

George White's Story



(image from www.bing.com)

by Angela Levy

George White's Story

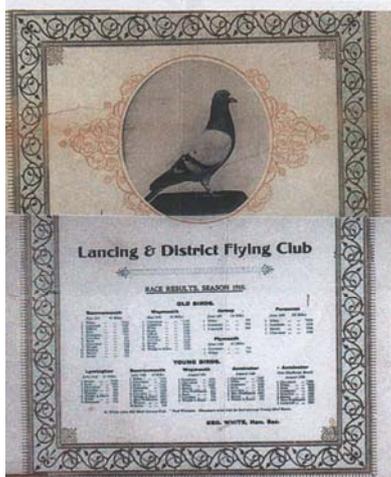
When George White was conscripted into the Royal Engineers, whether he chose to join the Carrier Pigeon Service or was ordered to, it could not have suited him better. There was very little the Service could teach him about training pigeons. Breeding them was his hobby.

He had built his own loft at his home, "Clovelly", 23, Cecil Road, Lancing, and he knew how to select the best birds, how to keep them in tip-top condition and how to train them to return to his loft from as much as 100 miles away.

He belonged to the Lancing and District Flying Club and in some years was its honorary secretary. George's birds had been prolific winners of races long before he joined the Royal Engineers.



George White
 (by permission of Sheila Simpson)



Flying Club certificate showing race winners
 (by permission of Sheila Simpson)

George and his twin brother, Percy, were the sons of Charles and Ellen (nee Mayell) White of Bramber Street, Bramber. In the 1881 England Census the twins were 5 months old and had 5 brothers and sisters – Ellen, 10, Charles, 8, Fanny, 7, William, 5 and Edith, 2.

Charles, senior, at this time was an agricultural labourer but by 1891 he is described as a domestic gardener and gardening was the occupation that George chose.

In 1901, aged 20, George was employed in the market garden owned by Bennett Greet of Fuchsia Cottage, Lancing. He also boarded

with the Greets.

It was a happy association for on 21 May 1904 George White married Emma Jane Mockford Greet, the second daughter of Bennett Greet, at Lancing Parish Church.

By the time George was conscripted in 1916 they had 3 children – Charles Bennett, aged 11, Olive Mabel, aged 8 and Gladys Maud, aged 3.

I am indebted to Terry Halland and Sheila Simpson, George White's grandson and granddaughter for providing me with information and photographs for this article.

Sheila remembers her mother, Olive, telling her how on one occasion she, Olive, and her sister, Gladys, were instructed by George to watch out for a



Market Garden workers like George tending vines
www.westsussexpast.org.uk
 PP/WSL/WGNG000224

much fancied pigeon returning to the loft at the end of a race. Olive was called away but she told her sister, who was 3 and a half years younger, "Now, don't you take your eyes off that bird when it gets back and mind you put the ring in the box!"¹

(The box was specially constructed with a clock inside that officially recorded the time of the pigeon's arrival when its ring was inserted.) Despite the strict instructions, the little girl's attention strayed and the bird's arrival went unnoticed, its time unrecorded and the race lost.

George was such a nice man, however, he was not too hard on the child.



Royal Engineers
 Badge
www.bing.com

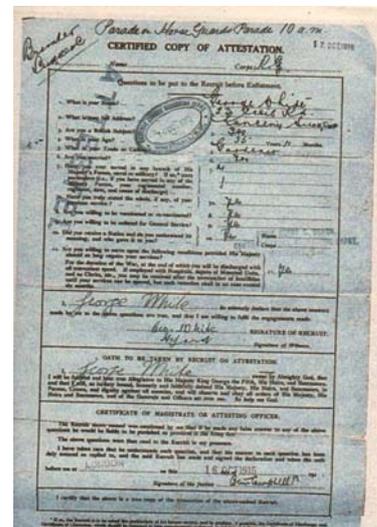
Sheila also remembers that 3 of George's best pigeons were stuffed and displayed in glass-fronted boxes in the hall of his home.

Although born in Bramber and living in Lancing at the start of the First World War, George joined the Royal Engineers at Whitehall, London.

The certified copy of his Attestation paper bears the oval stamp of the "Central London Recruiting Depot Whitehall S.W" and the date 14 October 1916 in the centre.

George took the oath, "I, George White, swear by Almighty God, that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors and that I will, as in duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and dignity against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God."²

George was given the rank of Pioneer, regimental number 204229 in "F" Company Corps of Signals. His service was reckoned as beginning on 16 October 1916. In fact,



Copy of George's
 Attestation paper
www.Ancestry.co.uk
 Military records

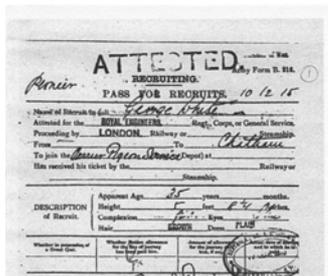
he had enlisted on 10 December 1915

but had been put on the Army Reserve List as, perhaps, his work in market gardening meant that he was helping produce food and, therefore, doing valuable War work.

Now, however, he was given a Pass to travel by train to Chatham in Kent to join the Carrier Pigeon Service.

It has his description on it "in order to prevent improper use of this Pass".³

His "apparent age" was 35, his height just over 5' 8", his complexion fresh, his eyes blue, his hair brown and his dress plain. "Plain dress" may mean that he was still wearing his own civilian clothes as he is stated as not having been issued



George's Pass
www.Ancestry.co.uk
 Military records

with a Great Coat. Across the bottom of the Pass is written by hand "Equip and return to Horse Guards S.W".⁴

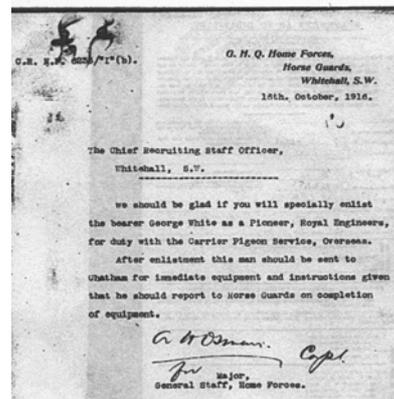
George was despatched with a letter from the Chief Recruiting Officer dated 16 October 1916 which read "We should be glad if you will specially enlist the bearer George White as a Pioneer, Royal Engineers, for duty with the Carrier Pigeon Service overseas".

For centuries pigeons had been used as the fastest way to send messages. The Persians, the Greeks and the Romans used them.

The carrier pigeon is not a distinct breed but is a domesticated rock dove, *Columba livia*. With training, a pigeon can carry up to 75g (2.5 oz).

The men operating the Pigeon Service were variously called Pigeoneers, Loftsmen and Pioneers.

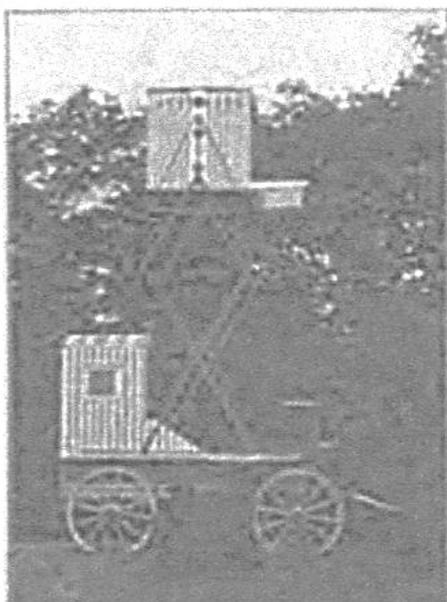
Photography before World War I had advanced so much that cameras had been miniaturised and pigeons had been trained to fly with them strapped to their chests while photographs were taken automatically as they flew.



Letter to the Chief Recruiting Office
www.Ancestry.co.uk
 Military records

In June 1915 the Carrier Pigeon Service was re-organised.

Ten pigeon stations were set up for each Army and a similar number for the Cavalry Corps. Sixty pigeon specialists, like George White, were enlisted and the service was transferred to the



Neubronner's Mobile Darkroom
www.en.wikipedia.org

Royal Engineers Signal Service.

The Service was so necessary, and therefore so successful, that by the end of the War the number of pigeons had risen from hundreds to 22,000 with 150 mobile lofts, some horse-drawn, some motorised, in order to move the birds with the troops as their positions changed.

Mobile lofts had been developed by a German apothecary called Julius Neubronner (1852-1932) well before the First World War in pursuit of his



George (left) with a mobile loft in the background
 (by permission of Sheila Simpson)

twin hobbies of photography and pigeon-keeping. Such a loft can be seen in the photograph of George and a fellow Pioneer.

When a bird arrived at one of these lofts, a wire in the coop activated a buzzer or bell and the Signals Corps Officer would go and retrieve the message from the canister on its leg.

Of course, each side would shoot at any pigeon suspected of being an enemy messenger. In Britain, under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), a person convicted of shooting a homing pigeon could be punished with six months imprisonment or a £100 fine.

In France, the Germans ordered the people to destroy their domestic pigeons and executed those who refused.

The endurance and determination of the carrier pigeons to reach their home bases, often despite being terribly injured, resulted in many birds receiving medals for saving thousands of human lives.

In 1936, at the entrance to Lille Zoo, the French Federation of Pigeon Fanciers erected a "monument aux pigeons voyageurs"⁵ to commemorate the 20,000 birds that died for their country and to remember the fanciers who were executed for keeping carrier pigeons. A statue of Peace is surrounded by a flock of birds and at her feet a pigeon rests on a serpent which represents the enemy.

Pioneer George White served in Ypres, among other places, while in the British Expeditionary Force.

He had 14 days leave to the United Kingdom between 24 January 1918 and 7 February 1918 and returned home for good on 23 March 1919. When the War ended on 11 November 1918 it was not possible for every soldier to immediately down arms and go home. On the original enlistment forms the recruit was promised that he would be "discharged with all convenient speed" but warned that he may be retained until his services could be spared "but such retention shall in no case exceed six months".⁶

Equipment had to be sorted out for transportation and, no doubt, the pigeons remained in France still serving their country – as food. George had to sign a "statement as to Disability" declaring that he was "not suffering from a disability due to my military service."⁷ As far as his family is aware he only suffered from "trench foot" as most soldiers did, through constantly wet feet.

George was discharged on 24 March 1919 at Chatham. He returned to his family and his old job of market gardening.

The majority of soldiers received three medals – the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. Collectively, these were nicknamed "Pip", "Squeak" and "Wilfred" after the adventures of characters in a popular cartoon strip which appeared in the Daily Mirror and the Sunday Pictorial from 1919 until 1956. "Pip" was a dog, "Squeak" was a penquin and "Wilfred" was a rabbit or, perhaps from his long ears, a hare.⁸



1914-15 British Victory
Star Medal Medal
(www.bing.com)



6.—He was soon sorry he had been so quick to carry the basket. "It's awfully heavy," he complained. Squeak said that there must be a lot of meat in the pies. I wonder!

Wilfred, Pip and Squeak
(www.bing.com)

George was not entitled to "Pip" as he had not served abroad until after 31 December 1915 but he received the other two. As was usual, his Army number, his rank, name and regiment were engraved on the backs of his medals.

George White died, aged 83, in Worthing Hospital at the end of 1962.

Information Sources

"Pigeon to Packhorse" by Alan Harfield chapter 7 "The Pigeon Service"
Picton Publishing (Chippenham) Ltd 1989

With thanks to Sheila Simpson and Terry Hallard for information and the
photographs of their grandfather, George White.

¹ Information from Sheila Simpson, George White's grand-daughter

² Oath quoted from George White's Attestation paper, shown above

³ Quoted from George's Pass, shown left

⁴ Quoted from the Letter to the Recruiting Officer, shown right

⁵ Quoted from the article below on the Monument to carrier pigeons at Lille

⁶ From George White's Attestation form

⁷ From George White's statement as to Disability, from his Service Records
viewed via Ancestry.co.uk (as were the documents in endnotes 2-6)

⁸ www.en.wikipedia.org