

The Amazing Claridge Family

Harold Claridge MM was the first caretaker of the Memorial Hall when it opened in 1925. He was also a decorated war hero who lost his left arm in WWI at the Battle of Passchendaele Ridge where he won the Military Medal. But Harold also came from an amazing family.

He was born in April 1894 at South Leigh near Witney in Oxfordshire. He was the eighth son of an astonishing fifteen children. His parents were George and Louise, both born and bred in South Leigh where they lived all their lives. Of the nine boys and six girls, seven served in WWI and two were killed. In 1916 George and Louise received a letter from the king congratulating them on having six sons serving king and country in WWI.



George William

The eldest brother, George William was born on 21st February 1885 and joined the army aged 16. He was posted to what was then the 2nd Battalion 52nd Regiment of Foot which in 1908 became the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, commonly shortened to the *Ox and Bucks*. Initially posted to India, he was stationed at Albuhera barracks, Aldershot, when World War I commenced. In August 1914 William was a sergeant with the 2nd Ox and Bucks when they went to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) at the very start of the war. George would have taken part in the famous retreat from Mons when the BEF was forced to withdraw in the face of overwhelming German superiority. The 220 mile retreat took place in sweltering hot weather, parched by thirst and dropping from fatigue they did not stop until they reached the outskirts of Paris.

In 1915, the 2nd Battalion famously routed the elite Prussian Guard at Nonne Bosschen during the first Battle of Ypres. During this battle the 2nd Ox and Bucks lost over half their strength but William managed to survive. He was killed near Hooge in Belgium in the aftermath of the second Battle of Ypres in August 1916.

Herbert Ernest

Herbert Ernest born on 23rd February 1886 and joined the 13th Brigade of Royal Field Artillery (RFA) in around 1902 and served several years in India. In October 1914 the 13th Brigade arrived in France attached to the 7th Division. Herbert would have been with his 8th Battery in support of the 7th Division when they fought the advancing German Army to a standstill at the First Battle of Ypres. They suffered grievous losses in the action and became known as the "Immortal Seventh"



Arthur Percy

Next was Arthur Percy who was born in 1887. We know little of his career but he is listed as having been a driver in the RFA. It seems he fought right through the war but died in the flu epidemic in 1918.

James Archibald

James Archibald was born on 30th November 1891. He joined up in the RFA aged 16, went to France with the BEF in 1914, fought right through the war and was eventually promoted to Second Lieutenant. He died in Newcastle in 1975.

Harold John

Harold John was the sixth son and eighth child. He was born in April 1894. He joined up in around 1912 and enlisted in 27th Brigade RFA. At the start of the war the brigade was located in Co. Kildare in Ireland and embarked for France on 15 August 1914 landing at Le Havre in France on 18 August 1914. By this time Harold was a Bombadier(Corporal) in 37 (Howitzer) Battery and they were attached to the 5th Division at Mons on 21 May 1916.

Like his elder brothers, Harold would have taken part in the earliest battles of the war. The role of the artillery was to support the infantry against the German onslaught. The 5th Division were prominent in the rearguard action holding a low ridge near the villages of Elouges and Audresgnies. The order to retire never reached part of the Division and two battalions of the Norfolks and the Cheshires with the RFA in support were wiped out: almost 2600 men were lost that day. A few days later the army turned and tried to hold the line in the Battle of Le Cateau with the 5th Division on the right wing and once again the 2nd Suffolks were wiped out.



Harold would then have taken part in the famous 220 mile retreat from Mons - under constant German bombardment, suffering from the sweltering hot weather and parched from thirst. To make matters worse their guns and ammunition wagons were pulled by horses which suffered even worse privations than their masters. Men frequently fell asleep on their horses and several fell off and were trampled underfoot. Such was the extremity of the retreat that men started to hallucinate and from which came stories of the so-called "*Angel of Mons*" appearing over the columns.

Like his brothers, Harold fought right through the war up to the Third Battle of Ypres. He would almost certainly have been at the first and second Battles of Ypres and may have been with the 27th Brigade supporting the infantry as they went over the top in the first day at the Battle of the Somme. The day that artillery bombardment failed to destroy the German defences and 56,000 men were mown down by enemy machine guns – the worst day in British army history.



We do know that Harold was promoted to Sergeant and was wounded in the Battle of Passchendale Ridge in October 1917 where he lost an arm. He was awarded the Military Medal(MM) for bravery in the face of the enemy. Apart from the Victoria Cross the MM was the second highest gallantry award an enlisted man could receive. Today class distinctions have been abolished and it would have been a Military Cross which was only awarded to officers in those days.



The Battle of Passchendale will go down in history as probably the greatest artillery battle ever. It will also go down as 103 days of Hell when the awfulness of the conditions exceeded anything experienced by any troops in any theatre of the war.

After the disasters of 1916 at the Somme for the British and Verdun for the French and when a large part of the French army had mutinied, General Haig planned a major summer offensive at Ypres which would sweep round and take the German submarine base at Zeebrugge from where their navy was devastating Allied shipping.

By 1917 artillery tactics had improved so that the mistakes of the Somme could be avoided. The RFA Brigades attached to each division were to follow up closely behind the infantry advance and direct accurate fire to the enemy pill boxes which were pouring lethal machine gun fire on the advancing soldiers. This involved the RFA in much closer coordination with the infantry in the front line.

The attack went in on the 31st July 1917 and on that day it started raining, went on continuously for three days and then more or less for the whole of August. The flat plains of northern Belgium had to be permanently drained and the biggest preliminary bombardment the world has ever seen tore up into these drainage systems and turned the battlefield into a quagmire. The artillery following up the advance could only move their guns and their ammunition wagons when the engineers laid duck board roads through the mud. The only shelter was in shell holes filled with water in which they had to set up their guns. Wounded men drowned in the shell holes and if they stepped off the duck boards they would be sucked into the clawing mud like quicksand. Men pleaded with their fellows to shoot them rather die being sucked under. All the time the enemy shells rained down and the shell holes filled with dead bodies - disembodied arms and legs floated in the water. After a while the bodies of men and animals started to putrefy and stench mingled with the cordite from the guns and the smell of fear. Day after day this went on with no let up, the Germans counter attacking and positions changing hands time after time. Then came the gas. On top of unceasing noise and being constantly wet through, came the plop of the gas shells and the pernicious seeping of chlorine or the mustard that blistered your hands and exposed skin, then the desperate fumbling to get on your mask. And friends died beside you - a horrible gurgling, coughing, retching death and there was nothing you could do.



Harold survived this until October for what must have been an endless two and a half months of hell - truly of hell. We do not know how he was wounded nor received his MM as his citation was destroyed in the bombing in WW2 but to keep going in these conditions let alone act with conspicuous bravery is beyond comprehension - he must have been a very special person.

Horace Frank

Horace Frank was born in 1896 and enlisted in the 1st Ox & Bucks and served in India. He was captured by the Turks after the siege of Kut in what is now Iraq in April 1916 and served the rest of the war as a PoW in Turkey. Of the thousands of British and Indian troops that surrendered most died of disease and starvation. Out of the 300 Ox and Bucks that went into captivity only 90 survived. It seems that Horace was one of them but he died prematurely in Australia aged 30 almost certainly from the privations he suffered in captivity.



The **siege of Kut Al Amara**, also known as the First Battle of Kut, was when 8,000 British and Indian troops were besieged in the town of **Kut**, 160 kilometres (100 mi) south of Baghdad, by the Ottoman Army and the extreme folly of the British general led to the surrender of the whole division. Following the surrender on 29 April 1916, the survivors of the siege were marched to imprisonment at Aleppo, during which many died. Historian Christopher Catherwood has called the siege "the worst defeat of the Allies in World War I". We can only imagine what Horace must have gone through in the heat, the exhaustion and the mistreatment by the Turks.

Hubert Cecil

Hubert Cecil was born in 1898 and joined the navy in 1915. He did his training at H.M.S. Cambrian in Devonport joining HMS Indefatigable in 1916 as a Stoker First Class and almost immediately was pitched into the largest naval battle of the war.

HMS Indefatigable was a battle cruiser, the best in her class built for the Royal Navy during the first decade of the 20th Century.

She was sunk on 31 May 1916 during the Battle of Jutland. Part of Vice-Admiral Sir David Beatty's battle cruiser Fleet, she was hit several times in the first minutes of the battle - the opening phase of the battle cruiser action. Shells from the German ship Von der Tann caused an explosion to rip a hole in her hull, and a second explosion hurled large pieces of the ship 200 feet in the air. She sank within minutes and only three of the crew of 1,019 survived.

Hubert would have been below decks by the boilers with no hope of escape when explosions ripped the ship apart and the water rushed in taking the ship to the bottom.

The vulnerability of the Royal Navy battle cruisers to enemy shell fire came about because although better armoured than their German counterparts their decks were unarmoured and enemy shells penetrated the gun turrets exploding the ammunition stores. This caused the British Admiral Jellicoe to utter the famous words *"There is something wrong with our bloody ships today"*!



Victor Reginald

Victor Reginald was the second youngest of the Claridge's 15 children. We know of him and his escapades in the Spanish Civil War thanks to Liz Woolley and her research for her book on Oxfordshire and the Spanish Civil War "No Other way".

Born on 14 May 1903, he was a barely a teenager when the tragedies of the first War occurred in the family and they must have affected him greatly. He seems to have travelled across the Atlantic in his mid-twenties. There are records of a Victor Claridge sailing to Canada in August 1928, and being deported from America back to England in September 1930. Moreover, a Claridge is described in the International Brigades records from the Spanish Civil War as having been in the US National Guard (the military reserves). It seems he had served in an artillery unit and had been trained in the use of the Lewis gun (a light machine-gun). In 1931 he had joined the International Workers of the World (the IWW or 'The Wobblies'), a radical union founded in Chicago in 1905 with the stated aim of promoting worker solidarity in the revolutionary struggle to overthrow the employing classes so it is possible that he was deported for his radical views.

Victor volunteered to go to Spain in 1936. He had been living in Oxford and was lodging with the Pulker family at 4 James Street, in the eastern suburbs, while working as a builder's labourer. He arrived in Spain just after Christmas and was sent to the Jarama front on 1 January 1937.

In July 1936 a group of army officers stage a coup against the democratically elected government of Spain and although unsuccessful, the coup precipitated a bloody three year civil war in which over half a million people died. On the one side were the Nationalists consisting of most of the army, the land owning classes backed by the Catholic Church and on the other, the Republicans, the legitimate government backed overwhelmingly by workers, the trades unions and a coalition of left-wing parties. What made the war especially lethal was that it became a proxy war for Hitler and Mussolini for the Nationalists and Stalin on the side of the Republicans.

In September 1936 Stalin agreed to the formation of a force of foreign volunteers – the International Brigades – to be recruited and organised by Moscow. Victor joined the newly formed British battalion of the International Brigades which fought at the Battle of Jarama between 6th and 27th February 1937. The British were deployed on the right flank of the front line in the battle and when the rest of the Brigade was forced to pull back the battalion was virtually cut off facing attacks on all sides. Exposed on the bare hillside to a day of incessant artillery bombardment and machine-gun fire, the British doggedly defended what became known as "Suicide Hill". After three days of fighting the battalion had lost a third of its men. It was here that Victor was wounded in the body but recovered and returned to Jarama.

The battalion was withdrawn in June 1937 and in July they were involved in the biggest Republican offensive of the war- the Battle of Brunete(6–25 July). After two weeks of fighting in the scorching summer heat, the British Battalion was reduced to 42 men out of 331. Victor was one of those who survived but he developed what was described as a 'severe illness'. Despite being a 'good soldier', he was repatriated to England in mid-October 1937 for health reasons.

Victor died in Camden in London in January 1978, aged 74.



Harold and Ellen

Harold married Ellen Louisa on 16th February 1918 at Buscot and came to live in one of the Viscountess Barrington's Trust Houses in Shrivenham. He was the first and much respected caretaker of the Memorial Hall when it was opened in 1925. They had four children. Louisa then Harold George who was in the RAF in WWII as a flight engineer on Lancaster bombers. Harold George was badly injured after an aborted take-off. Then came Herbert Victor who joined the Pioneer Corps. He was killed in October 1944 in Belgium and is buried in Brussels. John, the youngest son died when he was just two years old.

Louisa married Bernard Brittain and lived in Shrivenham. They had three daughters - the Brittain girls - all of whom lived their lives in Shrivenham (now Jean Mosley, Pat Clauson and Pam Tilling) and they live here still.

Harold died on 27th March 1967 in Shrivenham where he had lived for 43 years. After the Memorial Hall he was employed at the barrack office stores and was one of the longest serving workers at the Royal Military College. His funeral was at St Andrews Church which was attended by a very large number of mourners including representatives of the British Legion and the British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association.

