

Tortington and the Great War

Family and faith in a rural Sussex parish



Church of St Mary Magdalene, Tortington

Photo J Henderson

John Henderson

The Church of St Mary Magdalene in Tortington, West Sussex

Tortington is a small hamlet on the west bank of the River Arun, just two miles to the south of Arundel. Its parish church, built in the 12th century and dedicated to St Mary Magdalene and to St Thomas, owes its existence to a former Augustinian priory which stood on a site nearby until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century.¹

The 'Black Canons' of the priory received an income as well as sustenance from the land farmed around them and until the 18th century agriculture and prayer were the only preoccupations of the parish. That was when brick-making began to offer alternative employment in Tortington and in the 19th century an iron foundry and engineering works added more economic diversity. At the southernmost end of the parish the coming of the railway in 1846, and by 1863 an inn and goods yards, saw yet more opportunities arise as well as adding several unfamiliar family names to the parish registers.

In the early 20th century political and demographic factors were to alter the character of Tortington again, this time reversing the trend towards small industrial enterprises by virtue of a parish boundary change. In 1902 Arundel swallowed up parts of Tortington lying on either side of the Chichester road and these included Park Farm and the White Swan inn on the north side of the road and the area around Ford road on the south side. This latter part had seen the most rapid population growth and house-building of the previous century as well as the burgeoning iron and engineering industries, not to mention the sites of Arundel gas and sewage works. Thus truncated, Tortington was once again a predominantly agricultural parish made up of the church, two farmhouses, a grand private residence, railway buildings and scattered labourers' cottages.²

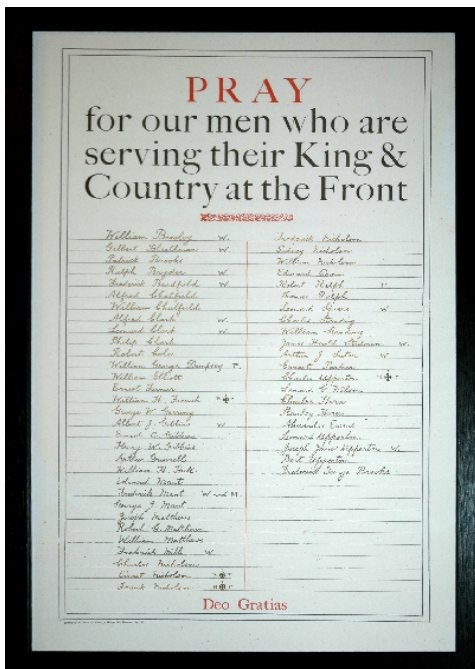
However, as the century wore on patterns of worship were changing as well as the demographic profile and by the end of last century the small local congregation in St Mary's could barely support the ancient church which now came under the pastoral care of the incumbent in St Nicholas's church in Arundel. The building itself became the responsibility of the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT), the national body that looks after redundant churches, and it was the Sussex representative of the CCT that arrived one day in 2007, with members of the recently formed Friends of Tortington Church, to clean and tidy the now redundant Vestry.

Dr Francis Hurd of the CCT and Andrew Webb of the Friends group found, in a damp and dilapidated state, two documents which were immediately recognisable as a roll of men serving in the Great War, 1914-1918, and a list of those killed.

One called on parishioners to 'Pray for our men who are serving their King and Country at the Front'. This was followed by a hand-written list of fifty-two men, mostly in alphabetical order. Some of these men also had letters added after their names - W or M or P or RIP. We are familiar with the letters RIP – Rest in Peace – but less obvious might be W for 'wounded', M for 'missing' and P for 'prisoner of war'.

The other document, headed by an image of the Crucifixion in a military cemetery, began 'From this parish the following gave their lives for King and Country during the war 1914 to ...'. Then there are 4 hand-written names, followed by the date on which they died.³

These were lists that some individual had compiled, maintained and amended. All are in the same hand and although there are several things about these



Roll of Honour. Photo J Henderson

documents that tell us something about life on the Home Front during the Great War and about the nature of remembrance during the war, they are not in themselves unique. Many parishes throughout the land maintained a Roll of Honour and sometimes it took the form of a simple hand-written list – St Nicholas's in Arundel itself had a hand-written Roll of Honour - sometimes it took the form of a book placed in the church for the congregation to record their condolences. Later, such lists would be replaced by more permanent memorials to those who died.⁴

Clearly the Tortington Roll of Honour was still being maintained in 1918 – the last fatality recorded is one of September 1918 - but it is interesting to note that the scribe had not added a date for the end of the war. This may have been because for servicemen the war was not

over until they had been demobilized. The government of the day and the military authorities until late in 1919 were exercising caution lest hostilities resume. But it may also have been because he or she felt, in the aftermath of the Armistice, that the documents no longer had a real function in the parish. It may even be that plans were already being discussed in Arundel for a civic memorial on which the Tortington men's sacrifice would also be recorded more permanently. It may have been a combination of all of these factors.

It is interesting to note that the documents had been printed and published by the 'Society of Ss Peter & Paul', an Anglo-Papalist organization which sought the re-unification of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. While this might not necessarily indicate the doctrinal leanings of the Vicar of Tortington in this period – it was the Reverend Frederick Booty until 1917 and

the Reverend Charles Winn thereafter – it may indicate the presence of an ecumenical spirit in the parish and in Arundel church circles more generally. At least one of the men on the Tortington list of the dead was a Roman Catholic whose name is not only on the Arundel civic memorial but also on a memorial in Arundel’s Roman Catholic Cathedral. At the very least this suggests that in compiling the Roll of Honour family ties and community bonds in Tortington were more important than how one worshipped God.

We now know that the list of men killed in the Great War is incomplete. One name on the list of fifty-two who served had been annotated to indicate that he was ‘wounded’ and ‘missing’. While this would have been what was initially reported to his family, he had in fact been killed in action on 1 October 1917, something later confirmed by the military authorities. This either suggests that the scribe felt it inappropriate or insensitive to so publicly declare the son of a parishioner to be dead, without the closure that comes with a formal burial and a marked grave. Or it might indicate less commitment to the original purpose of the Roll of Honour and the taking over of that function by the civic authorities in neighbouring Arundel.



Memorial. Photo J Henderson

Whatever the reason for later inaccuracies we remain indebted to the scribe for diligently recording on behalf of so many parishioners, the names of their family members, for whom prayers might be said throughout the war. We also remain indebted to the CCT for conserving the original documents and having facsimiles made for display in the south aisle of the church.

Bereavement and grief can be devastating, especially for those closest to the deceased. This is as true in peacetime as it is in war. But wars, especially those of the early 20th century, engulf whole communities, whole towns and villages, whole nations. Only in time of war can families voluntarily put themselves at risk of losing an entire generation of their kinsmen. One of the striking things about the Tortington Roll of Honour, and one that would differentiate it from any similar list of servicemen and women compiled today, is the number of family names which appear more than once on the list – brothers, cousins, uncles, nephews.

There we see fifty-two mens’ names, from only thirty-one families; 5 of them died in the Great War, 2 of those were brothers; twelve men were wounded, again 2 of them brothers; 1 man returned home wounded, unfit for further duty, only to later receive the news of his own brother’s death on the battlefield; 2 men were taken prisoner, but survived. We have no figures for the number of

men who returned from war damaged physically and mentally, shell-shocked or maybe gassed. All of them had mothers, fathers or other family members at home in Tortington praying for their safe return. We can only imagine the impact that these casualties would have had on their respective families and on the community from which they came. And while some, especially those who had moved away from the family home, would be strangers to one another, far more would have passed each other on the same lanes, as boys they would have gone to school together, as men would have worked together and of course all would have sang and prayed together.

This is the story of just four of those families, four who lost sons in the Great War.⁵



Troops leaving Worthing railway station 1914. WSRO PH/8211

The Nicholson Family

Of all the family names on the Tortington Roll of Honour and Memorial, that of Nicholson is the most numerous. This is in part due to the large family from which they came but also because of the number of men in the family who were both eligible and willing to serve King and Country. The fact that none had been resident in Tortington until just before the outbreak of war does nothing to diminish the terrible impact that the war was to have on this family and the Tortington community into which they had so recently settled.

The Nicholsons, as was common for families working in agriculture, moved house as employment and employer changed. William Nicholson senior was a stockman who hailed from Shipley near Horsham. Elizabeth his wife was a relative stranger in Sussex as she was brought up in Lymington in Hampshire. Together they would have a total of thirteen children, but the experience of

bereavement came early for the Nicholsons, only ten of these children surviving into adulthood.

Moving from Shipley to Thakeham, then to West Chiltington, and then to their longest Sussex residence in Edburton near Fulking, by 1911 the Nicholsons had seven sons and three daughters - William, Albert, Edith, Frederick, Elsie, Frank,



Life in rural Sussex. West Sussex Past PP/ARUHC/CIV23

Ernest, Kate, Charles and Sidney. Each Nicholson boy in turn took work as either a carter on local farms, or in the case of the more fortunate Albert, Fred and Ernest, became stockmen looking after cattle or horses. Life in rural Sussex was hard, wages were low and living conditions often intolerably cramped.⁶

Albert may have emigrated to Canada in 1905 while William, Frederick and Frank moved to Surrey for work and daughters Edith, Elsie and Kate either married or were living-in as domestic servants. William and Elizabeth Nicholson finally moved to 61 Priory Lane, Tortington just before the outbreak of the war. Ernest, Charlie and Sidney would have moved with them but the war was about to further disperse the Nicholson family, with tragic consequences.

William, Frederick, Frank, Ernest, Charles and Sidney are all to be found on the Tortington Roll of Honour. Frederick and Ernest are also named on the hand-written Memorial to the men of Tortington who lost their lives in the Great War.

Private Ernest Nicholson

Ernest, a stockman like his father, enlisted at Arundel in November 1914 and as a born and bred Sussex man he chose the Royal Sussex Regiment in which to serve his country. After basic training, and now in the 2nd Battalion, the Royal Sussex Regiment, Ernest was on his way to France the following March. Two months later he was in action at Festubert where he was wounded on the 9 May 1915.

He was sent back to England to recover from his wounds but was back in France again before the end of the year. On his return to France he was transferred to the 173rd Tunnelling Company, the Royal Engineers, with whom he remained until his death on 6 May 1917. The *West Sussex Gazette* reported his death, in its weekly Roll of Honour of those killed, wounded or missing in action, as 'accidentally killed'. It seems most likely that Private Ernest Nicholson was killed in a tunnel collapse. He is buried at Noeux-les-Mines Communal Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France.

Private Frank Nicholson

Frank had followed his older brother William to Guildford and into the butchery trade where William had clearly prospered. When the war broke out he was married with two small children and the family lived in what for the Nicholsons would have been a substantial suburban house. His affection for Sussex, and particularly the village where most of the Nicholson boys grew up, can be seen in the name he gave this house – ‘Edburton’. Another brother Fred, who had found work as a brewery drayman in Guildford, was already lodging with the family.

Frank too may have stayed with his brother when he first moved to Guildford to train as a butcher, possibly even working for him. However he soon established himself in nearby Godalming, marrying Annie Killick of Guildford in the spring of 1914. He had been a lowly carter boy when he left the family home and must now have felt that the future was promising. In short, the Nicholson family had good reason to be optimistic about the future.

Frank enlisted at Ascot, probably in 1916, joining the 2nd Battalion, the Coldstream Guards. He was serving near Amiens in France in March 1918 when the German Spring Offensive was launched with one of the heaviest barrages of artillery fire yet experienced in the war. The German attack was unsuccessful and eventually led to the German army’s retreat beyond the Hindenberg Line and ultimately to the Armistice in November of that year.

Private Frank Nicholson, aged 29, died of wounds incurred on the battlefield on 27 March 1918. He is buried at Doullens Communal Cemetery near Amiens, Department de la Somme, France.

After the war William Nicholson, who served as a Private in the war, possibly in the Army Service Corps, returned home to his family and his butchers shop in Guildford. Frederick, also a Private, who served in Salonika with the 4th Battalion, the Rifle Brigade, chose not to go back to his trade with his brother. Instead he returned to his parents in Tortington along with his younger brother Charlie who had served in the Machine Gun Corps.

Sidney, the youngest of the Nicholson boys, could have enlisted at the age of seventeen but we do not have his service or pension records. He was too young to vote in 1918 so was not registered as an Absent Voter either. It is most likely that he returned to Tortington and to his parents at 61 Priory Cottages.

By the end of 1918 the Nicholson family, in Priory Lane, Tortington and further afield, was left to mourn the loss of two sons, and brothers, who had made the ultimate sacrifice for King and Country.

The French family

William Henry French, known as 'Bill', was born in Park Place, Arundel, on 22 October 1900. His father Harry, born at Paghams but grew up just a few miles away at Halnaker, was a carter on the Duke of Norfolk's Arundel Estate. Bill's mother Kate was brought up in Arundel by her grandparents and married Harry



Raw recruits: Bill French, left, and friend in 1917.
Private collection.

French in 1896. Together they brought up six sons and two daughters as well as a son of Kate's from a previous relationship.⁷

The French family lived in a succession of estate cottages as, with each new arrival, they outgrew their domestic surroundings. By 1911 Harry and Kate had taken the family to Park Farm, just off the Chichester Road, where the young Bill would have enjoyed the luxury of four bedrooms shared between him and his eight siblings as well as his mother and father.

Private William Henry French

By the time he enlisted in the army, in Brighton on 22 November 1917, Bill was following in his father's footsteps working as a farm carter. We don't know exactly why he enlisted at Brighton but his enlistment was precisely one month after he became eligible to serve King and Country. Bill must have been a very proud recruit indeed as he joined his regiment, the 1st Battalion The Queen's (Royal West Surrey) Regiment.

Private Bill French was killed at Manancourt, south of Arras, on 21 September 1918, before he had completed one year of service. Aged just 17 years, he died along with 44 other officers and men of the West Surreys as they arrived to relieve the 6th Leicesters at the front. He is buried at Villers Hill British Cemetery, Villers-Guislain, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, France.

The Upperton Family

The Upperton family had lived in the Arundel area for at least a hundred years before the war, most of them born in North Stoke with a related branch of the family across the river Arun in Burpham. Four Upperton names can be found on the Tortington Roll of Honour, those of brothers Joseph James, Albert, Charles Aylwin and Leonard. Another Albert Upperton, from the Burpham branch of the family, also served in the Great War, in the Royal Sussex Regiment and the Labour Corps, but his is not the name on the Tortington Roll of Honour.

All four brothers were born in North Stoke where Walter Upperton, a carter from Amberley, had married local girl Mary Jane Gent in 1872. Joseph was their first-born and when he left school he did what most young men in this community did, he took work as an agricultural labourer.

Brothers Albert and Charles were born some eight years later and Leonard six years after that, by which time Joseph might already have been thinking about life beyond the family home. He joined the army, probably around 1895, serving for seven years as a Private in the Royal Sussex Regiment, notably in South Africa in 1901-02. On returning home he married Edith Critchell and moved to Haslemere where he became a postman. They lived here and adopted a daughter Greta in 1910 but tragically after only eleven years of marriage Edith died in 1913, forty years of age. Greta was also to die prematurely, at the age of twenty-one.

So Joseph had seen action in the field of conflict but had also experienced personal tragedy when he re-enlisted at Devizes on the 22nd August 1914 soon after war was declared. Before rejoining the Royal Sussex Regiment he got married again and both he and his new bride Emma moved to Brinkworth in Wiltshire where again Joseph worked as a postman.

He joined the Special Reserve of the Royal Sussex Regiment. A son Walter would be born soon after but by November of 1914 Joseph was serving with the Royal Sussex Regiment, probably the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion, in his first posting in Dover. He may have transferred around this time to another battalion as his next posting was to France in May 1915. Within two weeks of arriving in France Joseph was wounded in action and returned once again to England where



The Band of the 9th (Volunteer) Bt. Royal Sussex Regiment. WSRO PH/341

he was assigned to Depot duties. He had spent a total of only forty-five days in France but his wounds had rendered him unfit for duty and in March 1916 he was 'discharged...no longer fit for War Service'. We do not know what sort of wounds Joseph incurred as his medical record, unusually, does not describe them. His experience at the Front may have traumatised him. He may have been suffering from shellshock. We do not know.

Tortington had a successful iron foundry on Ford Road by the time Albert Upperton was of working age and while his parents and two younger brothers had moved to Rookery Cottages on Tortington Lane, he was a lodger with his aunt and uncle and their children in California Terrace, Ford Road. He was learning his trade as a blacksmith at the iron foundry and was soon to marry

Ethel Hewes and move to Verona Terrace just yards away on Ford Road. They had two children before moving yet again, this time across the road to Woodview.

Unlike older brother Joseph, Albert had not strayed very far from home but he did enlist early in the war, in October 1914, joining the Army Veterinary Corps stationed at Bulford in Wiltshire. Putting his experience as a blacksmith to good use he was an army farrier eventually achieving the rank of Acting Corporal. He remained in the 4th Reserve Section at Bulford until 1919.

Though most of Leonard's military records and documents are missing we do know that he was with the 1st Battalion the Royal Sussex Regiment in India in 1911, as was older brother Charles. We can only guess how these two boys might have planned their escape from the inevitable cycle of life as a farm labourer which Charles had certainly been before enlisting. At the outbreak of war Leonard was still with the Royal Sussex Regiment serving as a Private, eventually transferring to the newly formed Machine Gun Corps with which he served in Asia and in which he attained the rank of Lance Corporal. Oddly though, Leonard was on the Silver War Badge list, an award made to soldiers who had been discharged, deemed physically unfit for further service and this was normally due to wounds incurred in action. However, he appears to have completed his service with an Armoured Motor Battery, without discharge but once again as a Private.

We can easily imagine the close sibling and military bonds between these two brothers, Leonard and Charles. Returning home in 1919, this time to Mile House Lodge at the north end of Tortington Lane to which his parents had moved during the war, Leonard would have felt more than most the loss of a brother. But by then the war had tragically and unexpectedly separated the brothers – before leaving the army they had both registered in 1918 as absent voters at the new family home - and left another Tortington family mourning the loss of a son.

Corporal Charles Aylwin Upperton

Charles, along with Albert, was one of the 'middle' Upperton boys. Ten years younger than Joseph and six years older than Leonard, he had a big brother who left home to join the army when Charles was only eleven years old and a younger brother to look after at home and abroad.

Charles worked as a farm labourer when he left school, but letters read at home from brother Joseph about the course of the war in Africa may have stirred a sense of adventure in young Charles. Domestic space, so often a major factor in motivating young men and women towards work further afield, marriage or the army could not have been an issue. Parents Walter and Mary Ann along with Charles and Leonard had no less than five rooms at Rookery Cottages, unusually spacious accommodation for such a family.

Whatever his motive, Charles enlisted in Arundel in 1907. A Private in the 1st Battalion the Royal Sussex Regiment he was posted to Peshawar, which was then in India, in September 1908. By 1911 he had been joined in the 1st Battalion by Leonard and both of them were to remain in India for most of the



Men of the Royal Sussex Regiment in France, 1916.
 West Sussex Past PP/WSL/L001217

war. However it was also around this time that Charles Upperton became a machine gunner in the Regiment and was later promoted to Lance Corporal. Consequently he was transferred to the Machine Gun Corps in Campbellpore in January 1917.

Described by a senior officer as 'clean, smart, reliable, hardworking', Charles was very soon promoted again, to Corporal.

By early 1918 his company, the 221st Company of the 30th Battalion the Machine Gun Corps, was on its way to France via Egypt. His separation from younger brother Leonard was final. They would never see each other again.

Landing in France in June 1918 Charles enjoyed some leave at home in Tortington the following month. By this time the family, like the nation, must have been hopeful that the war would soon be at an end. Returning to France after fourteen days leave his Company were sent to the Front a few kilometres south of Ypres in Belgium. It was here that Corporal Charles Aylwin Upperton was killed in action on the 8 September 1918, aged thirty-four. He is buried in Wulvergham-Lindenhoek Road Military Cemetery, Heuvelland, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium.

The Mant family

The presence of the Mant family name on the Tortington Roll of Honour is at first sight both incongruous and in some ways insightful. This is because the family, not from Tortington at all, had lived for generations in the nearby parish of Climping. Could this tell us something about the circumstances of compiling the Tortington Roll of Honour, or indeed any of the thousands of such expressions of local pride, compassion and solidarity?

All eleven members of this family were living in Climping just a few years before the outbreak of war; James and Ellen Mant, their sons Frederick, Edward, George, Frank and John and daughters Esther and Ethel, all lived at Kents Farm. Another two daughters, Mabel and Edith, were domestic servants in two different Langmead family households in Climping. Further investigation might tell us more about the process of compilation of Rolls of Honour and lists of those who died in the Great War than it might tell us about the Mant family members

themselves. Brothers Frederick, Edward and George Mant all appear on the Roll of Honour, Frederick's name having the annotation 'W and M' next to it, indicating that he had been reported to be 'wounded' and 'missing in action'.

The youngest Mant boys, Frank and John, were too young to play any part in the war but George, sixteen when hostilities began, was eligible to enlist by August 1915. Of all his military records only his Medal Rolls Index Card survives so at least we know that he served as a Private in the East Surrey Regiment but did not serve earlier than 1916. By 1918, on registering as an Absent Voter, George had given his address simply as 'Ford'. However his older brother Edward, serving in the Royal Navy, does have a Tortington residential address as he too registered as an Absent Voter, giving his home address as 71 Church Cottages, Tortington.

It is quite possible that George left school and worked, as his father and all of his brothers had done, on one of the Climping farms owned by the Langmead family. However, he was soon to join the army and though we cannot be certain which battalion he served in, on being allocated to the East Surrey Regiment he must have listened in awe to reports of the regiment's distinguished service and battle honours at Mons, Ypres, Loos and the Somme - he may even have witnessed, or indeed played a part in, the legendary prank on 1 July 1916 when several men from the 8th Battalion of the Surreys dribbled four footballs across 'No Mans Land' during the attack on Montauban.⁸

George survived the war, marrying soon after his return to Sussex. But he was only thirteen when, in 1912, his older brother Edward joined the Royal Navy as a Stoker, Second Class. His first ship, HMS Blenheim, was in the Mediterranean when war broke out and later saw action in the Dardanelles where she was deployed as a depot ship. Stoker Mant also served ashore at the training establishments HMS Victory II at Crystal Palace, London and later at HMS Egmont in Malta.

It seems likely that Edward's parents had moved from Climping to Tortington during the war, hence Edward giving Church Cottages as his residence. Like brother George he too waited until the war was over before getting married in December 1919 to a local woman Eva Dowdy, before rejoining his ship, at that time the minesweeper HMS Dryad. Finishing the war based at Dover on HMS Goodwood, another minesweeper, he completed his service in 1928 with the rank of Leading Stoker.

Private Frederick Mant

The oldest of the Mant brothers, Frederick worked in Climping as a carter before enlisting in Loughborough, Leicestershire. There is no known record of his working life, in Climping or further afield, so we can only guess what might have taken him to Leicestershire. Young men working as unskilled labourers rarely travelled far from home for work unless completely new types of employment

opened up for them. Railway workers in Ford and Tortington in this period were often those members of the community furthest from their birthplace so some mobility was possible for those determined to seek their fortune far from the family home. Maybe Frederick had found opportunities for work and travel that his peers could only dream of.

Frederick's military record is almost as scant as that of his working life but we do know that he joined the 7th Battalion the Leicestershire Regiment. We also know that if he did enlist before 1916 it could not have been much before that as his Medal Rolls Index Card shows that he was not awarded the 1914-15 Star, a medal awarded to all those who served in a theatre of war during those years.

Several battalions of 'the Tigers', including the 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th Service Battalions had been in France since July 1915. Frederick was with the 7th in 1917 when they took part in the Arras Offensive and later the Third Battle of Ypres. It was in this latter engagement, during a phase known as the Battle of Polygon Wood, that Private Frederick Mant lost his life. At first reported wounded and then reported missing it was some time later that military authorities confirmed that Private Mant, aged thirty-three, was dead, having been killed on 1 October 1917. He has no known grave but his name is engraved on the Memorial to the Missing at Tyne Cot Cemetery, Zonnebeke, near Ypres, Belgium.



Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing. Photo Steve Williams

That Private Frederick Mant was killed in action in 1917 was something the compiler of the Roll of Honour did not know when he or she came to annotate the list with 'RIP' next to the names of those known to have died or to record the names of the dead on a separate list. This latter list, now the officially recognised War Memorial, could not have been completed earlier than 25 September 1918, the date of the last fatality on the Memorial. Yet by that date Frederick had been dead for nearly a year.

These Tortington documents might have been compiled and maintained by the then incumbent at St Mary Magdalene, who until 1917 was the Reverend Frederick Booty and from that date, the Reverend Charles Winn. Or it may have been maintained by another officer of the church or even by a member of the congregation. Whoever was responsible may have felt it inappropriate or insensitive to themselves declare the son of a parishioner to be dead, without the closure that comes with a formal burial and marked grave, however far from home that might be.

The Mant's were not alone amongst Tortington families who would have drawn comfort and pride, as well as hope and prayer from the simple act of recording and displaying the names of residents, and their family members, who were serving King and Country in France, Asia, India and on the oceans of the world. These records are not simple village roll calls or enumeration tools. They are records of a community's sense of togetherness, of its identity, its Home Front rallying call and finally, it's collective mourning.

If the monumental memorials of France and Flanders and Whitehall speak silently for the thousands of soldiers known only to God, or speak for a particular regiment or an entire nation, then the simple hand-written lists that pre-dated even the thousands of village and town memorials that grew up in the aftermath of war, speak for the families and communities that were torn apart by the Great War and who endured it with a quiet dignity which concealed unimaginable private grief.

The Tortington Roll of Honour

An estimated 5 million British men and women served in the Great War with a further 2 million from every corner of the British Empire. Nearly 1 million of them died serving King and Country. In Britain nearly 3% of the population lost their lives in the Great War. Of the 23 men on the Roll of Honour who were living locally, 3 died and a further 7 were wounded on the battlefield, most of them so severely that they received an honourable discharge from their service.⁹

However terrible the loss of a son, a brother or another member of a family must have been, we shouldn't underestimate the impact, personal and collective, of the uncertainties and fears for all of the serving men on the Roll of



Wounded and in shock. © The Long, Long Trail

Honour. The growing awareness of the scale of the casualties in France, Belgium, Italy, Turkey, the Middle East, Asia and at sea, must have taken its toll on families and communities throughout the country.

Prayers must have been said for Lance Corporal Robert Ralph of the Royal Fusiliers and William Dempsey when news reached Tortington of their capture.

Anxious enquiries would have been made about Private Frederick Mills, wounded at the Battle of Loos in 1915

and about Private Albert Gibbins who received gunshot wounds to his left hand and right foot at the Third Battle of Ypres. Private James Stedman received gunshot wounds in the face, neck and knees at the First Battle of Arras. And

while Privates Arthur Suter and Joseph Upperton of the Royal Sussex Regiment were wounded in action themselves, both lost brothers, at Gallipoli and the Fifth Battle of Ypres respectfully. Private Frederick Burdfield endured an unimaginable trauma under fire before being discharged at the end of the conflict with shellshock. At least seven other Tortington men were discharged with unspecified wounds or other conditions, physical or mental, incompatible with further service.

Some thirty more men on the Roll of Honour returned from the war, twenty-one of them to Tortington or the Arundel area. Mostly from the lower ranks of society as well as of the services, they were not of the class which left diaries or journals, nor did they express themselves in poetry or fiction. Some may have entertained and enthralled fellow drinkers in the public houses of Arundel about their time in uniform, the names of Ypres, Verdun, Passchendaele, the Somme, Gallipoli, Mesopotamia and Jutland guaranteeing undivided attention. Some may have told family members about their experiences, and those memories may still be passed down through the generations. Most, however, would have remained silent.

Even their military careers are patchily preserved. For some, no records of their time in the services now exists at all. Little evidence remains of their contribution to the war effort, still less that of the families they left behind and those who prayed for them in the tiny church in Tortington. Only the chance discovery of two damp and deteriorating documents recording the names of these men has brought them back from obscurity. Hidden from history for almost a century it is through these documents that we can once again look and remember how deep, even in an increasingly mobile community, the ties of kinship and community were. These were the foundation stones of the Home Front in the Great War.



Arundel War Memorial unveiled 1921. West Sussex Past PP/ARUHC/E16

¹ The origin of the dual dedication of Tortington church is undocumented, authorities using St Thomas or St Mary Magdalene without explanatory note. See Philip Mainwaring Johnston, 'Tortington Church and Priory: notes on their history and architecture' in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol 52 (1909), pp.163-177.

² T P Hudson (ed.), *A history of the County of Sussex: Volume 5 Part 1: Arundel Rape: south-western part, including Arundel* (VCH, 1997), pp.214-224.

³ West Sussex Record Office, PAR198/7/8 and PAR198/7/9. These two documents together comprise the Tortington War Memorial, recognised as such by the Imperial War Museum in 2009. I have used the following descriptors when referring to each document; 'Roll of Honour', to describe the document listing the names of fifty-two men who served during the Great War; 'Memorial', to describe the document listing 4 servicemen who died.

⁴ Derek Boorman, *At the going down of the sun: British First World War memorials* (Derek Boorman, 1988), p.22.

⁵ All biographical and military career data has been researched in UK Census returns for 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911; British Army WW1 Service Records 1914-1920; British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards 1914-1920; British Army WW1 Pension Records 1914-1920; UK Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914-1920; UK De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914-1924; all aforementioned sources have been accessed at <http://ancestry.co.uk>. Data for Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel has been researched on the National Archives website at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/royal-naval-seamen.htm> and <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/marines.htm>. Additional information regarding specific regiments and corps has been researched on Chris Baker's website 'the Long, Long Trail: the British Army in the Great War' at <http://www.1914-1918.net/>.

⁶ Alun Howkins, *The death of rural England* (Routledge, 2003), pp.86-87.

⁷ My thanks to Mr David French of Rustington, West Sussex, nephew of Private William French, who gave me access to his family photographs and newspaper clippings.

⁸ <http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/1661to1966/ww1east/ww1east.html>

⁹ J M Winter, *The experience of World War I* (Greenwich Editions, 1988), p.206. Geoff Bridger (ed.), *The Great War handbook: a guide for family historians and students of the conflict* (Pen & Sword, 2009), pp.193-199.