

PRIVATE HENRY HARDING (1899 - 1918)

Henry Harding, born on the 1st of May 1899, was the youngest of five sons and the youngest of the six surviving children of William and Grace Harding (nee Tancock). In 1911 the family were living at Guerins, an eight roomed cottage in West Town. The four younger boys were still living at home (ages 12-20), the three elder working, and Henry still at school. Also living with them was George, their eighty one year old paternal grandfather, a retired farm labourer, and an aunt who was boarding with them.

William Harding had risen to the post of Foreman Platelayer on the Railway. Back in 1901, the only daughter, Edith Ellen, was living at home, William was a platelayer and the family were living at Longbridge. (These cottages were demolished c. 1906). Edith Ellen (Nellie) was later to work as a shop assistant at the Railway Hotel.

After leaving school all of the Harding children attended evening classes in the village, for at least one session, and Henry for two. In the register of October 1912 he was described as a farm helper and in 1914 simply as a labourer.

Henry Harding enlisted in Exeter and was initially Private 68165 of the Devonshire Regiment. He became Private 44373 of the 12th (Service) Battalion (Bristol) of the Gloucestershire Regiment. How this happened is unknown.

June of 1918 found the 12th Gloucesters near the Front Line in Northern France. A few weeks earlier in April they had fought in the battle of Hazebroek when the Germans were prevented from taking this strategic town on the railway. Had the Germans done so they would probably have been through to the Channel ports of Calais, Bologne and Dunkirk within a week. During the Spring of 1918 the Germans had launched a series of offensives in different areas of the Front Line. Although they gained considerable territory at this time it was in the form of salients (bulges), thus extending the line to be defended. Their losses were heavy, especially of their 'crack' troops the stormtroopers, and they were unable to back up their advances with supplies. This was at a time when Allied troops, although they suffered similar losses, were about to be reinforced by American manpower.

Possibly unknown to Henry he was involved in a successful action when the tide of war was beginning to turn:

La Becque, 28th June 1918

After the bitter fighting at the end of April new lines were established in this area. On the 20th June the 5th and the 31st Divisions received orders to prepare for attack on a 5.5km front. The operation was designed to disrupt any plans the enemy may have for a renewed offensive, but also to make the Allied Line more easily defensible.

The 12th Gloucesters took the central position with the 10th E Yorks on the left and the Devon and Cornwall Light Infantry on the right. It was imperative they retained contact with these regiments throughout, which they did successfully.

At 6am on the morning of the 28th the artillery opened up enabling the troops to move forward under the barrage. There was little enemy opposition but there were casualties

with troops pushing too forward too close under the barrage. As soon as the protective barrage ceased, a patrol was sent to the River Plate Becque. All objectives were taken with little opposition according to the schedule. However enemy machine guns became troublesome. Shelling continued from 12.15 to 1pm. During the afternoon a few prisoners were rounded up from amongst the corn near the new Front Line. One Officer was captured, 4 Ordinary Ratings, 7 machine guns and a quantity of ammunition. About 5pm patrols went out under the cover of barrage, but could find no trace of the enemy on their side of the River Plate Becque.

The E Yorks to the left met greater opposition, but they successfully prevailed.

On the 29th June while the Front Line companies were improving their positions the enemy shelled nearly throughout the day. A further Officer was killed and two more wounded, one being a gas casualty. There were around 100 other casualties and Henry Harding was possibly one such. The other possibility is that he lost his life as his company withdrew to rest positions that night. In the Regimental Diary Officers are named but other ranks are described as OR. In the Army Register of Soldier's Effects he is noted as having died in action on 30th June 1918. In September 1919 his father William was awarded a war gratuity of £5.

It seems his body was never identified and he was still reported as 'missing' in the October issue of the Cadbury Ruridecanal Magazine. One can hardly conceive of the mixture of hope and foreboding with which his family would have waited. He is remembered on Panel 5 of the Ploegsteert Memorial to the missing. This memorial commemorates men from the Allied Powers who fought on the northern Western Front outside the Ypres Salient and whose graves are unknown.

His next eldest brother Thomas survived the war and was awarded the Military Medal.

Remembered with Honour
Ploegsteert Memorial



**For soldiers missing in the
area (Hainaut, Belgium)
during WW1**

To the glory of God and to the memory of 11447 officers and men of the forces of the British Empire, who fell fighting in the years 1914-1918 between the River Douve and the towns of Estaires and Furnes, whose names are here recorded but to whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death

**MEMORIAL TO HENRY HARDING
PANEL 5**