

# The Great War Dead of West Norwood Cemetery

by Peter Hodgkinson and John Clarke

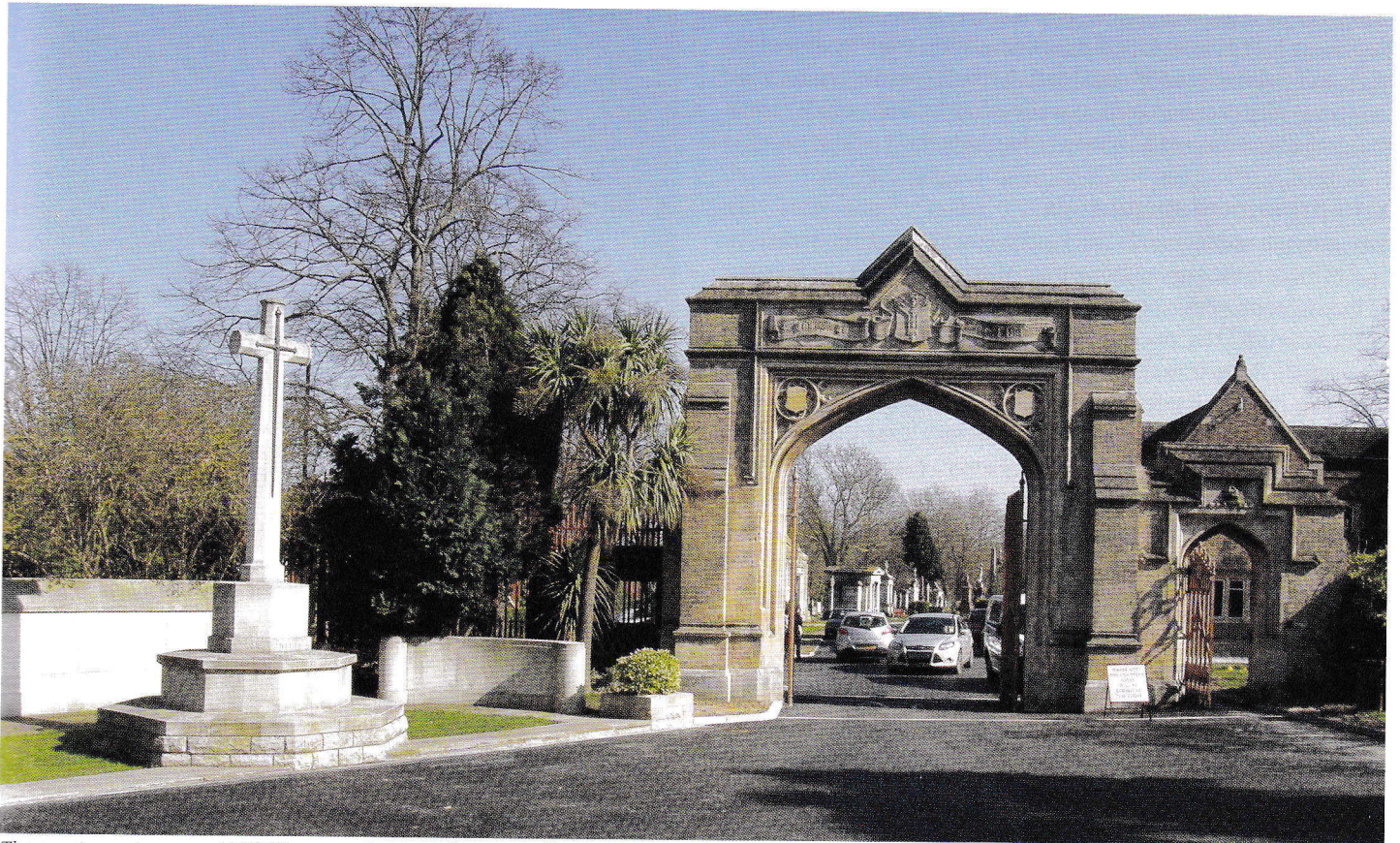
One of the 'Magnificent Seven' Victorian cemeteries of London, the Southern Metropolitan Cemetery opened in 1837 at what was then the hamlet of Lower Norwood, and some 250,000 interments in more than 40,000 individual graves have taken place. Largely full of memorials by 1900 (there are 64 listed monuments, a number surpassed only by Kensal Green), since the 1940s many have been lost through neglect, bomb damage and Lambeth Council's illegal clearances in the 1970s and 80s which led to the destruction of thousands of memorials. Approaching 75 per cent of the First World War family memorials have been lost, and in some cases the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has placed their uniform headstone on the approximate spot. Fortunately, Eric Smith FSA recorded monumental inscriptions (1967–1980), which exist on 29,000 index cards in Lambeth Archives. We do not know how many individuals who served and survived the war are buried in the cemetery, their service not noted and now possibly forgotten. There are a handful of graves of men, however, whose families chose to honour their service on a memorial by regimental initials or a decoration.

The various sources reveal that the cemetery once recorded the commemoration of (at least) 621 individuals who served in the Great War, 597 who died as result of their service. The CWGC, which records 91,389 Great War casualty burials in the UK currently lists 141 actual interments at West Norwood. Cremation during the war was extremely rare – in 1913 in the UK there were 504,975 deaths and only 1,139 cremations.<sup>1</sup> Likely unique is the case of Major Edward John Cummings of the 120th Rajputana

Infantry, who died of flu at Fort Niriz, Persia, on 15 November 1918 and was cremated there, yet whose ashes were returned to the UK and buried in the cemetery just over six months later.<sup>2</sup> Less exceptional, but still only an occasional practice (and restricted almost certainly to officers) until it was stopped in spring 1915, underlies the commemoration on his grandmother's grave of Captain William Cecil Holt Cree, 71st Battery RFA. Wounded by shellfire on his gun position near St Julien on 22 October 1914, he died two days later in No 7 Stationary Hospital, Boulogne,<sup>3</sup> and his body was returned to the UK and interred in Falmouth Cemetery.

Exactly two-thirds of the burials of service personnel were the result of sickness rather than wounds, at least a quarter due to the 1918–19 flu pandemic. Eight per cent of deaths took place from 1919 onwards. The grave of Private Francis Read, Machine Gun Corps, states: 'Died from the effects of injuries received in the Great War, Jan 25 1927'. The last known war-related interment at Norwood, his suffering was therefore a lengthy process.

In terms of both burials and commemorations, the three battles of Ypres (1914–17) yielded a total of 96 fatalities. In respect of the 1916 Somme campaign, 14 of the 84 deaths occurred on 1 July 1916, 12 of these at Gommecourt, where London Territorials were heavily engaged. The cemetery is a local one – of those commemorated or interred there, 27 per cent served in the London Regiment, whilst overall 68 per cent were born within five miles of it, and the families of a further 13 per cent were living within a similar radius at the time of the individual's demise.



*The cemetery entrance and CWGC cross and memorial screen wall (Author).*



Of the 'million dead' British or Dominion service personnel, 53 per cent are buried in named graves, 17 per cent as 'unknown', with 30 per cent 'missing'. Of the commemorations at Norwood, 38 per cent are of servicemen whose bodies were never identified or recovered. This suggests that from the psychological point of view, an inscription on a family memorial in the UK stood in place of the absence of a grave abroad.

### Multiple family losses

Thirty-one sets of parents lost two sons. Second-Lieutenant Gerald and Bombardier John Bramble died on the 1st and 3rd of July 1916 respectively on the Somme. Their parents' only sons, and commemorated on their grandfather's grave at Norwood, their memorial at Sopley, Hampshire, states: 'Lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided'.

Private Walter Leakey, who was wounded on the Somme, died of those injuries on 20 November 1916. Buried in a common grave, he was one of three brothers to lose their lives. Their parents, William (a domestic gardener) and Elizabeth Leakey had six sons – all served, and the trio lost their lives in the space of four months in the same battle. Approximately 30 per cent of the First World War military burials in the cemetery are in now unmarked common graves like Walter, a simple if sad matter of socio-economic status. (These individuals are now commemorated on the CWGC screen wall at the entrance.) Of the family graves and commemorations, 33 per cent concern officers. Given the ratio of officers to men, they are obviously overrepresented, and this is undoubtedly a reflection of available family funds.

The death of Private Henry Turner, 15th London, on 25 May 1915 (commemorated on a family memorial, his body lost) exemplifies the multiple tragedies that struck families. His younger brother, Gordon, of the 5th Battalion, had died of wounds 19 days earlier. He was due to wed his sweetheart, Miss Evelyn Worley. Her brother, Private Robin Worley of the Wellington Regiment NZEF, was killed in action a little over three months later, and Evelyn's sister's husband, Captain Charles Saunders of the Royal Fusiliers had died of wounds on 28 April 1915.<sup>4</sup> These four tragedies spanned a little over four months.

### Two prominent memorials

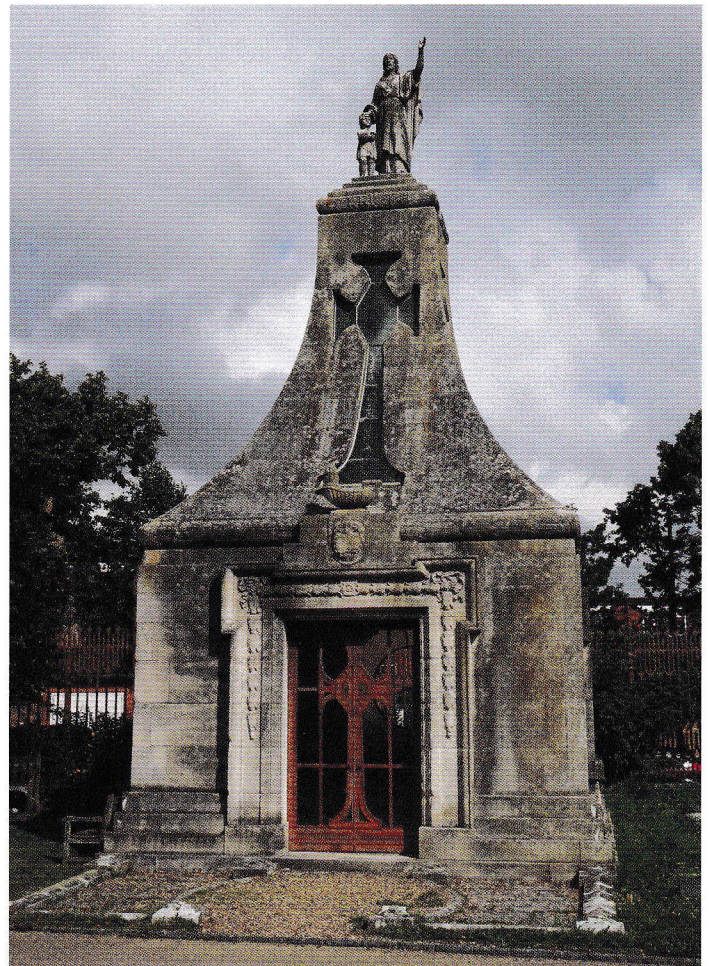
Two prominent memorials can be seen on entering the cemetery. One of these is the grave of Sir Hiram Maxim (d.1916), the inventor of that weapon which proved such an efficient killing tool on the Western Front. His presence draws attention to other civilians who served the war in different respects. A selection buried in the cemetery include Frederick Bourne (d.1928) who ran the Nobel Dynamite Trust Co, manufacturing military explosives. Alfred Longsdon (d.1893) had worked for Krupp, patenting a breech-loading mechanism for heavy artillery and also developing Krupp armour plate. In a gentler capacity, William Lovell (d.1944) was Director of Butter and Cheese Supplies in the Ministry of Food Control during the war (his son John, who died on the second day of Third Ypres, is also commemorated on his monument).

Less well known, and opposite Maxim's grave is the largest mausoleum in the cemetery, that of Edmund Distin-Maddick (d.6 July 1939). A naval surgeon at the Italian Hospital, he abandoned medicine in his 40s and took over the Scala Theatre, London. The venture was not successful and in 1911 it became a cinema, and the moving picture became Distin-Maddick's new passion. He became a second lieutenant in the Directorate of Military



*Hiram Maxim's memorial (Author).*

Intelligence of the War Office, later working for MI7, which was established in January 1916 to control propaganda and censorship. Distin-Maddick was in charge of the cinematographic operation at the front, and claimed to have 'produced all the films up to and including the Battle of the Somme', and to have been 'on land and at sea under enemy fire, as well as in aeroplanes and airships'. He thus oversaw Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell in their famous 1916 filming. He later joined the RAF, producing training films.<sup>5</sup> Ever conscious of his image, he built his mausoleum at West Norwood ten years before his death.



*Distin-Maddick's mausoleum (Author).*



## Accidental deaths

Accidental death is a feature of war – of the 179 British Army fatalities in Iraq 2003–2011, 30 were the result of accidents. Three victims of practice range accidents are commemorated or buried at Norwood. One victim, Lieutenant Dudley Christmas, the Staff Captain of 208 Brigade, was buried in the cemetery, aged 29. He was on a parade ground in Suffolk, delivering a message, when his horse bolted and he was thrown as it cornered and probably kicked. He suffered ‘laceration of the brain, besides other injuries’, was operated upon, and ‘although he slightly recovered consciousness, never completely did so’, dying on 23 October 1915.<sup>6</sup>

Another burial on account of an accident on home soil is that of Private Samuel Scranny, Army Service Corps. Stationed with 606 Motor Transport Company at Holland Park he died on 9 April 1919, aged 30, the day he suffered a terrible event. He was admitted to Fulham Military Hospital unconscious, bleeding from wounds to both sides of his head – his skull was fractured, and his brain compressed. His head had evidently been trapped, perhaps between two cases he was shifting. He was operated on, and pieces of his skull removed from his brain, but he died just over two hours after surgery.<sup>7</sup>

## Airmen

Six per cent of burials and commemorations at Norwood are of men from the Royal Flying Corps, Royal Naval Air Service or Royal Air Force. The deaths of flyers reminds us what a hazardous activity it was even when the enemy were not in the sky. Twelve of the 18 pilots buried or commemorated died in accidents, and two ground crew in propeller accidents. (These were horribly common – the RAF recorded eight in November 1918 alone.) Of the six pilots killed in action, four died in aerial combat, two being brought down by ground fire. Of the accidents, two were mid-air collisions with friendly craft, and stalls leading to spinning nose-dives appear alarmingly frequent.

20 year old Lieutenant Frank Nelham Clark, Royal Flying Corps, buried at Norwood, suffered a fatal accident on 29 April 1917, in Leigham Court Road, Streatham. He had completed his pilot training three days previously and was waiting to be posted to 56 Squadron in France. During his training he acquired the nickname ‘Bubbles’ as a result of ‘his youth, his clear outlook on life and his cheery spirits’. Having embarked on an ‘exercise flight’, he was flying around the home of his parents, Edwin and Annie Clark. Performing to a large crowd of spectators including his parents, it is likely that his engine stopped running, and the aircraft collided with a chimney and wall of another house, finally crash-landing on a garage and into a garden, bursting into flames, the petrol tank exploding. The crash location was just a few houses away from his parents’ home. Frank’s father and other bystanders rushed to pull the severely burned pilot away from the wreckage (Mr Clark also sustaining burns in the process). Frank was taken to a nearby nursing home, where he died that evening from shock. Edwin and Annie were likely the only parents of a Great War pilot who saw their son’s fatal crash.<sup>8</sup>

Lieutenant Frederick George Prince was one of two pilots killed flying a Handley Page O/400 of 58 Squadron from the UK to Cairo, with a crew of four. He is buried in Rome (Testaccio) Protestant Cemetery, Italy, and commemorated on the family grave. A passenger, who had been attending the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris, hitched a ride from that city to collect documents relating

to his service in the Middle East from Cairo. That individual was Lawrence of Arabia. Prince overshot the landing strip at Centocelle Airport and attempted to go around again. The aircraft struck a tree with its wingtip as it climbed away and crashed. Both pilots died, one of them instantly and the other in hospital three hours later – Prince had fractured his skull.<sup>9</sup> Colonel Lawrence suffered a broken left shoulder blade and two broken ribs, the latter injury troubling him for the rest of his life.

## Three navy casualties

Naval personnel commemorations (some of whom fought as infantry) make up only three per cent of burials or commemorations at Norwood. Brian Capewell, a second cousin of Sir Malcolm Sargeant, died on 21 August 1917, serving on the Q-ship HMS *Vala* as ship’s steward assistant. One of 38 out of 193 Q-ships lost in the war, his vessel was torpedoed by *UB-54* and sank about 120 miles south-west of the Scilly Isles. The U-boat’s war diary indicates that the 43 survivors made it to the boats, but it seems they were lost in bad weather conditions.<sup>10</sup> Compounding the family’s grief, his brother Frederick, 17th Royal Fusiliers, was wounded during the German Spring Offensive of 1918 and died in the UK on 1 April that year. Both are commemorated on the family grave at Norwood.

One of three commemorated in the cemetery who went down on capital ships, Sidney Seton, Assistant-Paymaster on HMS *Formidable*, a pre-Dreadnought battleship, was one of 35 officers and 512 men who lost their lives on New Year’s Day 1915. Their vessel was torpedoed amidships off Portland Bill by *U-24*. The family were told that Sidney had last been seen by a brother officer giving his lifejacket to a seaman, saying he was a strong swimmer and could do without. The sinking left an unusual legacy. The ship’s pinnace was spotted that evening off Lyme Regis and 48 men, and nine dead, were recovered. The cellar of the Pilot Boat Hotel was used as a mortuary, and there the collie, Lassie, the landlord’s wife’s pet, who was accustomed to lick her face when she had an epileptic fit, licked the face of one of the ‘corpses’, Able Seaman John Cowan, and gave an alerting bark when he responded. The story grew in the telling and led to the book *Lassie Come Home*. Hollywood then turned it into a series of films, a radio series and TV shows.<sup>11</sup> Sidney Seton and his family were not as lucky, his brother George recalling, ‘It was a sad time for us as a family, waiting for news as to whether Sidney had been picked up with the other survivors’. His body was never recovered but he was commemorated on the family grave.

Ordinary Seaman Cecil Douglas Stone, who died on 5 September 1914, and is commemorated on the family grave, had the dubious honour of dying on HMS *Pathfinder*, a scout cruiser, the first ship ever to be sunk by a self-propelled torpedo fired from a submarine (*U-21*). Of a likely 268 personnel aboard, there were only 20 survivors.<sup>12</sup>

## Greek and German connections

London, then as now, was a cosmopolitan place. The influx of Greeks in the first half of the 19th century created communities in Finsbury Circus and Bayswater, largely involved in shipping and commodity trading. A Greek Enclosure was created at Norwood, which now contains nearly a third of the listed memorials. Representatives of the ship-owning Lykiardopulo and Kulukundis families are buried there, the latter profiting by buying up 15 vessels of the German maritime marine which were





*The Greek Enclosure (Author).*

seized as war reparations, at knock-down prices.<sup>13</sup> A Greek seaman buried there is Leonidas Bistis, a captain for Bistis and Co, who went down on the *Lusitania*. There are four *Lusitania* burials/commemorations at Norwood. Bistis and his friends Michael and Angela Pappadopoulos were in a lifeboat that was upset as it was being lowered, throwing everyone into the water. In the water, Bistis tried to help his friends to get back into the craft.<sup>14</sup> Leonidas and Michael held on for a while and then disappeared. Bistis was washed ashore several weeks later, buried in Ireland, and later exhumed. Michael Pappadopoulos, whose body was brought back to London by his wife, lay in the Necropolis until both men were reburied in 1924.

Commemorated in the Enclosure on a family memorial, Augustus Stephen Agelasto, whose father was stockbroker, demonstrated the continuing connection the London Greeks had with their homeland. He had served in the Greek forces during the Balkan War of 1912, returning to England in September 1913. Commissioned in the 1st Dorsets in February 1915, he was hit by a bullet in the ear in May 1915 at Ypres and was posted to Salonika as an interpreter in November. Psychological symptoms, no doubt related to his wound emerged there, and he returned to the UK in March 1916, to be hospitalised in Weymouth, where 'nervous breakdown for a second time' was recorded. In July it was noted: 'He is still nervous – very marked twitchings of the muscles of the face and eyes, tremors of hands etc, intolerance of sudden noises, slight insomnia and is easily tired'. Undaunted, he returned to the Western Front in October 1916, to be killed in trench-holding duties with the 6th Dorsets after only a week.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, most burials and commemorations at West Norwood are infantry – 72 per cent. Eight per cent were artillerymen, with a similar proportion from the combined Royal Engineers, Army Service Corps etc.

There were, perhaps, 40,000 Germans in London in August 1914, and there were Anglo-German colonies in Herne Hill, Sydenham and Camberwell. They were the subject of hostility from the outset, and subject to the Aliens Restriction Act. Robert Emil Henry Dicke, who would die of pneumonia in Basra in 1921, a captain in the London Regiment, was the son of German parents. He changed



*A family memorial inscription to Second Lieutenant Neville Dodd, giving rank, unit, place of death and place of burial (Author).*



his surname by deed poll to Dick during the war, and dropped his second name, Emil, no doubt to shake off the German association. Gustav Adolf Koenigsfeld, a lance corporal in the Black Watch died of wounds in 1918. He died, however as Gustav Adolph Kaye (and known as John), changing his surname in August 1914.<sup>16</sup>

## Two suicides

We will never know how many servicemen committed suicide during the war or in its aftermath. Two such soldiers buried in the cemetery represent on the one hand those of robust character affected by their experience of war, and on the other those of vulnerable nature who should, perhaps, never have been at war.

Osborn Pritchard had seen active service in the Sudan, the North-West Frontier and East Africa in 1903. At the outbreak of war, he was second-in-command of the 2nd Battalion, Welsh Regiment. During the First Battle of Ypres at Gheluvelt on 31 October 1914, Pritchard was severely wounded by gunshot in his left side, right leg and left arm, the latter shattering his elbow (despite which he 'behaved most gallantly in leading counterattacks'). In November 1915 he returned to France as commanding officer of the Battalion. In July 1916 on the Somme, during the fighting for Munster Alley, near Pozières, Pritchard was buried in the Battalion HQ dugout by a shell. By the time of the unit's involvement at High Wood, 20–28 August (when the Battalion lost 46 killed, 173 wounded and 46 'shell shocked'), Captain C P Clayton noted: 'The recent fighting has affected his old wounds, and... one leg and foot are all swollen so badly that I wonder he can walk at all'. After the High Wood fighting, he was described as 'very deeply grieved by his losses', and in September was invalided with phlebitis. He returned to a London hospital for treatment, where he was described as 'depressed', and afterwards went to live with his brother-in-law. Two nights before the ensuing tragedy of 27 November 1916, he 'expressed pleasure when he found he could just walk round the dining room table'. He shot himself with a Colt revolver, ten minutes after being assisted to his bedroom. His note to his sister and brother-in-law read: 'Dear Ted and Bea, I am getting paralysed and my brain is going. Please forgive. Osborn'.<sup>17</sup>

A number of servicemen buried or commemorated predictably have a reference to psychiatric symptoms in their records. The second known Great War related suicide buried in the cemetery is Lawson Smith. A lance corporal in 9th London, he served on the Western Front for nearly six months in 1917, following which he was sent to Dykebar War Hospital Paisley, a psychiatric institution, diagnosed with 'mania'. It was noted 'has constitutional predisposition – mother highly neurotic'. He was transferred to the Highfield First Home of Recovery in Golders Green, where he jumped the 30 or 40 feet from the French windows of his bedroom on 13 May 1918. His first words after the fall were, 'What have I done? You've been very kind. Leave me alone'. He died later that day, aged 33.<sup>18</sup>

## Courage of different sorts

There are two Victoria Cross holders remembered at West Norwood. The ashes of Spencer John Bent (1891–1977), Colour Sergeant of 1st East Lancashire, and one of the VC Guard at the interment of the Unknown Soldier at Westminster Abbey on 11 November 1920, are interred in the cemetery. He won his VC during the final Hundred Days Campaign. Major Stewart Loudoun-Shand VC is commemorated on a family memorial

– he fell with 10th Yorkshire at Fricourt on 1 July 1916, killed encouraging his men over the parapet under heavy machine gun fire.

Frederick Wilkinson would have been viewed at the time by many as very much the opposite of these two men. His story involves equal courage, however. His grave at West Norwood was purchased by fellow members of the No-Conscription Fellowship and is marked by a CWGC headstone. Wilkinson, a schoolteacher and the secretary of the Streatham branch of the NCF, was an 'absolutist' conscientious objector who died in jail. He was conscripted Private (G/7844) in the Queen's Own, and, refusing to serve, was subject to a court martial and was sentenced to two years with hard labour, although he was released after five months. The sentence was repeated twice, and he died on 3 January 1919 in Maidstone of pneumonia following flu. The conscientious objector periodical, *The Tribunal* reported on 16 January 1919:

He had suffered much from the hardships of his long confinement, but he was always brave, bright, cheerful. We who loved him saw him growing paler, thinner, weaker, though the light within glowed ever brighter and comrades in prison testified that he was a comfort and a strength to them all. He was full of care for his comrades to the last. *The use of the word 'comrade' is marked.*<sup>19</sup>

Second Lieutenant Donald Carman Green, commemorated on a family grave, was forced to resign his commission on 14 October 1916. His Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Sidney Fitzwyman Cooke wrote:

I consider him lacking in many of the most essential qualities required of an officer. He has failed in his capacity for leading men and inspiring them with confidence and his power as a leader is nil. He does not possess sufficient strength of character... his presence with the Battalion in action would constitute a real danger.

His father wrote of the 'disgrace to my family' and gave the opinion that it 'would have been better if he had sacrificed his life for his King and Country'. He listed seven relatives serving in the army, including Donald's brother Leslie, who was with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles. Donald became Private (42942) in the 1st Lincolns. He died on 16 April 1918. The Battalion were in the Wytschaete sector, Ypres, when at 04.30 the enemy put down an intense bombardment, and after 70 minutes attacked both flanks in dense fog. The Battalion 'stood firm and fought it to the last', a 'mere handful of men' being able to withdraw – 'no individual surrendered'.<sup>20</sup> Donald Green's life ended as his father had hoped. His body was not recovered.

## They also served – two nurses

It is appropriate to finish with two women associated with the forces who lie at West Norwood. Hilda Ayre Smith was the daughter of Dr Robert Ayre Smith (a Durham surgeon) and his wife Catherine. As a trained nurse, she volunteered for the Red Cross. In February 1916 she had been working for over a year at Hylands Hospital, Chelmsford, which had five wards with 100 beds and an operating theatre. Hilda, described as 'devoted to her profession, and highly esteemed by the doctors', contracted



septicaemia (blood poisoning) whilst changing dressings for wounded men. A specialist was brought from London, but she died two days later on 3 February 1916. The CWGC refuses to acknowledge her. This is all the more tragic as her family grave was destroyed by Lambeth council.<sup>21</sup>

Doris Helen Swanston was the daughter of a well-off family. She joined the Surrey Voluntary Aid Detachment in 1916, serving first as a fulltime First House Orderly at the Kensington Red Cross Weir Hospital, Balham; transferring to the London VAD the following year. Her work was voluntary until December 1918 when she became a 'Nursing Member, Assistant Nurse' with a salary of £26 per annum. She did not enjoy this long as she died at the family home on 28 February 1919 of pneumonia, a likely casualty of the flu pandemic.<sup>22</sup> She was given a military funeral at West Norwood, where she was cremated. Swanston is commemorated on the Brookwood Cemetery War Memorial.

In conclusion, West Norwood Cemetery is therefore not simply somewhere to walk and admire as a place of notable cemetery architecture, its memorials hide (as, of course, do other cemeteries around the UK) a rounded history of the Great War in (to borrow and alter a phrase) 'a hundred memorials'.

*Note: The Friends of West Norwood Cemetery will this year publish a booklet listing all the First World War burials and commemorations, and will subsequently provide mini-biographies of all these individuals on its website (www.fownc.org). The Friends offer tours of the cemetery.*

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