

Thomas Abell

Able Seaman

VR 5689

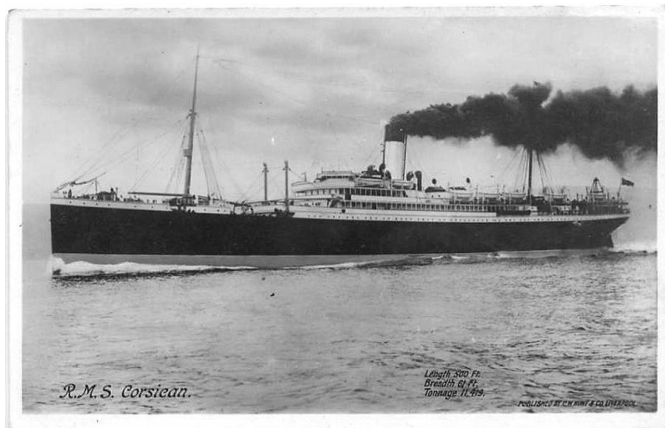
Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve



Thomas Abell was born on 6th April 1886 in a house called Bailey Brook in the tiny hamlet of East Dean on the Herefordshire, Gloucestershire border. He was to be just one of sixteen children born to William and Clara Abell (nee Daunter). William had married Clara on the 2nd May 1880 and shortly after their first child Elizabeth was born in Longhope, Gloucestershire. Unbelievable heartbreak struck the Abell family the day after Thomas was born when on the 7th April 1886 his sister Jane, died of whooping cough, at just 2½ years old. As is often the case, tragedy follows tragedy, and just five days later, on 12th April, a second sister, Alice, also died of whooping cough. Alice was just 15 months old.

William was a miller and plied his trade around East Dean and Lea Bailey in Gloucestershire until, sometime between 1893 and 1895, he moved the family to Kington. This move appears to have prompted the birth of their eleventh child Edward, who was born in Kington shortly after they arrived. Five more Kington born Abell's were to follow. Thomas was educated at Kington Boy's School on Gravel Hill but by the 1901 census, aged fifteen, he had left school and was employed as a labourer. By this time William, Clara and nine children were all living at No.1 Jewells Row, Headbrook and its fair to say it must have been crowded. Again William is recorded as being employed as

a miller. In the following census, 1911, the family had moved just across the road to No.6 Ashmore Place on the Kingswood Road but Thomas is conspicuous by his absence.



Perhaps because of the overcrowding or just because Thomas had an adventurous spirit, we actually discover that on the 19th May 1910 he boarded the SS Corsican in Liverpool, with the intention of emigrating to Canada. The ship arrived in Quebec on the 27th May 1910 and the record states that he intended living permanently in Canada. He disembarked and headed for Regina, the capital of the Canadian province

of Saskatchewan, where he became a farm labourer. Sadly very little is known of Thomas's life thereafter until circumstances take him in yet another unexpected direction.

In May 1914 the Canadian Navy had established a naval reserve unit called the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserves. When war broke out in August 1914 the Canadians were keen to offer their services. The Canadian navy were rebuffed by the British Royal Navy, who politely declined their offer and suggested they could handle anything the German navy could throw at them. Rather helpfully though they did suggest that if Canadians wished to volunteer, perhaps they might like to join the army, since the British army were in serious need of help. History shows that the British Navy were sadly wrong in their appraisal of German capabilities and when German submarines started indiscriminately sinking shipping in the North Atlantic, the Canadian Navy were drawn in.

A campaign of recruitment began and by the end of the war some 8000 men had volunteered for the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve. Three geographic reserve commands existed; Atlantic, which defended the Atlantic coast of Canada to a line just west of Quebec City; Lake, which served from the line just west of Quebec, through the Canadian Lakes to Brandon in Manitoba and the third, Pacific, which looked after the



Canadian Pacific coast. Thomas was quite late volunteering but on the 1st December 1917 he applied for enrolment into the Pacific Division of the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserves. The labourer from Kington, who worked as a farmer in Vermillion, Alberta, was now known as Able Seaman, VR 5689, Abell. An unbelievable turn of events far removed from his life as a miller's son in Kington. His service papers show that he was a short chap, just 5' 2½" tall but, what was more confounding, was the fact he declared he had no experience of the sea and that he was a non-swimmer. I

can empathise with Thomas, having served for twenty five years in the Royal Navy myself, I too am a poor swimmer. But as we whimsically said, 'it does concentrate the mind on keeping the ship afloat'. Importantly his initial medical inspection reports Thomas as being 'fit in all respects and ready to serve'.

Thomas served in Esquimalt, British Columbia, not too far from Vancouver. On the 2nd of May 1918 he fell ill and was sent to the medical facility in Esquimalt. He was suffering from Tuberculosis (TB) and was placed into Esquimalt Tubercular Sanatorium. We then learn that Able Seaman, VR 5689, Thomas Abell, died on the 10th November 1918. We can but assume he succumbed to TB. Official correspondence confirm that Thomas was still single and that he was not entitled to Separation Allowance and that he had no financial allotments set up. His outstanding pay was sent to his 'next-of-kin', his father William, back in Kington. What happened to Thomas after his death is unclear. No records of his burial in Canada have been forthcoming and his family relate a story that his remains were returned to Kington where he was buried in Kington Cemetery. This is yet to be verified. His name was read out at the Kington Peace Service in July 1919 and again when the memorial plaque for Kington Boy's School was unveiled in 1921.

As for Thomas's family back in Kington. His older brother, John, enlisted, at the age of 34, into the King's Shropshire Light Infantry as a Special Reservist in 1914, SN 7366. He served just 43 days before being discharged. At the time he was married to Elizabeth and had two children, William and Louise and lived in Eardisley. Men who were not exempt from military service were expected to come forward and enlisted. They may not have been called up at that time but were eligible for service if required. It appears John was not called up but, in 1916, was issued with a Khaki Armband which he was to wear with civilian clothing to inform everyone he had enlisted and was ready to serve if called upon. The records do not indicate that John was called up. He survived until 1962 when he died in Hereford.



No records exist to indicate that any of Thomas's other brothers enlisted or served. William and Clara continued to live in Kington, at 30 Majors Row, until their deaths. On 8th January 1929 William passed away and the Kington Times informs us that he worked for J & P Turners for 30 years. He was 78 years old and is buried in Kington Cemetery. Just over a year later Clara also died. Again the Kington Times sheds some light on her passing, informing us that she died on 28th June 1930, at Kington Cottage Hospital and was 70 years of age. Clara is also buried in Kington Cemetery.

Thomas was an adventurous soul and attempted to serve his mother country before being tragically taken by TB. In compiling this biography my research has been supplemented by the invaluable assistance of Mr Paul Davies, who is the Great Nephew of Thomas and is also keen to learn of Thomas's exploits. Information passed to me by Paul, about Thomas's Canadian service, has proven invaluable and my heartfelt thanks go to Paul and his family.

Researched and developed by Mark Wheatland