

How Interesting!

During 2011 Magna will publish notes about twelve notable and interesting graves and headstones, in and around Holy Cross Church and environs. This month we look at **Robert Andrew Eakin**. This article has been written by Neil Richardson and Peter Hounsell.

As part of his series of articles about the memorials in the church and churchyard, Neil wrote:



Robert was a Captain in the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. The headstone informs us that he was killed on active service in France. The wording on the headstone implies that he didn't die immediately, but later, from wounds received in France, which could mean he was brought home injured, but then died, or that he died in France and his body was brought home for burial in Greenford. Probably the former?

Sadly he died two months before Armistice Day, aged 34. Like so many young men, Robert never got the chance to develop whatever skills and abilities he might have offered the community during a long and successful life. We may be reminded of the composer George Butterworth and the poet Wilfred Owen, who also died on active service in 1918.

Neil showed me this some months ago, and, out of an historian's sense of curiosity, I wondered whether we could add some detail to the story of this young man's life. He shares a grave with his father, but not with his mother, his father's death taking place only a few months after his own. After about six months research, on and off with my other research, I can piece together a life which is much more interesting than Neil or I ever imagined. Although some of the research could be done online, using Ancestry, I have also looked at records in the National Archives, the London Metropolitan Archives and books in Ealing Central Library and the British Library.

When I started looking into the life of Robert Eakin I assumed that he came from a local family, but neither he nor his father showed up in the directories of the period, not in the Census for 1901 for Greenford. This immediately posed a question about why they were both buried in Holy Cross Churchyard.

There were some early surprises, the biggest of which was that Eakin had not died just before the end of the war in 1918, but a year earlier in 1917, and that the action in which he was wounded took place in the early months of the war, in the autumn of 1914!. The date on the gravestone is incorrect, and his burial is recorded in the Holy Cross burial register in September 1917. The next surprise was that Eakin was not a native of Middlesex, nor even of Shropshire, but he had been born in the West Indies where his father was a doctor.

So a brief narrative of Eakin, father and son, looks something like this.

Robert Andrew Eakin was born in 1883, in San Fernando, Trinidad, and was the only son of James Wilson Eakin, M.D. He was sent back to England for his education and attended Wellington College, Crowthorne, Berkshire where he appears in the 1901 Census, where his age was given as 18.

He must have enlisted in the army soon after as he served in the South African War and was awarded the Queen's Medal with four clasps. He was gazetted 2nd Lieutenant, in the Lancashire Fusiliers in June 1904, and in 1908 transferred to the 1st battalion Shropshire Light Infantry.



Officers of the 1st Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry taken in 1913. Eakin is apparently the third from the left in the middle row. (Photo courtesy of the Regimental Museum at Shrewsbury).

Of his military service we know very little, save that he played military cricket, according to Wisden. His battalion was serving in Ireland when hostilities started in 1914, so for him and his colleagues on the Western Front they had come a long way from Tipperary, as the battalion left there on the 14th August on its way to France via England.

The battalion joined the 16th Infantry Brigade and at the end of August were encamped at Grantchester near Cambridge. (If you enjoy such associations, Grantchester was for a time before the 1st World War the home of Rupert Brooke, who wrote about the "corner of a foreign field that is for ever England", and died near Gallipoli). From there they set off for France and were marching towards Crecy – think of the associations with wars long ago! - on 12th September. The battalion was then engaged in some of the early encounters of the war, and it was at the battle of Le Quesne on 22nd October that Lieutenant Eakin was one of several casualties, according the battalion's official war diary. From later information we know that his cause of death, three years later, was a gunshot wound to the head, but the nature and extent of his original injury is not recorded. However, it was of sufficient severity to prevent his rejoining his regiment although he remained on the army payroll.

Whilst injured he was promoted temporary captain in November that year. He was clearly unfit for further military service, but there is no evidence of when and where he was in hospital. However, he was fit enough to travel to Trinidad in February 1915, presumably to visit his father, returning in March. There is no information about what he was doing in the period between 1915 and 1917, but he married on 5th May 1917 Kate (Kitty) Emily Phillips, aged 25, the daughter of Robert William Phillips (deceased). At the time of his marriage his address was given as 83 Portland Place, his wife's as Weymouth Court, Portland Place. The wedding took place at Holy Trinity, Marylebone Road. I have not been able to find any evidence about how and where they met. When next we catch a glimpse of Robert, he has died of wounds on 24th September 1917 at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley, a military hospital near Southampton. His wife was apparently present at his death, which was registered at South Shoreham.

The funeral took place at Greenford Church at 12 noon on Friday 28th September 1917. There was no report of the funeral in the local paper. A year later, on the anniversary of his death, his widow placed an "In memoriam" piece in the Times of Tuesday 24th September. It contained the verse:

The little mighty force that stood for England
Stood firm, while England girt her armour on.

The quotation comes from a poem *To the Vanguard* by Beatrix Brice which commemorates the role of England's small professional army at the beginning of the war – the so-called Old Contemptibles.

As well as his headstone at Greenford, Robert is commemorated on the Port of Spain Cenotaph and in the Caribbean Roll of Honour.

His probate recorded his home address as Clare Hall, South Mimms. Administration was granted on 9th December 1917 to his widow, and he left an estate worth £973 – 12s – 4d. Kate Eakin applied for her husband's medals in May 1921. She remarried in 1924, to Ralph Philipson, an insurance broker. He died in 1963, and she died in 1967, aged 76, at Chapel-en-le-Frith in Derbyshire.

As we have seen that Eakin's father, who died in 1919, shares a grave with him in Greenford churchyard. James Wilson Eakin was born c.1854 and had trained as a doctor in Dublin, and was included on the General Medical Register in 1875. He served as a ship's doctor with P & O in 1879, before settling in Trinidad with his first wife. He was a member of the British Medical Association and became treasurer of the Trinidad & Tobago branch in 1892, and President in 1895.

He was in London, staying at the Portland Hotel, in 1912 when he married for a second time, aged 58. The wedding took place at All Souls, Langham Place on 27th June, and his new wife was a widow Maud Edith Sarah Ellis, aged 49, whose address was given as Northfleet in Kent. However, this marriage was not to be a long one, as she died in Port of Spain in August 1914. They had both travelled back to England on the Royal Mail Steam Packet "Danube" arriving in Southampton on 13 April 1914.

Following his son's visit to Trinidad early in 1915, Eakin senior travelled back to England arriving in London on 16th June. At the time of his death his address was also given as Clare Hall, South Mimms. I originally thought this was the name of a private house, but in fact it was a hospital, operated by Middlesex County Council, originally to treat smallpox patients, but at this period and later, a T.B. sanatorium. Eakin was appointed Assistant Medical Superintendent of the hospital at a salary of £120 p.a. in February 1916 and he remained at Clare Hall until his death. He suffered some major medical event shortly after his son's death, which resulted in a total loss of sight, making any continuance of his medical duties impossible. He was allowed to continue living in his quarters at the hospital, and a charge of 30s a week was levied for his board, lodging and laundry. He died on 25 February 1919 at Clare Hall and his death was registered at Barnet. He was buried at Greenford three days later. Probate was given on 17th July 1919 to Charles Ta Bois M.D., the Medical Superintendent at Clare Hall in the amount of £6836-11s-8d. Neil commented, thinking that Eakin senior had died shortly after his son, that grief may have been part of it. Although the gap between the two deaths is a year longer than it appeared because of the incorrect date on the gravestone, nonetheless the records of Clare Hall record that James's breakdown and blindness followed only a few weeks after the board had offered their condolences on the death of his son, so Neil's supposition may well be correct.

A number of questions remain. The first relates to the nature of Eakin's wounds and what happened in 1917 that occasioned his death three years after he was originally wounded. Unfortunately, Eakin's army file only records his "afterlife", as the first entry in the file is the notification of his death, and the rest of the file is concerned only with the amount of pay arrears owed to his widow. The second question is why are the Eakins both buried at Greenford?

When Robert returned from the West Indies in March 1915 he gave his address in England on the shipping register as Greenford Green, Harrow, Middlesex and this address is also given by his father when he made the journey three months later. So did Robert Eakin own or rent a house at Greenford or was he staying with friends? Was it possible that Eakin senior knew Dr George Leslie Eastes who lived there, although they hadn't trained together? In fact the connection was a simple one, once I had investigated the history of Eakin's regiment. One of his fellow officers when the battalion arrived in France in 1914 was Lieutenant T.D. Perkin. Like Eakin a regular soldier, Perkin was the son of Alfred William Perkin J.P., nephew of William Henry Perkin, the pioneering chemist who made the first chemical dyes at Greenford in the 1860s. A.W. Perkin was heavily involved in local affairs and served, amongst other appointments, as chairman of the Board of Management of Clare Hall throughout the period of James Eakins' involvement. So we may reasonably assume that Robert Eakin's friendship with Thomas Perkin brought him to Greenford, and later his father followed him there. Perkin was injured in 1915, but survived the war as adjutant to the Reserve Battalion, and was living back in Greenford after the war.

Neil originally quoted a passage from Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum est*

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory
The old lie; Dulce et Decorum Est
Pro patria mori.



Wilfred Owen

Perhaps one could add another epigraph, which appears in a history of the KSLI in the Great War, published in the 1925, of which T.D. Perkin was one of the subscribers. It is a passage from A.E. Housman's sequence of poems, *A Shropshire Lad*, which though published in 1896, now seems so prescient of the loss of young lives in the First World War. These words were memorably set to music by George Butterworth.

They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man,
The lads that will die in their glory and never be old.

Peter Hounsell

