called Minnie Louisa. Sadly Minnie didn't survive her second birthday and passed away in mid-1872. However, joy returned to the family in 1875 with the birth of a son, Arthur James Skillicorn. Alas tragedy struck again in 1879 when sadly John was to lose his wife Annie. Throughout his life John is recorded as being a House Painter and Decorator and in 1881 happiness returned to the Skillicorn family when John remarried. For his second wife John chose a Kington girl called Rachel Hughes. Rachel's father was a Sadler who had his business located next door to the Kings Head pub, where the Market Hall now stands at the bottom of Church Street. We do not know what Rachel was doing so far from home, perhaps domestic work, but the 1881 census shows the newly married couple in lodgings in Dormansland just outside Lingfield in Surrey. The following year, 1882, their first born arrives, Georgina May and toward the end of 1884 the hero of this piece arrives when George Albert Nash Skillicorn is born. In 1891 the family are still living in London, at 31 Hambala Road, Battersea however, shortly after Georges sixth birthday

the family had moved back to Rachel's hometown and were living at 34 High Street, Kington. By 1901 John has moved his family again and they are found living at 13 Church Street where he has set up his Painting and Decoration business and George, now 16, is his apprentice. In the 1911 census George considers himself fully qualified and is recorded as being a House Painter like his father. In this census he is still single but later that year his circumstances are to change. In the latter part of 1911, in Yazor, he marries Sarah Helen Parry and at some point moves out of the family home in Church Street and finds new accommodation at 28 Victoria Road, Kington.

Sadly George's service records do not survive but from his low Service Number we can guess that it was quite early in the conflict when he enlisted in Leominster, originally into the Royal Army Service Corps as Private 1450 Skillicorn. The next recorded events in George's life are bitter sweet. In early 1915 his father John passed away at the age of 67 but also on the 15th of March 1915 Rachel delivers their first, and as it transpires only child Marjorie Nina Joan Skillicorn. As will be seen later any happiness at this time does not last.

At some point George is transferred into the 1st/7th Battalion the Prince of Wales Own, West Yorkshire Regiment and his service number changes to 54533. On the 15th of April 1915 the Regiment landed at Boulogne. Being only a month after the birth of Marjorie we do not know if George ever saw his daughter. By the 19th of April the Regiment is billeted in the area of Estaires. A month after landing the 1st/7th West Yorkshire Regiment, along with other Yorkshire Regiments, became part of the 146th Brigade, 49th (West Riding) Division.

We will never know for sure exactly what George's involvement was in the war but we can get a reasonable idea from the records of the 49th Division. They first saw action at the battle of Aubers Ridge on the 9th of May 1915. In 1916 they were present at the Battles of Albert, Bazentin Ridge, Poziers Ridge, Flers-Courcelette, all of which were smaller actions of the larger Battle of the Somme. In 1917 they were involved in Operation Hush on the Flanders Coast. This was a plan for an allied amphibious landing on the Belgian coast on the beaches near Nieuport. The action was to support expected advances by allies at Ypres. The expected successes did not materialize and the Germans got wind of the allies' plans. They started a spoiling attack on the 10th of July using mustard gas for the first time in the region. The attack obliterated two British battalions and gained considerable territory. On the 14th of October Operation Hush was abandoned. The Battle of Poelcapelle, a phase of the third Battle of Ypres, was their last major involvement in 1917. In 1918 the Division fought in the Battles of Estaires, Messines and Bailleul, where the Division were heavily involved in defending Neuve Eglise, a small town to the west of Bailleul. They then moved on to Kemmel Ridge, strategically important high ground to the south of Ypres. The 1918 Spring Offensive of the Germans had delivered some successes but staunch allied defence of the high ground of Kemmel Ridge thwarted their ambitions. The Second Battle of Kemmel Ridge took place on the 25th and 26th of April 1918 and saw a major push by the Germans overrun the allied positions. It would appear that on the 25th of April George was taken prisoner.

As would be expected reports about this incident were confused but in June the Kington Times reported that Rifleman GA Skillicorn was missing. He had in fact been interned in a German Prisoner of War Camp. A memorial plaque erected by his family in St Mary's church, Kington suggests that he died at a place called Trelon on the French/Belgian border. In April 1918 this would have been behind German lines. Further research reveals that he died on the 28th of August 1918 while still in captivity. The official report states that he died of 'General Weakness'. A truly sad report of his death appeared in the 14th December 1918 edition of the Kington Times and it is worth recording it here in full.

SKILLICORN ALBERT J

Death of Kington Prisoner

Information has been received through the Geneva Red Cross that Rifleman Albert Skillicorn, West Yorkshire Regt., only son of the late John Skillicorn of Kington, died in August last in Germany whilst a prisoner of war, from general weakness. He was taken prisoner in April last. His wife and one child reside in Victoria Road, Kington and they had been daily expecting him with other repatriated prisoners.

The first thing to note from this report is that George perhaps preferred to be known by his second name Albert. This would explain an anomaly on the Memorial where the names of Albert Skillicorn and George Albert Nash Skillicorn are recorded. No trace has ever been found of an Albert Skillicorn hence perhaps this is a duplicate inclusion on the memorial. The second thing to note is that right up until the end of 1918 his family were unaware of his death and still expected him to return. It shows that in times of war, particularly the chaotic nature of World War One, accurate communication was incredibly difficult and that as a result families were left in limbo.

What is known for sure is that George is buried at Glageon Communal Cemetery Extension, grave reference II.N.1. Glageon is a small village to the west of Trelon and for the majority of the war was in German hands. The cemetery was used by the Germans from September 1914 until August 1918, not only for their own war dead but also those allies who died while prisoner of war. All German, American, Italian and some French graves have now been move with only British and Russian graves



Memorial Plaque in St Mary's Church, Kington

remaining. For his long and arduous service George (Albert) Nash Skillicorn was simply awarded the Victory and British War medals.

Life at home, as it must, continued. Rachel, George's mother, survived until 1931 when she passed away in Hereford at the age of 71. George's wife Sarah lived until 1970 when she died in Stockport and as for Marjorie his daughter; she married John Gaskell in 1940 and lived until the ripe old age of 93.

This memorial piece for Bert Skillicorn has been produced with the help of Gary and Elizabeth Smitherman (nee Skillicorn). Elizabeth is a distant relative of Bert and for their help I am eternally grateful.

