

The Medhursts –  
An Ordinary Bognor Family  
at the time of the Great War



Thomas Medhurst 1897-1917



Frank Medhurst 1893-1917

[Images from author's collection]

This is the story of the Medhursts, a very ordinary, typical Bognor family living through a very troubled time. I had started to write this case study in the spring of 2013 and thought it was so ordinary that I stopped. I had been reading local newspapers to be indexed (as part of the 'Great War Project' being run by West Sussex County Council) and had found many articles describing a single family with all sons *and* sons in law serving in the War (sometimes more than twelve in total) who had received a letter from the King, praising their efforts. How could my ordinary family, with only five sons serving compete with that?

On August 4<sup>th</sup> 2014 at the event to launch the book of the project I met a lady who had written another case study on the American Aerodrome in Rustington. We got talking and she made a very good point. We could easily find out what Winston Churchill or a soldier awarded a VC did in WW1, but what about the 'ordinary' people who in their millions did their bit for King and country without ever being mentioned? Are their names and stories any less worth recording?

### Childhood memories



As a young girl, I can remember looking at this photograph of my great Granny and Granddad Riggs, taken, I think, in the 1930's. You can just about see a locket hanging around her neck. It contains pictures of two of her brothers. I also recall being shown a rather smelly old bag made of striped material, full

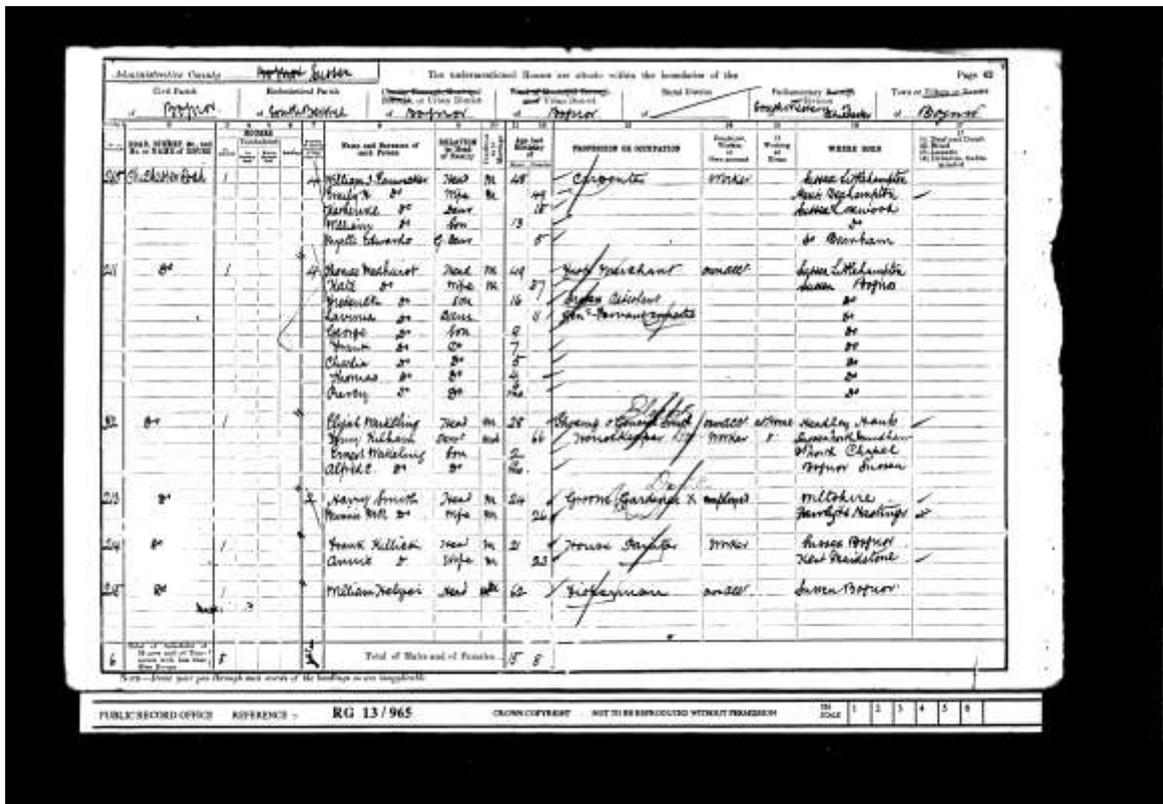
[Images from author's collection]  
of cotton wool, containing the biggest coins I'd ever seen and being told they had something to do with the First World War. Of course, as a child, I never gave either a second thought, particularly the bag!

It wasn't until much later in my life, after my Nan (one of their six daughters) had died and I 'inherited' the locket (and the smelly bag!) that I made the connection. The pictures in the locket were of my two great great uncles, Frank and Thomas Medhurst and the 'coins' were their commemorative plaques (given to the families whose relatives had died in WW1, more commonly known as a 'Dead man's penny'). I didn't really know much of that side of my family, but volunteering for the Great War Project and the 100th anniversary of the beginning of WW1, gave me the incentive to find out more. This is the story I have uncovered so far.....

Thomas and  
 Matilda  
 Medhurst



Thomas and Matilda Medhurst had nine children, two daughters and seven sons. Kate is my great granny and the lady in the picture wearing the locket.



[Images from Ancestry.com]

On the 1901 census we find most of them living together but elsewhere although nearby, daughter Kate aged 11 is boarding with a Blacksmiths family and son William aged 12 is with his Aunt and Uncle Harris. Thomas as the head of the family is a fish merchant. Matilda is a housewife. Their eldest son Fred is a drapers assistant and their eldest daughter, aged 11 is a general servant/domestic. George aged 9, Frank aged 7 and Charlie aged 5 are presumably at school. Thomas is 4 and Percy is only a six month old baby.

I think this paints an image of a poor family not able to afford a house large enough for all of the family to live together and in circumstances which necessitate a young daughter, who should be still in school, already out at work.

I imagine it was a working class family, typical of the area.

In 1908 the head of the family, Thomas dies of tuberculosis. Life for a poor family struggling to make ends meet, now got even harder.

NAME AND ADDRESS	RELATIONSHIP to head of family	AGE	SEX	MARRIAGE or MARRIAGE	PROFESSION or OCCUPATION	REMARKS	NATIONALITY	REMARKS
Matilda Medhurst	Head	46	Widow					
Frederick Medhurst	Son	26	Single		Postman			
William Medhurst	Son	23	Single		Urban District Council			
Kate Medhurst	Daughter	21	Single		Steam Laundry			
Frank Medhurst	Son	19	Single		Urban District Council			
Charles Medhurst	Son	16	Single		Errand Boy			
Thomas Medhurst	Son	14	Single		At Home			
Percy Medhurst	Son	10	Single		At School			

[Images from Ancestry.com]

On the copy of the 1911 census above we find Matilda, by then already a widow for three years, living in 3 Essex Road Bognor Regis with sons Frederick, a postman, William and Frank, both working for the Urban District Council, Kate, a steam laundry worker, Charles, a errand boy, Thomas, living at home and Percy at school. Lavinia is working in London whilst George is already a soldier and residing in the Chichester Barracks.

Although Matilda has lost her husband, at least she has five workers in the family bringing in a wage. Perhaps Lavinia who is working in London is sending money home too. Despite this, I imagine life was still very hard for the Medhurst family.

In 1912 both daughters get married, Lavinia in April and then Kate in December. I guess this was a mixed blessing as it would have been two less mouths to feed, but two less wages coming in.

In August 1914, war is declared. It was very much seen as a womans duty to encourage her husband and sons to enlist.

George was already a soldier but four of his brothers were just about to join him.....

## Brothers in Arms

### Frederick Medhurst

As with so many First World War soldiers the service records for Fred are missing but I have found a medal card. He was in the Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA).

Campaign :-		1914		(A) Where decoration was earned.	
				(B) Present situation.	
Name	Corps	Rank	Reg. No.	Batt on which awarded (if any)	
(A) MEDHURST	RGA att stat/Art	1st Lt	18224	MEDAL	ROLL PAGE
(B) Frederick	- " -	- " -	- " -	VICTORY	RGA/104/3 397
Action taken				BRITISH	old old
THEATRE OF WAR.				16	1/11/14 6
QUALIFYING DATE.					
16/8/14					

(S 34 44) W214-HP250 500,000 4/19 HWV(P240) K008 [Over]

It states he was attached to a stationary hospital. As he was a postman before the war with no obvious medical training I can only assume he was engaged in non medical duties. I have also found Fred on the Rolls of Honour in the Bognor Observer and in

[Images from Ancestry.com]

Parish magazines where it states he was serving with one of the Heavy Artillery Battalions so he must have left his hospital duties and moved nearer the action.



As British artillery tactics developed, the Heavy Batteries were most often employed in destroying or neutralising the enemy artillery, as well as putting destructive fire down on strong points, dumps, store, roads and railways behind enemy lines.

[Image from The long long trail <http://www.1914-1918.net/>]

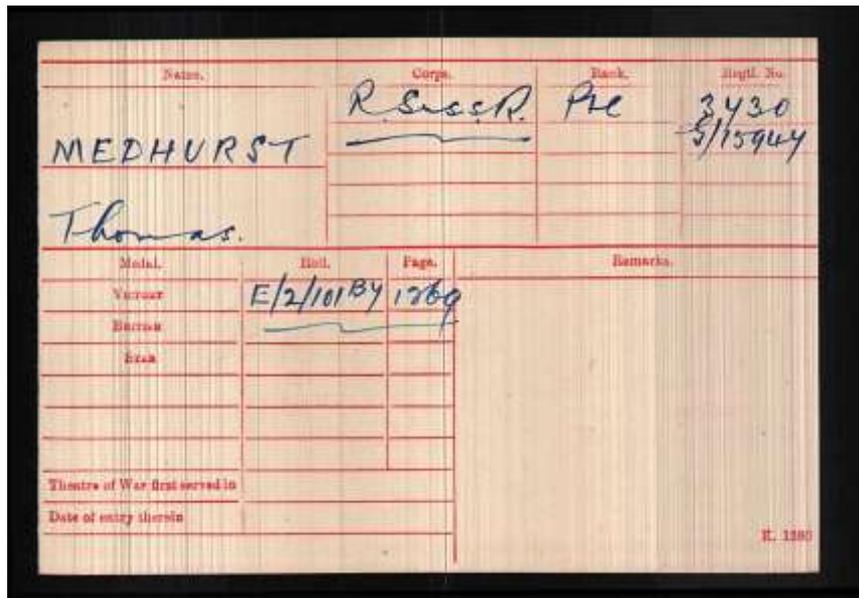
Fred is also listed as an Absent Voter for 1918 and the spring 1919 so I guess he stayed in the war until the end.



Wounded 23rd July 1916 and posted back 23rd August 1916. He's in hospital again on 9th September 1916 and is sent back to England 13<sup>th</sup> Sept 1916. Whether he goes back to France again is not clear but he lists his occupation as soldier when he gets married on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1918.

### Thomas Medhurst

As with all of his brothers, Thomas' service record is not available. This is his medal card.



Name	Corps	Rank	Regt. No.
MEDHURST	R. Sussex R.	Pte	3430 5/15944
Thomas			
Medal	Date	Page	Remarks
Victoria	E/2/10184 1769		
Barras			
Star			
Theatre of War first served in			
Date of entry therein			

Before the war Thomas worked for Mr Munday at Shripney Farm. Thomas enlisted in Horsham in 1915 and served with the Royal Sussex Regiment, 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

[Images from Ancestry.com]

These are some extracts from the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion War diaries from around the time that Thomas died. July 31<sup>st</sup> through August 1<sup>st</sup> is when the battalion were heavily involved in recapturing the town of St Julien, part of the third battle of Ypres or Passchendaele.

Aug 1<sup>st</sup>

"...Rain commenced to fall heavily about 3pm on the 31<sup>st</sup> July, and the ground was saturated. Both the BLACK LINE and the dotted BLACK LINE (lines of trenches) was full of water, and the men were standing in 2' 6" of water in places. No-one had any sleep; everyone was wet through, but all were cheery and confident..."

Aug 2<sup>nd</sup>

"... The night passed quietly so far as enemy movement was concerned, but artillery activity on both sides was tremendous. The BOSCHE shelled our new positions unceasingly, and it was during this period that most of our casualties were sustained. The rain meanwhile continued to render our trenches more and more uninhabitable, and the men were forced to get out of them and lie on top. In the afternoon at about 4pm the enemy were reported to be massing for counter-attack NE of St Julien, but this came to nothing. Indeed it was practically impossible for anyone to move owing to mud...."

Aug 13<sup>th</sup>

"Enemy plane dropped a bomb on camp, killing two and wounding six members of the M.G.C. (Machine Gun Company). Casualties in the push of July 31<sup>st</sup> – Aug 2<sup>nd</sup> amounted to 14 officers & 250 O.R. (other ranks)"

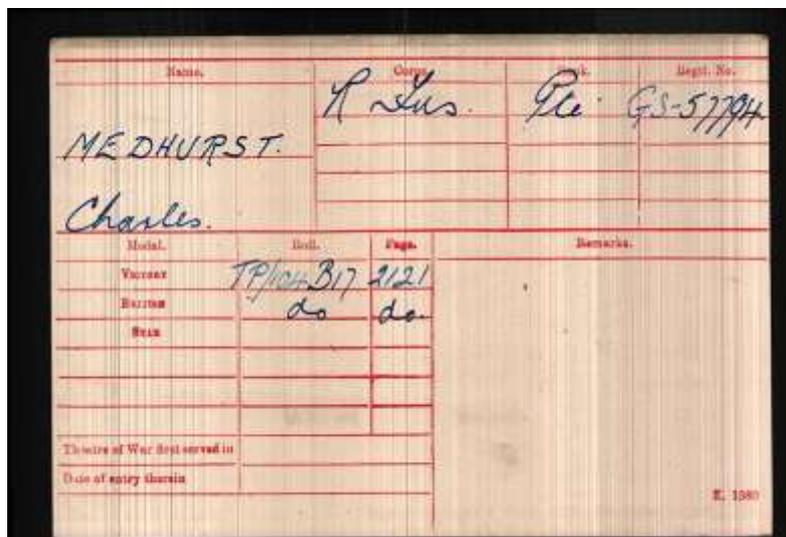


Although I cannot be sure, I think Thomas was probably fatally injured on one of the above dates. He died of his wounds in a field hospital on August 15<sup>th</sup>. This is a copy of the newspaper page that was posted (by another family member?) to his sister Kate, my great grandmother, about his death.

[Images from author's collection]

### Charles Medhurst

I know Charles served in the Royal Fusiliers as this was mentioned in the local newspaper when his brother Thomas died. I believe this is his medal card.



As yet I have not found out anything else about Charles' service.

[Images from Ancestry.com]

## Frank Medhurst

Frank was a private in the Queens Regiment (Royal West Surrey) serving in 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. His service records no longer exist but comments on the list of UK dead in WW1 states he was formally in the Royal Sussex Regiment. This is his medal card.

Name.	Corps.	Rank.	Regt. No.
MEDHURST	The Queens R	Pte	40252
Frank.			
Medal.	Roll.	Page.	Remarks.
Victoria	E/11018/152977		
Barrack	do do		
Star			
Theatre of War first served in			
Date of entry therein			

[Images from Ancestry.com]

Here is an extract of the war diary for October 26<sup>th</sup>, the day he died.

"...The weather became overcast and cloudy about 2am and rain was falling when zero- hour, 5.40am was reached. The barrage appeared to start simultaneously down the line at 6.10am. The O.P. (observation post) reported by runner that the attack appeared to be progressing well.

Very shortly after, the O.P. was struck by a shell which buried or temporarily stunned the garrison who shortly returned with the information that the advance had suffered a check and that considerable disorganisation was taking place among the advancing troops, which appeared to be the result of a battalions of the Left and Right both converging on the LEWIS HOUSE, where the main obstruction had been encountered.

As a result of the congestion, it was not possible for the Stokes guns under 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut. E Schult to fire in reply to the pre-arranged signal of 2 White Very lights, and, moreover, the hostile machine guns in LEWIS HOUSE were afforded a target of confused units, instead of meeting with the organised assault of small controlled bodies."

Strangely, I haven't been able to find any mention of Franks death in the local newspapers.

## The Home Front

During the war, I believe Matilda stayed at 3 Essex Road, Bognor. With five sons serving in the Army and two daughters married this only left herself and sons William and Percy at home. She had effectively become the head of the house, a role many housewives had to adopt. I believe William gets married in 1915 and so she is then alone with youngest son Percy, who at 15 years is probably the sole breadwinner. I would like to think that sons George, Charlie, Thomas, Frank and Fred sent some of their wages home to their mother. Even so, during the period 1914-18 prices doubled. Food and fuel were scarce. This must have meant Matilda and Percy very often went hungry and cold.

Matilda must have been constantly worried about her sons on active service. I hope they came home on leave but I suspect it wasn't very often. If they wrote to their mother, no such letters have survived. I have also learnt that when a soldier was wounded and sent back to 'Blighty', they very rarely went to a hospital near their home. When son George was injured and sent home in 1916, Matilda may have known he was back in the UK but probably would have had no opportunity or means to visit him.

Matilda would have also been concerned about her eldest daughter Lavinia who was a new mum to two little girls living far away in Kent with a husband away serving in the Navy.

There must have been some lighter moments. Her other daughter Kate, my great grandmother has 3 little girls in this time. She is living in the area and so Matilda hopefully often saw her grand-daughters.

Unfortunately in 1917 her worst fears were realised when Thomas and Frank were both killed within 3 months of each other. I cannot even begin to imagine her grief. I wonder how she coped. Her youngest son Percy turned 18 in the summer of 1918 and old enough to enlist. I can imagine his mother almost begging him to stay at home.

If losing two sons in France was not enough, William dies in late 1918. On his death certificate it states influenza as the cause. It doesn't say Spanish flu but I guess this might be likely. Matilda is present at her sons death.

Although her five sons were experiencing the full horror of war, for four years life on the home front also had its challenges.

## After the War

Fred, George and Charles return from the war.

### Frederick Medhurst

Fred married Charlotte Robinson from West Witterings in early 1919 and had a son, also called Frederick. He died 12th June 1944 aged 59 in Bognor and left an estate of £101 7s 11d to his widow.

### George Medhurst

George was already married to Alice and lived in London initially but moved to the Bognor area soon after. They didn't have any children. George died in 1962 aged 70 and Alice died in 1974 aged 82.

### Charles Medhurst

Charles never married and died in 1958 aged 62. I have a copy of his funeral bill which his sister Kate paid for.

### Lavinia Medhurst

Lavinia and Walter had five children in total. She and her husband lived in the Bognor area around the time of the Second World War when Walter dies. It is not clear if Lavinia moved back immediately to Kent where her children lived or stayed in Bognor for a period of time. Her death in 1958, aged 71, is registered in Kent

### Kate Medhurst

Kate was married to Bill Riggs and had six daughters, Florence, Alice, Rose (my grandmother), Edie, Gladys and Lily. She lived all her life in the Bognor area and died in 1982 aged 92. I have very fond memories of her. I know that her brothers deaths had a profound effect on her and she wore their pictures in a locket around her neck for decades. She is pictured at the beginning of this story.

### Percy Medhurst

The youngest Medhurst, married Lillian Wilding and had a son called John. He died in 1956 aged 55.

### William Medhurst

Although William died in 1918 I believe his son was born the following year. He was also called William.

### Matilda Medhurst

Matilda survived two world wars and out lived four of her children. She died aged 83 in 1947 in Chichester Hospital.

## Postscript

I will continue to try and find out more about their lives. I intend to go to France and visit the graveyard and memorials where Thomas and Frank are remembered. I hope this story hasn't been too boring to read. The Medhursts were indeed a very ordinary family but they are *my* ordinary family and I am very proud of them.

P.S. I still have the smelly bag and the coins!



[Images from author's collection]