

1914 - 2014 CENTENARY

A tribute to four men of Compton Bassett who fell during World War One



Compton Bassett War Memorial

Major Frederic George Greenstreet
Corporal Walter Reginald Powell 15041
Private William John Cook 22197
Private Reginald Thomas Raisey Cook 45033



The memorial tablet inside St Swithin's Church, Compton Bassett

In a war that killed up to 10 million people with another 15-20 million badly wounded, four may seem an insignificant number. 100 years is also a long passage of time and the events that took place are now unsupported by living memory. Yet we continue to remember because their history is still relevant to our lives, whether war is considered futile or just.

This is a personal tribute to four men who lived in, or were connected to, the village of Compton Bassett and were killed during the 1914-18 war; their story reminds us that it was not just a European war. Each name is inscribed on the modest yet dignified war memorial that was created in 1950. The archive of First World War army records is patchy, some 60% lost forever but it has been possible to piece together a dimension of their lives and the events that led up to each tragic conclusion.

Major Frederic George Greenstreet
105th Mahratta Light Infantry, British Indian Army
Born 7 March 1881
Died 9 January 1917 aged 35
Family lived at the Rectory, Compton Bassett



Frederic George Greenstreet was born on 7 March 1881 in London, the third son of Colonel William Lees Greenstreet and Matilda Christina Frederica Kent. At that time the family lived in London but as William Lees was a career officer with the Royal Engineers and stationed in India, his wife often joined him for periods at a time. Several of their seven children were born in the Punjab region of India. Later, when Colonel William Greenstreet retired in the 1890s, they moved back to England and lived in Berkshire and Devon. Frederic's mother Matilda died in 1911 and subsequently his father moved in with second son Lawrence William who had become the new rector of Compton Bassett in 1915; Rev. Lawrence Greenstreet remained vicar from 1915-37. As well as having many generations of sons who entered the church, the Greenstreet family were steeped in a long tradition of military service and to India in particular. Frederic's great grandfather, John Greenstreet, arrived in Bengal as a cadet in 1797 and a long career culminated with promotion to General in 1854.



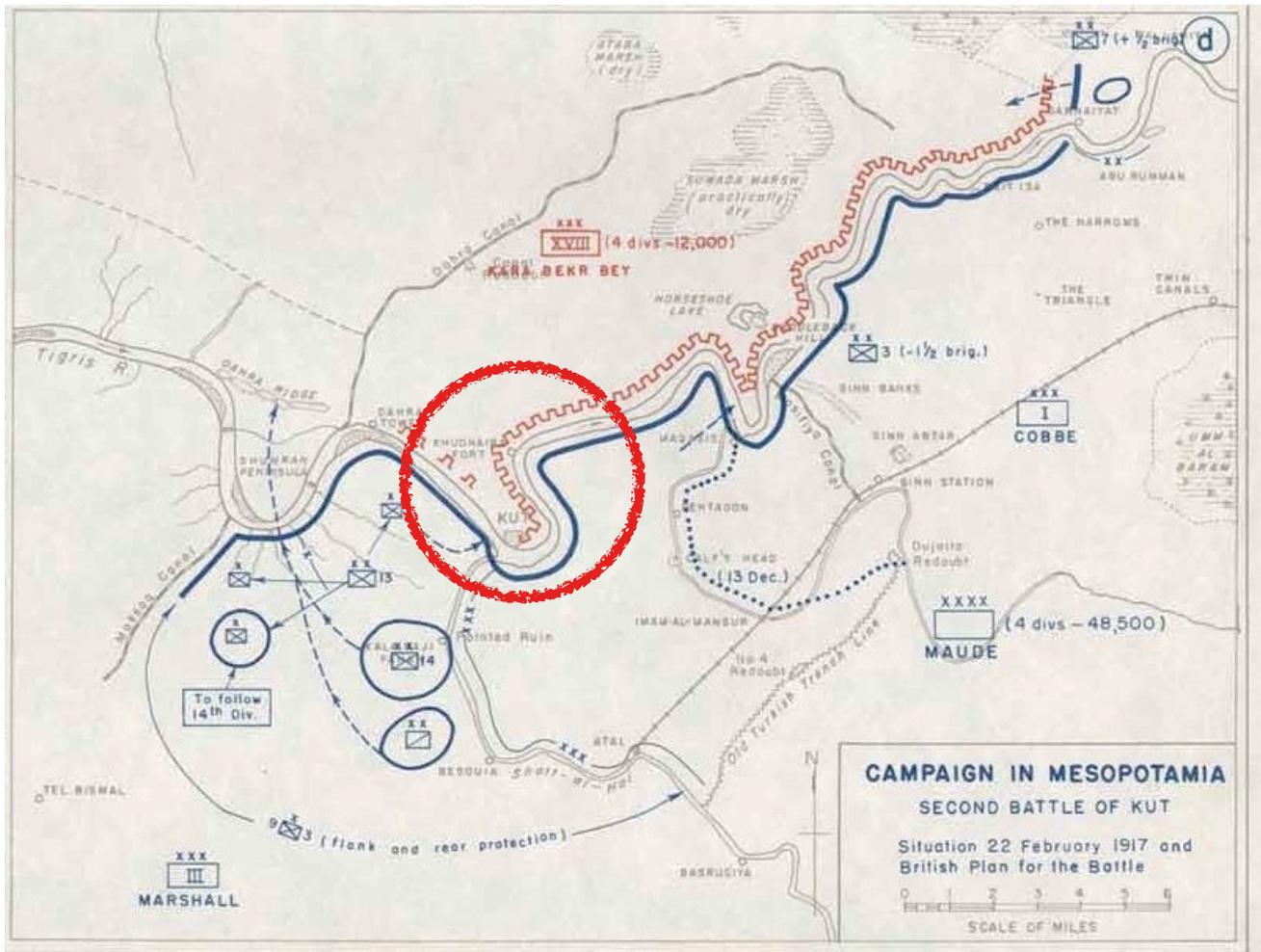
Compton Bassett Rectory 1925



Frederic Greenstreet

Frederic George attended school at Dover College in Kent and at the age of 18 he followed his eldest brother Charles Basil Lees Greenstreet and took up a career with the army. After officer training at Sandhurst, he received his first commission with West Surrey Regiment as a 2nd Lieutenant on 11 August 1900. On 3 April 1903 Frederic was promoted to Lieutenant and subsequently headed to India to join 103rd Mahratta Light Infantry of the British Indian Army. He was promoted to Captain on 11 August 1909 and later Major from 1 September 1915. Now as Second in Command of the 2nd battalion 105th Mahratta Light Infantry, Frederic was sent to the Mesopotamia to protect British interests there; his brother Charles, who was to survive the war, had been stationed there since 1915.

Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) became an increasingly important place in the First World War as Britain sought to protect its supply of oil for the navy. In 1908 the first oil had been struck by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and in 1913 Winston Churchill negotiated a deal on behalf of the Admiralty to modernise the navy by abandoning its use of coal in favour of oil. The supply was now under threat from Turkey, who claimed Mesopotamia as part of the Ottoman Empire; meanwhile Germany, although an ally of Turkey, had ambitions of their own in the region. Britain saw an opportunity to defeat Turkey, thereby weaken Germany's European campaign, and maintain their sphere of influence in protecting the frontier of India.



Khadairi Bend is centre picture, just north of Kut, on the river Tigris, 100 miles south-east of Baghdad

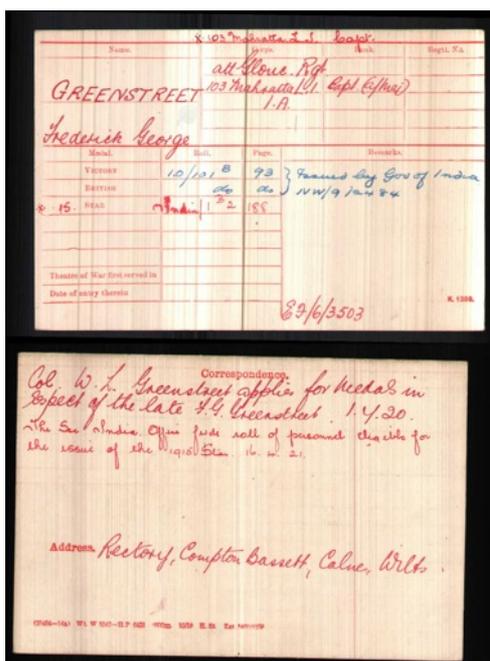
British forces sent to the region were principally from the Indian Army and so it was that Frederic was assigned there, probably during 1916 as large numbers of reinforcements arrived at this time. Overall, some 700,000 Indian troops took part in the Mesopotamia campaign and they faced a formidable opponent in Turkey. Early in 1917 Frederic became involved in an offensive to retake Kut-al-Amara, a strategically important town on the Tigris river, 100 miles south east of Baghdad. Turkish forces had inflicted a humiliating defeat on the British there in April 1916 and now, under new command British forces launched an offensive at Khadairi Bend, where the Tigris river turns sharply eastwards just north of Kut; it was an area that was heavily fortified by the Turks. After an artillery bombardment on Turkish defences, an infantry assault commenced on the morning of 9 January 1917, becoming known as the battle of Khadairi Bend (or battle of Mohammed Abdul Hassan). It was extremely hard fought, in awful conditions resulting from previous torrential rain and the day itself was shrouded in mist.

Despite early gains, Turkish forces counter attacked and intense hand to hand fighting ensued but British and Commonwealth forces ultimately prevailed and took the Turkish position. Casualties were around 700, including Frederic who was killed in a frontal assault of the first Turkish trench whilst leading D Company of the 105th Mahratta Light Infantry. Aged 35, half of his life had been with the British Indian Army and serving abroad; the war casualty list even records his nationality as Indian. His name is recorded on Panel 48 at the Basra Memorial in Iraq.

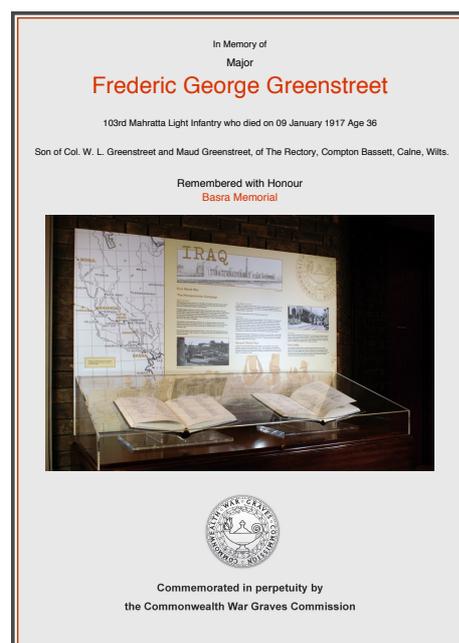


February 1917. British Indian Army in Kut-al-Amara, Mesopotamia after its recapture from the Turks

Frederic was awarded the 1915 Star for service in India, together with the Victory Medal and British War Medal, the standard issue for active service in his case. Given that his father and brother Laurence only moved to Compton Bassett in 1915 it is possible that Frederic never actually came to Compton Bassett. In 1920 his father applied for Frederic’s medals to be sent to him, a small comfort for the family’s sacrifice.



Frederic Greenstreet's Medal Index Card



Basra memorial commemoration

Corporal Walter Reginald Powell 15041
8th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment
Born January-March 1892
Died 6 September 1918 aged 26
Family lived at 29 & 33 Compton Bassett



29 Compton Bassett - middle cottage.



33 Compton Bassett - left hand cottage

Born in Compton Bassett during the months of January to March 1892 to parents George Daniel Powell and Mary Jane Ferris, Walter Reginald spent his early childhood living at 33 Compton Bassett before the family moved to Lower Lodge near Cherhill by 1901. In 1911 nineteen year old Walter was lodging in Devizes and working as a shop assistant selling furniture. Meanwhile his parents had moved back to Compton Bassett, a little further up the street at No 29 where George was employed as a house painter for the estate.

Walter volunteered for service with 12th Service Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment and landed in France on 21 November 1915; a month later his brigade became attached to 5th Division. Walter was promoted to Corporal and his records indicate that he was later transferred to 8th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment. Transfers occurred when a soldier was injured and after recuperation was often unable to rejoin his unit and sent elsewhere; equally he may have been transferred on promotion and attached to another, more depleted unit. So, by 1918 Walter's 8th Battalion was part of 57th Brigade in 19th Western Division and fighting on the Western Front in the Advance in Flanders, otherwise known as the Fifth Battle of Ypres. This was a critical juncture of the war with increasing successes against German forces who were fast becoming battle weary and exhausted. On 6 September 1918, just two months before war ended and after three hard years of combat, Walter was shot by a sniper while on patrol near the village of Locon, north east of Béthune in an area not far from the Belgian border. His name is recorded at the Loos Memorial on panel 61, which commemorates the 20,616 identified British and Commonwealth soldiers who have no known grave but fell in an area between the river Lys and Grenay, a distance of about 10 miles.



Above: British troops passing through the ruins of Ypres, West Flanders, Belgium in September 1918

Still living at 29 Compton Bassett, his mother Mary received a letter dated 12 September 1918 from Walter's platoon officer,

"He was very popular with the men; he was a fine soldier and a man whom I greatly admired. He will be greatly missed by all the platoon, and as a non commissioned officer his place will be hard to fill. Our heartfelt sympathy goes out to you in your sad bereavement, and I trust you will find comfort in the thought that he died serving his country."



Above: The symbolic headstone of father and son in St Swithin's churchyard, Compton Bassett

Mary had been widowed earlier in the year when husband George died on 12 March 1918 and sadly was then to lose her only son six months later. An elegant headstone in St Swithin's Churchyard, Compton Bassett commemorates both George and her son Walter. Below their names is a special dedication to Walter which reads:

***Sleep on dear son in a soldier's grave
Your life for your country you nobly gave
No loved one stood near to say goodbye
But safe in God's keeping now you lie***

Name	Regt	Corps	Rank	Regt No
POWELL	12	Division of	Plt	15041
Walter			CPT	
Medal	Roll	Page	Remarks	
VICTORY	X	101 B 22	3816	
BATTAL	15	STAR	1228	509
				KIA
Thence of War transferred in		(1) France		
Date of entry therein		21 - 11 - 18		
Correspondence.				
Address.				

Left: Walter Powell's Medal Index Card

Private William John Cook 22197
5th Battalion Wiltshire Regiment
Born July-September 1896
Died 29 March 1917 aged 20
Family lived at Alley Cottage, 59 Compton Bassett



Born in Roundway, Devizes, William John was the eldest son of William and Mary Jane's nine children (three died in infancy) . The two boys and their four surviving sisters lived in Mildenhall near Marlborough before moving to Alley Cottage, 59 Compton Bassett (now Austin's Farm) in the early 1900s. In 1911, at the age of 14, William worked on the farm as a labourer, where his father was also employed as a carter.



The cheering Wiltshire regiment in Mesopotamia

William joined the new 5th Battalion Wiltshire Regiment that had been recently formed in Devizes, on 29 March 1915 and sailed from Avonmouth for Gallipoli on 1 July 1915, landing at Cape Helles on 17 July. His battalion experienced heavy losses in a Turkish attack on 10 August; to make matters worse they suffered from disease and harsh weather. They were evacuated from Gallipoli in January 1916 and moved to Egypt. In February 1916 they moved again, this time to Mesopotamia where the battalion remained until the end of the war, attached to 40th Brigade and part of the 13th (Western) Division. They were the first to capture and enter the city of Baghdad on 11 March 1917, where they were enthusiastically greeted with cheers by the inhabitants.



General Maude leads Commonwealth troops into Baghdad March 1917

After this the 5th Battalion moved eastward and according to their war diary, did not then engage enemy forces meaningfully until the 29th March, when they set out at 2.30am along the Nahrwan Canal and assembled two miles south of the Turkish front line. From there they advanced under shell fire to a deep ravine, a position which afforded only slight cover and now just over a mile from the enemy. At 9am they pushed forward and attacked the Turkish position until they were held up 1300 yds away. Despite the absence of good cover 5th Battalion accomplished the attack successfully but under heavy artillery, machine gun and rifle fire, sustaining appalling casualties with at least one in five men killed or wounded. It was probably during this action that William was injured and later died of his wounds.

A plaque at the Basra Memorial in Iraq, panel reference 30 and 64, commemorates him and the regiment he served with. William was one of 40,682 members of Commonwealth forces who died in Mesopotamia between the autumn of 1914 to the end of August 1921 and whose graves are not known.

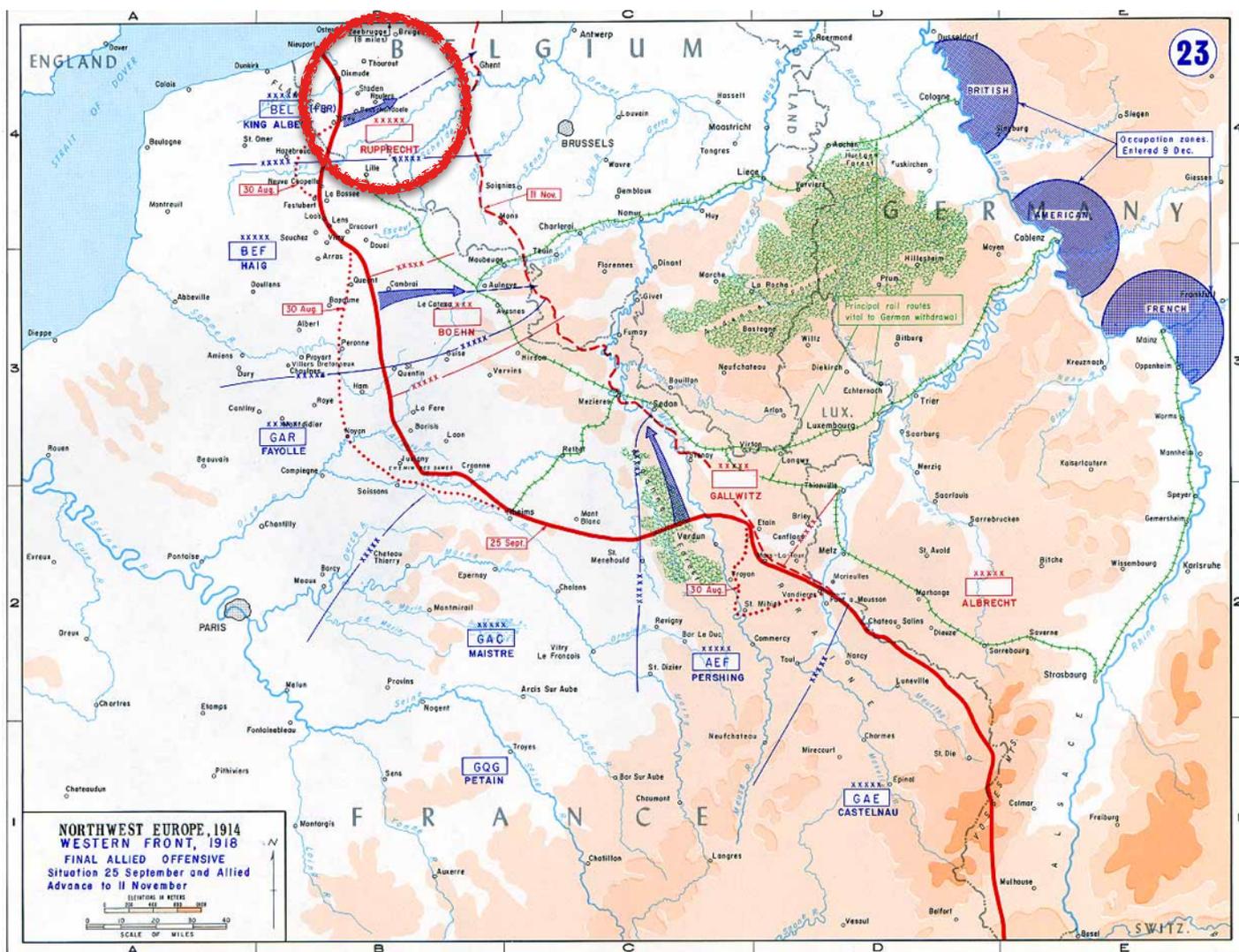


Basra Memorial, Near Zubayr, Iraq

Private Reginald Thomas Raisey Cook 45033
1st Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers
Born October-December 1899
Died 15 October 1918 aged 19
Family lived at 59 Compton Bassett



Records show that Reginald Thomas Raisey Cook, known as ‘Tom’, was born within the months of October to December 1899 in Manningford Abbots near Pewsey, Wiltshire. He was the younger brother by three years of William John, whom he followed into the army, presumably during 1918 as conscripts were not allowed to be sent overseas until the age of 19. In the early years of World War One this rule was often bypassed as volunteers lied about their age or gave false names and some 250,000 underage soldiers have been estimated to have fought. Even so, by 1918 the British Army was depleted in numbers and a new law passed in April of that year allowed men of 18 years and 6 months to be despatched abroad as long as they had received 6 months initial training. However, the introduction of conscription in 1916 had made it much more difficult to falsify one’s name or age and recruit numbers continued to decline. It is possible therefore, that Tom was only in active service on the Western Front just weeks before being killed in action.



The final push September-November 1918. Roulers is situated top left of map

Enlistment after 1916 changed the army's training structure and conscripts no longer had a choice of regiment, being simply allotted to any regiment that needed men. This is almost certainly why Tom ended up with an Irish regiment instead of a local one, as his elder brother William had done when electing to join the Wiltshire Regiment. Tom's Battalion had transferred to 109th Brigade in 36th (Ulster) Division in February 1918 and in October, during the remaining weeks of the war were involved in the Battle of Courtrai (Kortrijk) in Belgium, a city east of Ypres; an offensive started in the early hours of 14 October and by evening British forces had reached high ground to the south and had captured Moorslede to the north. Roulers fell the next day and it could have been here or at the south of the city where Tom was killed in action. The battle was over in five days with the German army now in retreat.

His name features on panel 70 at the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing at Zonnebeke in Belgium; the memorial contains the names of 34,959 Commonwealth soldiers who died in Belgian Flanders but were never found. For his parents, William and Mary Jane, the sacrifice to the First World War was immense but an all too common one. The loss of both their sons was further compounded soon after when eldest daughter Winifred, who was severely disabled, died in December 1918, aged 24.



Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing, Zonnebeke, Belgium

Compton Bassett War Memorial

At 10.30am on Sunday 12 November 1950, Captain Guy Benson unveiled the new war memorial during a special service of dedication conducted by Reverend Vernon Thomas and held at the site to commemorate those soldiers who had died during both world wars.



Captain Fielding Johnson and wife Noel 1933



Captain Guy Benson and Lady Violet Benson 1955

Captain William Spurrett Fielding Johnson, who lived at Manor Farm, served in both world wars, as a Captain in the Leicestershire Yeomanry in WW1 and an RAF Squadron Leader in WW2; he was awarded the Military Cross & Bar and the Distinguished Flying Cross respectively. Captain Fielding Johnson, along with Captain Guy Holford Benson, who served with 9th Queen's Royal Lancers in WW1, and owned Compton Bassett House, set up a village planning committee for the purpose of erecting the memorial. Villagers contributed to the fund but the greater part was donated by the two captains.



Service of dedication at the new memorial on Sunday 12 November 1950

Captain Fielding Johnson lost his only son Hugh and step-son Cecil Diccon Earle in the Second World War and the verse inscribed on the pedestal of the memorial is attributed to him:

***Not with the earthly eye or fleshly ear
But lifted high above mortality
We see at last the eternal hills
and hear the sighing of the universal sea***

***And kneeling breathless in that holy place
We know immortal beauty face to face.***

An article written by Jack Watkins for the War Memorials Trust Bulletin in 2004 describes how the building of the memorial came to fruition:

'There may be grander War Memorials than the stone cross in the village of Compton Bassett in Wiltshire, but few can occupy a more evocative setting. Beyond the narrow lane at the foot of the steps leading up to it, the ground falls away, amidst the trees and hedgerows, to rich green meadows grazed by herds of dairy cows. It is the sort of 'Forever England' landscape evoked by war poets.

“It is a wonderful view and a nice place to come and think your thoughts, even if some of them are painful ones”, reflects Alan Lewis, a veteran of the D-Day landings at Arrowmanches. He stands on the steps with his friend, Les Smith, two men steeped in the village and its dairy-farming traditions.

While Alan had three friends killed at Arrowmanches, both he and Les knew some of those commemorated on the cross. Moments later, up rolls Jim Taylor; like the other two, he was present at the memorial’s unveiling in 1950. Today, he carries a photograph of the ceremony.

It was two local military men, Captains Benson and Fielding Johnson who instigated the building of the memorial. Jim has some wry memories of the latter. “He wouldn’t put money into it unless the villagers got involved first. He had a little rubber dinghy set up and, for every sixpence (2.5 new pence) we threw in, he’d double it”.

Just over 50 years later, in 2003, locals of a community consisting of only 100 houses and a population of 200 had to dip into their pockets once again. Lichen and weeds were crowding out the inscriptions on the stonework. After being awarded Grade II listed status and a grant offer from English Heritage of 50 per cent towards the total cost of repairs - £1,650 - matching funds were required. “We sent out a letter to everyone in the village, saying that the cross has been here for 50 years and this was a chance to contribute to maintaining it”, explains Serena Henly, chair of the parish council. “So much was given that we have even been able to set aside a bank account for the memorial’s future upkeep”.

There are over 50,000 war memorials standing at the heart of virtually every community throughout Britain which represent a very emotional response by bereaved families.

The Compton Bassett memorial is constructed from Portland stone and is Grade II listed, having been judged in 2002 to be an uncommon example, meriting its status of special architectural and historic interest.

Rectors of Compton Bassett during the First World War



*1880 Rev. Vincent Fredrick Ransome
Rector of Compton Bassett 1878-1915*



*1915 Rev. Laurence William Greenstreet
Rector of Compton Bassett 1915-37*

If anyone is able to assist with additional information it would be greatly appreciated, for later permanent inclusion in a section of the Compton Bassett village website; please contact Laurie Waite on 01249 811076.

Further reading on soldiers from the Calne area can be found in *'The Great War: Calne District Soldiers'* by Richard Broadhead.

