Thomas Victor Burgess

1899- 1918

By Ivor Williams
Thomas Victor Burgess, was born on Sunday 3rd December 1899 at No 9 Boss’s Gardens, Brighton to the parents of George Henry Anthony Burgess and Eliza Burgess, nee Jupp.

As with his siblings, we know very little of Thomas’s childhood. In the first record we have, the 1901 Census, Thomas was only 1 year old. All we know at that stage is that Thomas was the youngest of five children. He would eventually have a younger Sister.

By the next Census in 1911 the family had moved from Boss’s Gardens into a larger home at No4 Jersey Street, Brighton.

By now Thomas was the only Son at home. His brothers, George and William, had now grown up, married and had left home. Thomas was still only eleven years of age and studying at school, or we hope he was studying!
During the period between the Census in 1911 and December 1915 the family had moved twice. First to 16 Richmond Hill, Brighton and then between May and December 1915, to 29 Lennox Street, Brighton. We know that from his father’s records and Thomas’s own application to join the Army.

It was on Friday 3rd December 1915 that Thomas Victor Burgess had a medical to see if he was fit enough to join the Army. Thomas had claimed to be 19 years and 1 month old.

His medical shows he was 5 foot 2 ¼ inches tall and a chest of only 32 ¼ inches with an expansion of 2 ½ inches. His vision was good and the form says his physical development was good, although I would have questioned his height.

The Medical Officer, Harry Shelton of Hove, had declared Thomas ‘fit for service in the field and abroad’ for the ‘Territorial Force’.
On Saturday 4th December 1915, a Captain of the 4th Royal Sussex Regiment acting as the Recruitment Officer in Hove, signed Thomas into the 4th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment.

Before his ‘posting,’ Thomas had to complete his Attestation. This was done on the Saturday 11th December 1915, again in Hove.

Thomas's Attestation form can be found on the following page and begins with a series of questions put to the Soldier and the answers are written down on the form next to the questions. By doing it this way there are no mistakes made should the Soldier not be able to read or write properly. These are fairly simple and straightforward questions about name and
Thomas would then sign a declaration to state the answers given were true and that he would fulfil the engagements made. Thomas would then have taken the oath, which was as follows;

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY RECRUIT
ON ATTESTATION
I, Thomas Burgess, 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.

The next step on the Attestation Form is to have everything certified by a magistrate. This went as follows;

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE OR ATTESTING OFFICER
The Recruit above named was cautioned by me that if he made false answer to any of the above questions he be liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act. The above questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence.
I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to, and the said Recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken the oath before me at Hove on this 11th day of December 1915.

Signature of the Justice Certificate of Approving Officer.
The Approving Officer was a Captain.
Finally another Approving Officer, this time a Major, completed the medical Form which stated Thomas was posted to the 4th Royal Sussex Regiment’s depot at Horsham, Sussex on the Monday 13th December 1915.

I cannot help wondering if this was the Barracks in Broadbridge Heath, Horsham which I use to see in the fields during my journey from Brighton to Farnham in my Army days? The Barracks was demolished in the 1970’s and is now part of the Leisure Centre and Tesco.

So Thomas Victor Burgess, Regimental Number 3899, started his Army career with the 4th Battalion The Royal Sussex Regiment. He had answered all the questions, been vetted by a number of different people of varying ranks, all of whom had signed the forms to state that Thomas was fit, well and capable of serving is Country and die for it if need be.

There was one major problem to all of this and that problem was a serious one. Thomas Victor Burgess, on the date of his medical on 3rd December 1915, was just SIXTEEN years of age.

How the discovery was made is not known. Maybe his father, mother or brothers had found out where he was and told the Army the truth? Maybe Thomas himself became homesick and told them? Or maybe it was just a normal follow up check for a birth certificate had made the discovery? How or who discovered the truth will never be known but discovered it was. Thomas had served his Country for 273 days before being discovered and discharged from the Army.

On Thomas’s ‘Statement of the Services’ form it shows Thomas was embodied and posted on Saturday 11th December 1915. At the bottom of the page it states that on Saturday 9th September 1916 Thomas was discharged.

Next to ‘Discharged in consequence of’ is written “having made a misstatement as to age on enlistment”

The document was signed by a Lt. Colonel who was the Officer Commanding, of the 4th (reserve) Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment. This appears to be in Purfleet, which I believe is the one in Essex?

Looking carefully at the ‘Medical Inspection Report’ next to the ‘Apparent Age’ there is a little comment which says ‘Born 3 Dec 1899’
It is not known, nor recorded, if Thomas got into trouble for what he had done. It may have been 'hushed up' because he had fooled so many Officers during his Medical and Attestation. Either way, Thomas's days in the Army were over for a while or at least until he had reached 18 years of age. As it happens Thomas was never to re-join the Army again.

Thomas eventually went on and joined the Royal Navy. There are no records to say when this occurred, but I would have thought Thomas would have been of legal age and would not dare to try the same trick twice? All we know of Thomas's Naval career was that he was based at HMS Victory, which was a Training facility in Portsmouth. Here he was Ordinary Seaman SS/9420.

Thomas's Military History Sheet

Tragically his life was to be cut short. Thomas was to catch a disease while in Portsmouth and was admitted to the Naval Hospital there in 1918. There was an epidemic throughout the whole of Europe at that time which became known as 'Spanish Flu'. This disease eventually killed over 30 million people in Europe. Being a Naval Port it would be an easy entrance into England.

Thomas Victor Burgess eventually succumbed to the illness and died of pneumonia eight days later on Thursday 12th September 1918 at Portsmouth. One cannot help thinking how his life would have been had he not been discharged from the Army?
Although the entry below states Thomas died at home on the 12th September 1918, the death Certificate states he died at the Royal Naval Barracks, Portsmouth. The Certificate should, and would, be correct.

**BURGESS**

**Thomas Victor**


There were many young seamen who died of this disease in Portsmouth and a ‘Roll of Honour’ does exist for them. They were;

Victory, RN Barracks/Base, Portsmouth, all illness
BRUTON, William, Ordinary Seaman, SS 9201
BURGESS, Thomas V, Ordinary Seaman, SS 9420
CUNNIFFE, Henry, Ordinary Seaman, SS 9547
DOWLING, John J, Stoker 2c, K 53483
EVANS, Evan O, Able Seaman, MMR, 825383
GREEN, Leonard, Stoker 2c, K 52679
HAMMOND,
George L, Signal Boy, RNR, SB
2265 HEWITT, Alfred C, Ordinary Seaman, SS 5934 KENNEDY,
Colin, Ordinary Seaman, SS 8929
LLOYD, John J, Stoker 1c, SS 116844
MACKAY, James Mc D, Seaman, RNR, A 9501 STREETER, Edward V,
2nd Cook's Mate, M 33678
TOINTON, Charles H, Ordinary Seaman, SS 9210 WICHELOW,
Thomas C J, Ordinary Seaman, SS 9318

Thomas is mentioned on the British Legion’s ‘Roll of Honour’ and has a grave which should be maintained by the War Graves Commission.

Name: Thomas Victor
Burgess Rank: Ord Smn
Birth Date: 3 Dec 1899
Birth Place: Brighton,
Sussex Branch of Service: Royal Navy
Cause of Death: Died from disease Official Number Port Division: S.S.9420. (Po) Death Date: 12 Sep 1918 Ship or Unit: HMS Victory
Location of Grave: R.39. 64.
Name and Address of Cemetery: Brighton & Preston Cemetery, Hartingdon Rd, Brighton, Sussex Relatives Notified and Address: Father: George, 29, Lennox St, Brighton.

Thomas Victor Burgess - 1899 - 1918

A brave man or a young fool hardy lad?
Sources:

Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk) for First World War Service Records and Medal Index Cards