

DRIVER WALTER KNOWLES (1877 - 1917)

In the early spring of 1858 James Knowles, a tailor from Upton Pyne, married Maria Coad, also of Upton Pyne in St Peter's Church and the couple came to live in Newton St Cyres (1861 census). Sadly they lost their two eldest children, John in January 1862 and Sarah in March 1862. However, the couple went on to raise a further nine children of whom Walter, born in 1877, was the youngest. James's business appears to have widened in scope so that by 1891 he was described as tailor and grocer. Walter at the age of 13 years was an errand boy. James died in 1893 and the grocery business was continued by Maria. Alfred Abraham, in his book describing his childhood in the village, mentions how the tap of the black treacle barrel was accidentally left on!

By 1901 Walter had moved to London and was one of three young men boarding with a Metropolitan Police Officer and his family in Marylebone. Another was Charles Hard from Crediton. Both young men worked as general labourers. The following year, 1902, at the declared age of 22 years, Walter enlisted in Woolwich with the Royal Regiment of Artillery (Royal Horse and Royal Field Artillery) and was posted that July as a driver. On his attestation Certificate he is described as a carman. His medical certificate states that he is 5 ft and 2 and 5/8 ins tall with a fresh complexion, blue eyes and brown hair.

In June 1905 he was transferred to the 1st Class Army Reserve. On his transfer form, as an aid to getting civilian employment, he was described as a carman accustomed to horses. He was later re-engaged by the Army as a driver but the date is obscured and it may not have been until 1914.

Meanwhile in December 1908 Walter was reported as being involved in some unseemly conduct outside the Agricultural Inn which had its licence revoked in the following March. Redundancy was cited, there being three Inns for a population of 700 but from newspaper reports it seems the landlord George Abraham was unable to exercise sufficient control. In May 1909 Maria Knowles (shopkeeper) had a stroke and died and there was a big funeral. Walter was with his sister Florrie and her husband Frank Weeks, a groom, and their small son Freddie at the time of the 1911 census. He was working as a general labourer. Florrie was to take over the shop.

In the late summer of 1911 Walter Knowles married Lily Evans in the Totnes district and that November they had a daughter Annie Irene who was followed three years later by a brother Victor Walter. Lily gave a Stoke Gabriel address for the Army contact.

Walter Knowles was mobilised at Hilsea (RA barracks in Portsmouth) on the 1st of August 1914, as a driver in the 23rd Brigade, and he joined the British Expeditionary Force. He had a further four postings of which the last was to Brigade headquarters, before his death in February 1917.

Driver Walter Knowles, service No. 24327, died of natural causes at the age of 39 yrs while on active service.

The circumstances of Walter's death were unusual. He had been feeling unwell for several days but had managed to keep working although with difficulty. He was sleeping in a loft with another driver and a saddler. On the morning of the 24th February 1917 he was unable to get up and his companions reported him sick. He was visited by Captain Morgan RAMC who found him conscious but in a state of collapse. As the loft was approached by a ladder and a trap door, with no access for a stretcher, it was thought best to leave him there with a visiting medical orderly. He appeared to sleep during the day but his condition deteriorated and he died in the Captain's presence in the late afternoon. A verdict of cardiac failure was presented.

There were several enquiries into Walter's death, one a week later and another in the following July when death as a result of cardiac failure was confirmed. However there is a further document in the file dated August 1917 from the MP (is this Military Police?) "Returning the documents and asking for grounds of alcoholic poisoning"

The only further document I have seen is the granting of his wife his 1914 Star Medal in 1922. Walter Knowles served in the Theatre of War for two years and 190 days. His total Army service was fourteen years and 262 days. The Royal Field Artillery were responsible for the medium calibre guns and howitzers deployed close to the front line and whatever the circumstances of his death Walter certainly "did his bit". He is buried in the Albert Communal Cemetery Extension. Albert was the main town for the Allies behind the lines of the Somme Battlefields.

The Knowles /Weeks families had already lost Leslie, the grandson Maria had brought up. He had died on a Somme battle field the previous September. Florrie Weeks (nee Knowles) was to lose her young son Freddie to typhoid the next August. Husband Frank was on active service and was unable to return home in time. They were village shopkeepers. Fortunately the typhoid did not spread.

Below is a letter from the soldier, Walter Knowles, who is featured on the previous page. It generates fascinating insights into the issues of the time.

OUR LETTER BOX

PROTEST FROM A SOLDIER.

To the Editor of the "Western Times."

Sir,—Will you kindly grant me a small space in your valuable paper to tell some men at the little parish of Newton St. Cyres that it would be far better if they would show their manhood and come out and protect their wives and children than it is to throw slurs at the wives of those who are gone, to the effect that they are better off now that their men are at the front. I expect the wives would rather have their husbands at home than the little extra money they keep throwing in their faces. Some of these men are as able-bodied as I am, and about the same age, only I suppose their hearts are in the wrong place. I have been out here right through from Mons to Ypres, and I am glad to say that after what I have seen of the Huns, regarding the women and little children, I feel that I am doing my duty in being out here for my country, and to help protect the women and children at home. God help them if the Huns got over there. Let those who jeer at the wives at home be men and come out as men and protect their country, or keep a silent tongue in their heads.

Yours faithfully,

DRIVER W. KNOWLES.

Somewhere in France,

July 29th, 1915.

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