

A WW1 "SILK" MYSTERY



The card is from the author's own collection

By ANGELA LEVY

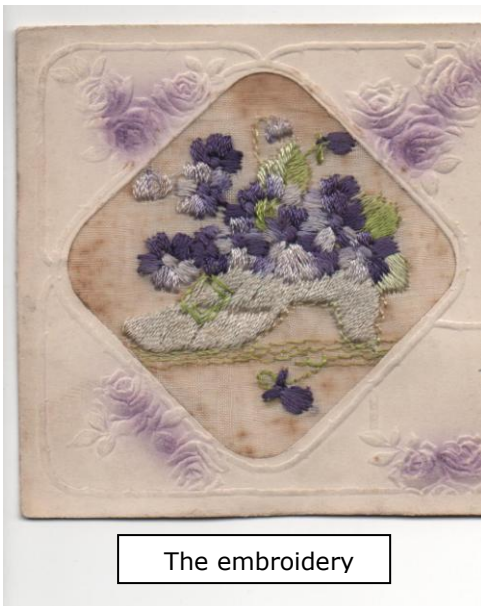
A WWI Silk" Mystery

The postcard was in a small, hard-covered album measuring 5 and a quarter inches by 6 and a quarter inches and, despite having only 10 pages, is 1 and a half inches deep.

Each page consists of a piece of stout, cream-coloured card sandwiched between two sheets of black paper were glued to the card along the sides and bottom edges but open at the top to allow pictures to be slotted in, front and back. Apertures in the black paper frame the pictures inserted.

The album belonged to my late mother and she probably bought it for a few pence at a jumble sale.

The contents are a strange mixture. Mostly, they are sentimental Christmas cards, very likely Edwardian. There are some delicately coloured landscapes and flowers, as well as a souvenir of the Coronation of Elizabeth II and even one or two saucy cards.



The embroidery

sheen.

Round the diamond-shaped aperture and the edges of the card, embossed roses, flushed with lilac, are connected by embossed stems complete with embossed leaves and tiny, embossed thorns. Although beautiful in itself, the card particularly interested me because of the regimental badge of



The album and silk postcard

The silk postcard, the subject of the mystery and used on the title page of this article, was in a class of its own. The finely woven material on which the design was stitched is brown with age but, despite being nearly 100 years old, the silver grey of the shoe, the green of the buckle, the green of the leaves among the abundant deep purple, lilac and pale mauve pansies have kept their colour and the threads have kept their



Royal Sussex
Regiment Badge

the Royal Sussex Regiment embossed in gold next to the embroidery. Having volunteered to take part in the West Sussex County Council's "Great War Project" this was an exciting find at exactly the right moment. Embroidered cards appeared early in the 20th century but it is not known precisely when they were first published or who were the first publishers though they are thought to have been Swiss, German, French and Austrian.

During the years of the First War these cards were immensely popular. The vast majority were the sentimental kind – floral with a loving message – known today as "Hearts and Flowers" cards. A variation of these had an envelope-type pocket intended to hold a small message card. It is believed that initially they were embroidered by French nuns because of their skill in ecclesiastical needlework. Later, however, their manufacture became more of a cottage industry with French women and Belgian refugees producing them to earn a small income.

Multiple copies of a design would be stitched on a piece of silk or organdie. When completed the material would be collected or sent to the factory to be separated and mounted on a postcard back. A frame was secured to the front and the whole neatly trimmed. Soldiers would buy them for the equivalent of 25p. It is thought that ten million were made. Surviving cards are often in good condition for, apart from being treasured by families, they were usually sent in brown, semi-transparent envelopes. If the soldier was on "Active Service" he did not have to pay the postage. These embroidered cards are known by collectors as "WWI Silks".



Birn Brothers trademark

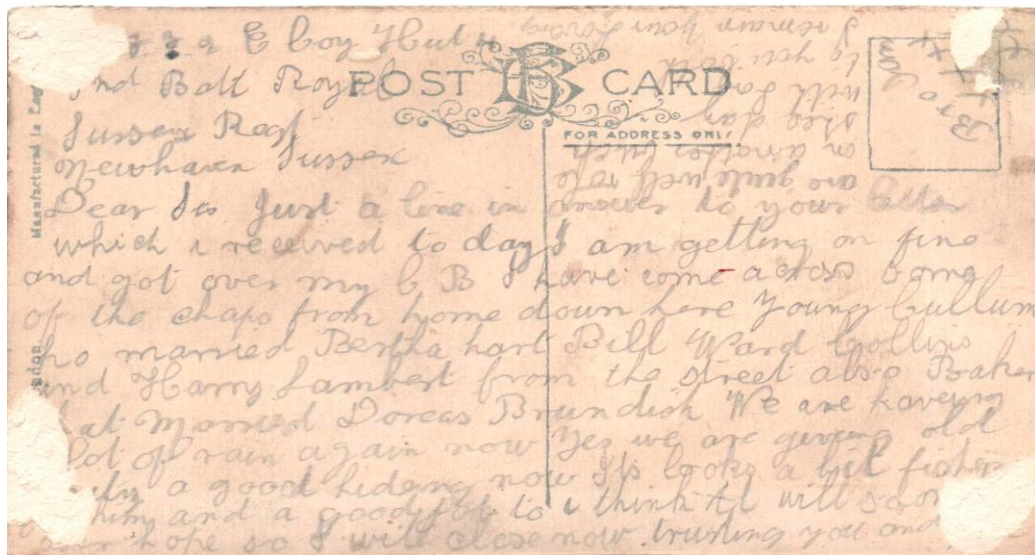
This card was published by Birn Brothers of 67-70, Bunhill Row, London

EC1. Their trademark was "BB" and their cards were often embossed.

Subjects ranged from the romantic to the patriotic and from the regimental to the

comic. Many would have been printed in Germany

Being too big to fit into one of the framed pockets, my card had been glued to a page by the tips of the four corners with the result that some of the



The original message

wording was lost when I prised it free.

Using the exact wording and spelling of the original and dashes for missing characters, the message is;-

"----882 E Coy Hut 4 -nd Batt Royal Sussex Regt Newhaven Sussex
Dear Sis Just a line in answer to your letter which i received to day
I am getting on fine and got over my C B I have come across some
of the chaps from home down here Young Cullum ho married
Bertha hart Bill Ward Collins and Harry Lambert from the street also
Baker that married Dorcas Brundish We are having -- lot of rain
again now Yes we are giving old ---tz a good hideing now It looks a
bit fish-- --- him and a good job to i think it will soon --- over hope
so I will close now trusting you and ---- (here he turned the card
round and continued at the top right hand corner) are quite well
role on another buck shee day with love to you both I remain your
Loving Bro Sam xxxx—xx"

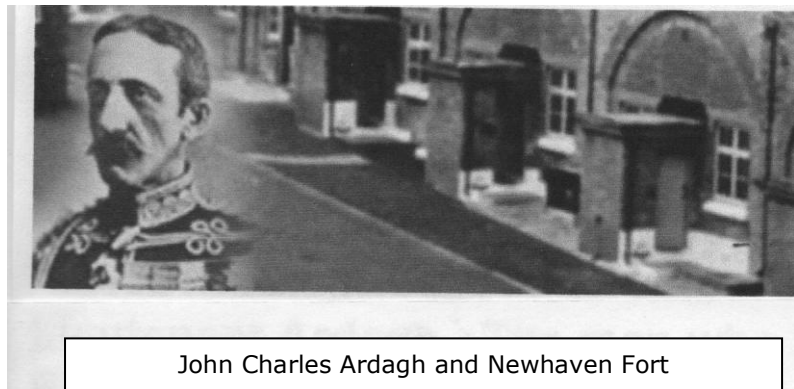
With no date, no postmark, no surname for the sender and no name and address for the person to whom it was sent what hope is there of finding out? Why bother? I thought it worth a try because the

postcard was such an apt and timely find and because I enjoy solving puzzles.

To set the scene, Sam is at Newhaven Fort, which was designed by Lieutenant John Charles Ardagh (1840-1907). Work began in 1864. Instead of flattening the land and building a fort on top, which was the usual procedure, Ardagh integrated his fort into the existing contours which made it inconspicuous from the surrounding area. In addition, he used concrete for the first time in a military structure. The six million bricks used were made from local clay.

By 1914 the fort had been modernised with up-to-date breech-loading 6 inch guns. During the First World War Newhaven became the main supply port for the British Expeditionary Force in France as well as being the base for naval vessels on escort and other duties in the English Channel. Although enemy attacks on the port were expected they never materialised and fit men were posted to the Western Front for more active service.

At the start of an investigation it is important to assemble the known facts. Having established that Sam is at Newhaven Fort at the time of writing the card, what do we already know about him?



John Charles Ardagh and Newhaven Fort

He is a soldier in E Coy (Company) The Royal Sussex Regiment and is billeted in Hut 4. His battalion number is all but obliterated. However, "nd" or "rd" limits it to 2nd or 3rd. The tiny lower part of the number visible appears to be curved so that would indicate a 3. This is confirmed by Ancestry.co.uk's descriptions of the various Royal Sussex Regiment battalions in their Forces War Records. The 3rd (Reserve) Battalion was mobilised in May 1915 to Dover and then on to Newhaven for duty as Newhaven Garrison.

We also know that Sam has a sister and that several of his friends "from home" are stationed at Newhaven, too.

Before investigating the "chaps from home", it seems to me that more than bare facts are revealed about Sam by what and how he has written. For instance, many men would have been brief and to the point, something like, "Dear -----, I am quite well. Hope you are the same. The grub's not bad here. Send me some fags. Yours etc."

Sam, on the other hand, has filled the whole card with his message. He has used every bit of space right to the edges and corners. This suggests an out-going, talkative man with a zest for life.

Despite a lively mind, however, he is not particularly well educated. There are hardly any commas or full stops and his spelling is poor. He writes "role on" for "roll on" and "a good job to" for "a good job, too". He writes "haveing", "giveing" and "hideing" and uses a small "h" for Bertha Hart's surname.

The number of people he mentions in the small space of this card suggests that he has many friends whom he values and likes to keep in touch with. That, in turn, suggests that he is a likeable person and good company. Ending his message with at least 6 x's (kisses) further indicates that he is an affectionate man.

The obvious people to investigate first are those Sam describes in most detail, that is, the married couples. Ancestry.co.uk birth, marriage and death records soon revealed that Bertha Hart was born in 1891 at Mendlesham, near Stowmarket, in Suffolk. Her parents were John Hart, an agricultural labourer, and Eliza (Elizabeth) nee Scarfe living at Green, Mendlesham. In 1913 Bertha married Walter Henry **Culham**. Sam had probably never seen his friend's name written down so it would have sounded like **Cullum**. Walter was born in 1891 at Little Stonham, Suffolk about 2 miles south-east of Mendlesham Green. His father, Charles, was a horseman on a farm. His mother, Nellie, nee Quinton, came from Hadleigh in Suffolk about 11 miles south of Mendlesham Green.

Walter died in 1947 and Bertha, dying in 1980, had outlived him for more than three decades. Both are buried in Colchester Cemetery, Essex.

With the second married couple we again have the wife's full name.

Dorcas Brundish was the daughter of Arthur and Maria (nee Ager) Brundish and she was born in the Mendlesham area in 1891. Mendlesham and Mendlesham Green are separate villages about 2 miles apart, so cause some confusion. Arthur was a boot and shoe maker and Dorcas was a servant just before her marriage to Hamilton William Baker in 1912. Hamilton had been born in 1890 at Pettaugh, Suffolk, about 4 miles south-east of Mendlesham Green. Harry Baker, his father, was an agricultural labourer. His mother was Nellie, nee Salter. Hamilton had been a stockman on a farm. His death was registered at Ipswich, Suffolk, in 1972. Dorcas had predeceased him in 1956.

By now there was no doubt that “home” for Sam was Suffolk and, very likely, Mendlesham Green.

Before searching for him, however, I wanted to find out something about the remaining three friends. Because of the lack of commas and full stops in his message it sounded as though Bill Ward, Collins and Harry Lambert all lived in the same street, whatever it was called, and that perhaps Sam lived there, too.

It turned out that it was only Harry Lambert who lived in a road called The Street – the A140, which runs north/south a mile or two east of the Mendleshams.

Harry was a farm labourer before he joined up, as was his father, George. His mother was Mary Ann Hart before her marriage. Harry was born in 1892. I could not find a marriage for him or the date of his death.

Bill Ward proved to be William Stephen Ward and, as expected, his birth in 1887, was at Mendlesham. His parents were Thomas Henry, a farm labourer, and Mary Ann Ward, nee Watcham. In 1920 Bill married Ellen May Hart, the daughter of Frederick and Charlotte Hart, all born in Mendlesham. Hart families were numerous in the area.

Ellen died young, aged 47, in 1949. Bill died in 1964. His will gives his address as 2, Recreation Road, Stowmarket and he left £208 to Stephen William Ward, postman, presumably his son.

Collins was impossible to identify as there was too little information.

Despite knowing the probable area of his birth and likely date, Collins was not one of Mendlesham’s family names.

I contacted Newhaven Fort to ask if a record existed of men who were stationed there and was told that one was being compiled but was not available as yet.

Now for Sam. Having found Harry Lambert, Dorcas Brundish and Bertha Hart in the 1901 England census for Mendlesham Green, it seemed a good idea to find out how many Samuels there were in the same census.

Samuel did not appear to be a common name and there were only three – Samuel Reynolds, Samuel Reason and Samuel Finbow. There was also a Henry Samuel Eastall who might have been known as Sam.

The first two men were easy to rule out as they were 72 and 52 years old respectively. As the other two were 7 and 6 years old respectively in 1901 this made them 20 and 19 years old at the outbreak of the First World War.

Did either or both serve in the Royal Sussex Regiment? Having had no luck with military records so far, I crossed my fingers and searched for Samuel Finbow and found only one record. However, it was the one that mattered – his Medal Roll Index card. Sure enough, he had served in the

Royal Sussex Regiment.

There was no need to look for further proof. This was Sam, the writer of the silk postcard. Why such certainty?

The very first characters Sam had written on the postcard had been partially lost when it was removed from the album but three

Name	Grade	Rank	Regt. No.
FINBOW	R. Sussex R.	Pte	4/5214
Samuel	R. Sussex R.	Pte	5/19882
Medal	Enl.	Page	Remarks
5 STAR	2/2/1919	187	Class 2. 3. 3. 19.
Theatre of War first served in (1) France			
Date of entry therein 27.7.15.			

Sam’s Medal Rolls Index card

numbers remained**882**. On the Index card was Sam's full Royal Sussex Regiment Army number S/19**882**.

Samuel Charles Finbow was the son of Frederick Finbow, a farm worker and horseman on a farm, and Mary Jane Hayward who were married in 1881. They lived at Mill Terrace, Green, Mendlesham.

Finbow families were the most prolific in the Mendlesham area. Frederick and Mary Jane, typically, had a family of eleven children. They were Annie, born in 1882, Alice born in 1884, Laura, born in 1886, Edward George, born in 1887 and died an infant, Hilda Beatrice, born in 1889, Vera, born in 1889 and died an infant, Edith Emily, born 1891, Ephraim, born in 1892, **Samuel Charles**, born 1894, Edward George, born 1896 and Frederick Walter, born 1896..

In 1911, aged 17, Sam was a "farmyard boy". Although not certain when or where he enlisted, his Medal Rolls Index card shows that initially he was in the East Surrey Regiment. It also tells us that he went to France in 1915 so, allowing for a period of training, he must have enlisted early on in the War. As with his friends from home, I could find no service records. Perhaps he was wounded in France. He writes about having "got over my C.B" but that sounds more like an illness than an injury. Nevertheless, the East Surrey Regiment unit history gives some significant clues as to his probable whereabouts while he was serving with the regiment. Of the 18 Regiments raised in WWI it is most likely that Sam was in the 8th (Service) Battalion, part of Kitchener's Army. I believe the 8/ before his East Surrey Regiment army number indicates this.

The 8th Battalion was formed in 1914 at Kingston-on-Thames. In April



East Surrey Regiment badge

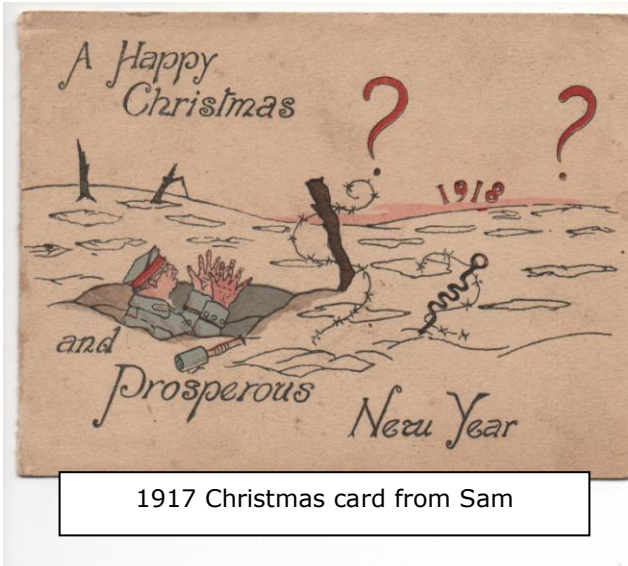
serve during the Crimean War fighting at the Siege of Sevastopol, an

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100

1915 it moved to Colchester and then to Salisbury Plain in May. The most significant fact, however, is that Sam's Medal Rolls Index card states that his "Theatre of War first served in" was France and the "Date of entry therein" was 27 July 1915. The 8th Battalion East Surrey Regiment was mobilised for war and landed at Bolougne on 28 July 1915. The Battalion was engaged in various actions on the Western Front. During 1916 it was involved in the Battles of Albert, Bazentin Ridge, Delville Wood, Thiepval Ridge and

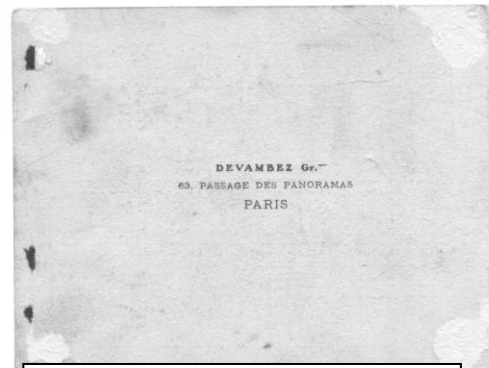
Ancre Heights. In 1917 it was at the 1st and 2nd Battles of Passchendaele and the Battle of the Somme.

Without knowing exactly when Sam was transferred to the Royal Sussex Regiment and when he arrived at Newhaven, I re-read the message on the postcard. From his optimistic view of progress of the War and his hope that it would soon be over made me think he may have been writing in late 1917 or early 1918.



I also went back to the album, looking, with “fresh eyes” as it were, for more clues. There was another card from Sam. This was not a silk postcard but a Christmas card with a picture of an apprehensive German soldier, in a shell-hole in the middle of a desolate battlefield, looking towards the horizon where the date 1918, between two question marks, is rising. Inside is an almanac for 1918 so

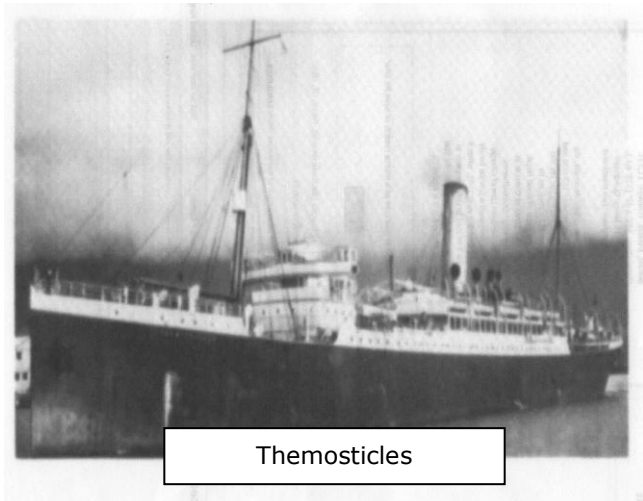
obviously this was a message of hope at Christmas 1917. There is the name and address of a prestigious printer on the back – “DevambeZ Gr, 63, Passage des Panoramas, Paris”. Did Sam buy the card in France in 1917 before returning to England? DevambeZ was the name of a fine engraver’s firm. Edouard DevambeZ acquired the business from royal engraver, Hippolyte Brasseux in 1873 and moved to 63, Passage des Panoramas in 1890. The House of DevambeZ won many awards for the outstanding quality of its engraving and design and attracted the wealthiest and most influential clients. In 1920, Sam married Catharine Dashwood, the daughter of Lancelot and Sarah Dashwood of Harleston in Norfolk. Catharine’s, birth was registered at Depwade in Norfolk in 1892.



The back of the above card

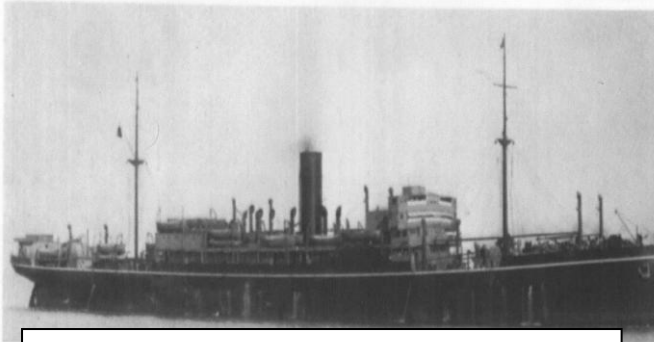
Her name was spelt with two a’s. Presumably, Sam had returned to farm work and, no doubt, found it dull and lacking in prospects.

On 2 July 1920 Sam sailed from the Port of London for Australia aboard the “Themosticles” of the Aberdeen Line which spent her entire working life travelling between Great Britain and Australia via Cape Town. Sam was a 3rd class passenger and he was travelling alone. Had his marriage



Themosticles

ended so soon? More than a year later Catharine followed him to



SS Benalla

Australia. She was a passenger on the s Benalla”, a P & O Branch Service ship, which left the Port of London on 8 September 1921. Her last address in England had been 23, Salisbury Road, Great Yarmouth and her occupation on the passenger list is given as

housekeeper. Catharine was not travelling alone – with her was her infant son, Arthur Samuel, born 1 February 1921. The journey from London to Melbourne would have taken about 6 weeks. Tragically, Arthur died shortly after their arrival.

The Australian Electoral Rolls show that Sam and Catharine settled in Corio, Victoria, in the sub-district of Geelong North. Today it is one of the largest suburbs in the area. It was formerly known as Cowie’s Creek, after James Cowie, an early land owner there. Even in the 1860s there were two hotels and a population of about 500. A Post Office opened in 1864 and Geelong Grammar School moved there in 1914 so there were prospects for newcomers.

However, the Electoral Rolls always give Catharine’s occupation as “home duties” and Sam was always a “farm hand”. An extensive Finbow family tree deposited on Ancestry.co.uk reveals that Sam and Catharine had more children – three daughters.

A further card from the album depicts a landscape with a tree in the foreground. On a branch of the tree is fixed a little silver koala bear and beneath is a verse.



Geelong in Australia

“AUSTRALIAN NATIVE BEAR”

We call him a bear, which isn’t fair
 He’s the best little chap in God’s fresh air,
 Whatever his thoughts they’re fair and free,
 He comes with a message of friendship to thee.

The card had come from “Cath Sam & Doris” and in typically affectionate fashion Sam had crossed through the word “friendship” and substituted “love”.

On the back is written “To Laura & Jim with love Wishing you a Happy Xmas & a bright New Year _____ letter to follow”

Laura is Sam's sister and Jim is her husband, James Hersey, (or Hursey) whom she married in October 1914. Sam died in the state of Victoria, Australia, in 1974 aged 80 and Catharine died in 1986 aged 94.

There is one last Finbow card in the album. Though not obviously a Christmas card it shows a prehistoric cave-boy kissing an apprehensive cave-girl under a bunch of mistletoe. Beneath, the caption reads "I'll Tell Ma".

Inside, beneath a verse by H.M. Burnside, it is signed in a round, youthful hand by Edward Finbow, Sam's brother, and it was sent to "Laura".

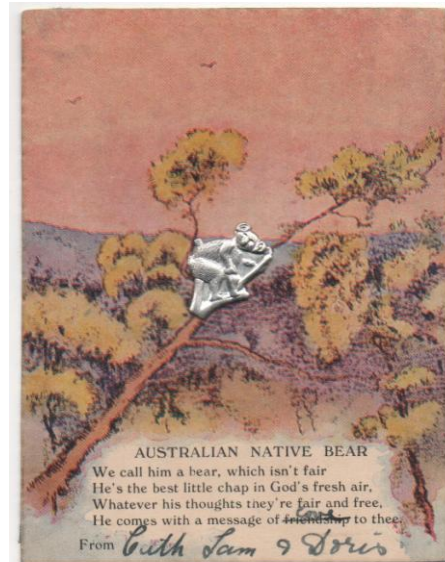


Edward's Christmas Card

This Laura

was probably Catharine's sister.

Private Edward George Finbow joined the 8th Battalion Suffolk Regiment at Ickworth and was killed in action on 29 October 1916, aged 22.



The "koala" Christmas card



Sequel May 2015

While researching the Silk Card Mystery, I became attached to Samuel and Catharine Finbow but, not being able to find a photograph of them, felt that the article was not complete.

Imagine my surprise and delight, therefore, when Martin Hayes, supervisor of the West Sussex Great War project, told me that he had received an e-mail at Worthing Library from the grand-daughter of Samuel and Catharine.

Cheryle Marinner lives in Victoria, Australia, not far from the place to which her grandparents emigrated in the early 1920s.

Following the tragic death of their infant son, Arthur, soon after arrival in Australia, Samuel and Catharine went on to have three daughters, Doris, Freda and Margaret. Margaret is Cheryle's mother.

Samuel enlisted in the Australian Army but never forgot his time in the Royal Sussex Regiment and when in civilian clothes often wore the badge on his lapel.



Cheryle knew little of his life in England. It was on Anzac Day, 25 April 2015, when Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in WW1 are remembered, that she decided to try to find out more and, turning to the Internet, discovered the West Sussex Great War website.

Since then, e-mails have flown back and forth. She has sent me the photographs my article lacked and I have sent her my research papers and all the original cards, including, of course, the silk one written by her grandfather a century ago.

Cheryle told me "I thought you might like to know that I showed the cards to my mother. She sat in her armchair trying to take it in,

that she had these beautiful treasures in her hands. She had tears in her eyes.

"Grandpa spoke of being in France in WW1 and he remembered having to sleep on the bodies of the men who had been killed. He was shot in the war somewhere and shrapnel hit the cigarette case that was in his breast pocket. We think that smoking may have saved his life back then, but it ironically caused his death in the end. My mother still has the cigarette case – which she treasures.

"Grandpa enlisted in WW2 in Australia and served on the home front – due to his age. I think he must have had a real sense of pride regarding his Military Service in both the British and Australian Armies.

"I can't tell you how thrilled and excited we are to discover this story and to see the cards."



Conclusion

The work we do as researchers can seem to be a task “in limbo” but this experience goes to show that the facts and dates we unearth and record will mean something, to someone, somewhere, some time.

Sources of Information

www.ancestry.co.uk was used to identify the persons named through England Censuses, Births, Marriage and Death records and passenger lists.

Birth certificates of Samuel Finbow, Catharine Dashwood and Arthur Finbow in the author’s own collection

Marriage certificate of Samuel and Catharine in the author’s own collection
‘Til the Boys Come Home by Tonie and Valmai Holt 1977 “Silk Cards” section, page 618

The Dictionary of Picture Postcards in Britain 1894 – 1939 by A.W. Coysh 1984 741.683

The Concise Catalogue of Embroidered Silk Postcards by John Westland 1994 741,683

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corio,_Victoria

Passenger Lists from www.ancestry.com.uk

Devambez information from www.en.wikipedia.org

John Charles Ardagh www.newhavenfort.org.uk/ man_who_built_fort

The Illustrations

Photographs of the album, the cards and the poppy are by the author

The Medal Rolls Index card and both ship pictures were found on www.ancestry.co.uk

www.bing.images Geelong,Australia for the map and for the East Surrey Regiment badge

Grateful thanks to my cousin, Frederick Howell, in New Zealand, a collector of postcards, for his help.