

William Wellcome DCM 1894-1954



Photograph and medals are in the writer's possession.

By Deborah Wigmore

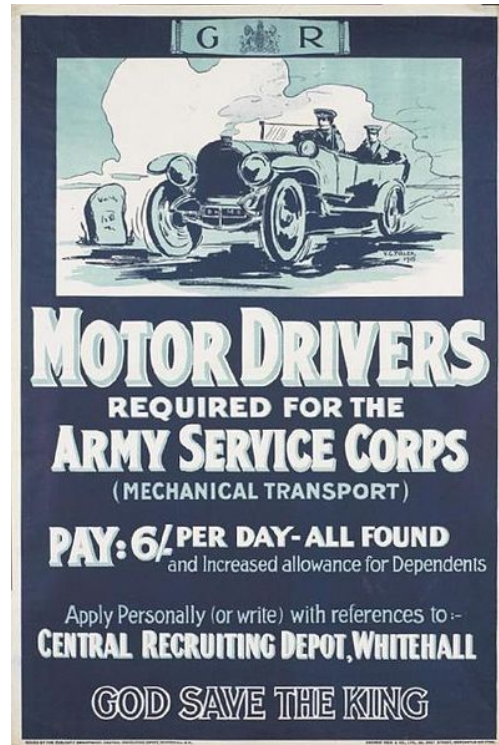
Private William Wellcome M2/101865 ASC (MT) Chichester DCM

William Wellcome was my maternal grandfather, I never met him as he died before I was born and, having been separated from my grandmother since 1943, was not much discussed. I wanted to find out a little about his life as I have his medals from 1914-18 & 1939-1945 and have wondered about a man who was in France during the Great War from 24th July 1915 until his discharge in 1919 & who was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal in 1918 for "conspicuous gallantry & devotion to duty". Gallantry seemingly being a form of conduct from another time when it was important to "do one's duty"

William Wellcome was born in Chichester on August 20th 1894, according to the 1911 census, he was the second child of four born to Edmund and Sarah (Holder) Wellcome. The census shows that in 1911, the head of the household was Edmund aged 42 and born in Liverpool in 1869, he was described as a Job Master & Coal Merchant, Sarah his wife was 38 & she had been born in Chichester. At this time the family included Nellie (18) born in Talke, Staffordshire, William (16), Edmund (14) & May (5) all born in Chichester. They registered a servant/stableman Joseph Henry Pratt (24) and Sarah's mother Mary Holder as living with them in Chichester Parish (possibly Cooper Street).¹ The Chichester and Southdown Observer reported on Mr E. Wellcome's funeral at Hunston in the 23rd June 1945 edition. It noted that he was from an old established family, his business career had been long and varied but with much of it being in garages and the motor industry. He had the distinction of being the first man to put hire cars on the road in the Chichester District so possibly claiming to be the founder of the taxi business in the city. His son William attended the funeral. A photograph posted on the Ancestry website shows a picture of Edmund with a car as does a photo displayed in "Chichester An Illustrated History", the caption also cites Mr Wellcome as being a taxi owner having one of the first cars to be seen on the city's streets.

Edmund's father, William's grandfather also a William, was born in Hunston, Chichester in 1840. The Observer and West Sussex Recorder printed his obituary on Wednesday 20th June 1917. At his death at 77, William was a well-known figure in Chichester having had an adventurous youth being apprenticed to Joseph Robinson (a veteran ship owner of Littlehampton), seeing service in the Baltic whilst at war with Russia, blockade running in America & serving as a boatswain under Cunard & Allan Lines 1863 on the "Great Eastern" which ferried passengers from New York to the Paris Exhibition. He married in Liverpool in 1868 to Mary Harrison but by the 1881 census² the family was living in Basin Road Chichester & by 1891³ had moved to St Pancras, Chichester. The obituary reported that William was proud of building up a successful business himself as a coal merchant, buying his first horse and cart for £4-10s. The eldest son, Edmund, was one of nine siblings, four of whom were born in Liverpool before the family returned to the Chichester area from whence the family has been traced from Hunston in the 1700s. Edmund, at the time of his father William's death, was the proprietor of a garage at Southgate, Chichester, the premises of which ran back to Southgate fields.

In the 1911 census, my grandfather, William Wellcome, aged 16 was described with his brother Edmund aged 14 as being assistants in business and family recollection is that both brothers helped their father with the deliveries of coal. In the course of this business, William learnt to drive which was still unusual in the era of the horse & cart and this led directly to him being enlisted into the Mechanical Transport section of the Army Service Corps.



This poster is reproduced from a collection held by the Imperial War Museum, the photo is Art.IWMPST 13484, artist Pollex VC & is in the public domain.

Again, family recollection is that William & his brother Edmund were in New Zealand at the outbreak of WW1 & they both returned to Britain to enlist. Certainly it seems that the family were no strangers to travel, William's elder sister, Nellie, appears on the immigration lists for the vessel Albania arriving 25th June 1911. Nellie's record⁴ stated that she was 19, she had been to Canada before, was able to read & write & intended to stay in Canada. The document was marked British Bonus Allowed which meant that a commission would be paid by the Canadian government's Immigration Branch to steamship booking agents in the United Kingdom for each suitable immigrant who purchased a ticket to sail to Canada. The immigrants themselves did not receive a bonus. (Library and Archives Canada)⁵. Nellie was described as a domestic and indicated that she intended to travel to Montreal. Nellie returned from Montreal on 8th August 1911 on the ship Asconia, Cunard Line.

On researching the possibility of William & Edmund emigrating, passenger lists on Ancestry.com revealed that they did in fact travel together to Wellington, New Zealand departing on 4th August 1912. They sailed 3rd class on the Corinthic which was built for the White Star Line & was in

service between 1902 and 1932. The ship had a tonnage of 12367 and a speed of 13 knots. The brothers gave their ages as being 19 & 18 & occupation as farming. A record for William's return on the vessel Turakina of the New Zealand Shipping company Ltd has been found on the incoming passenger lists to the UK. William travelled from Wellington, New Zealand arriving in London on 9th September 1914 having travelled via the ports of Montevideo & Plymouth⁶. William at 20 described himself as a labourer. The ship only served between 1902 and 1917 being torpedoed in 1917, she carried 40 1st class passengers, 50 second & 105 third class with a tonnage of 8349 and speed of 14 knots. Edmund did not appear to travel back on this ship with William.

As mentioned above, William enlisted into the Army Service Corps as a driver. The ASC had been formed in 1888 & by 1914 there were specialist companies for example mechanised transport which included buses & ambulances. Mechanised transport in WW1 never fully replaced horses & mules, at the outbreak of the war there were only about 500 mechanised vehicles in the ASC worldwide but by the Armistice this had increased to around 105,000. The ASC have been described as "Cinderella units" of the British Army and the Long Long Trail website has this to say:

"The unsung heroes of the British army in the Great War - the ASC, *Ally Sloper's Cavalry*. Soldiers cannot fight without food, equipment and ammunition. In the Great War, the vast majority of this tonnage, supplying a vast army on many fronts, was supplied from Britain. Using horsed and motor vehicles, railways and waterways, the ASC performed prodigious feats of logistics and were one of the great strengths of organization by which the war was won."⁷

The 200,000 plus officers & men of the ASC were not combat soldiers but were exposed to the German artillery which deliberately targeted the ASC supply routes, depots & the resting places of pack animals. Some ASC troops were drafted into the front line defence as replacements for casualties but the overall casualty rates were 4.9%⁸.

The medal roll for William shows his army number to be M2/101863 & that he entered France on 24th July 1915. He was awarded the 1914-1915 Star for those who had given service in the fight against central powers between the outbreak of war in August 1914 and the end of 1915 either on land or sea.⁹ Instituted in December 1918, approximately 2,366,000 were awarded in total and always awarded in conjunction with the British War Medal & Victory medal. William received all three of these, nicknamed Pip Squeak & Wilfred but was also awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal on 18/3/1918. The citation appears in the supplement to the London Gazette on 28th March 1918 p 3879 & there is a report of this in the Observer & West Sussex Recorder 3rd April 1918 p 4 which states:

"Private Wellcome, who is the eldest son of Mr Edmund Wellcome, of the Southgate Garage, was awarded the D.C.M. "for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty". When an ambulance was urgently required he ran his car through a village which was held by the enemy and was exposed to heavy shell and rifle fire throughout the whole journey, his car being hit on two occasions. He set a splendid example of courage and

determination" Private Wellcome is 23 years of age and has been in France since July 1915. Chichester will be proud of these gallant sons who have brought such honour to the old city".

A more complete report was published in the Observer and West Sussex Recorder on Wednesday 16th January 1918 under the title "A Ciscestrian's Good Work". It observed that William had received a letter from the Major- General commanding his division congratulating him on his fine behaviour and "gallant" conduct in running his car under heavy fire from Margoing through Villiers, Plouch and Gouzeancourt an area that the enemy had entered during the Battle of Cambrai. William was driving with four stretcher cases in his ambulance to a dressing station but the road was blocked by Germans, on consulting with a companion of another car, William decided to carry the patients a distance of 2 miles over hedges and ditches to another ambulance. Being successful, he returned to set his car alight so the Germans could not use it only to decide to try to make it back over about 20km. His unfortunate comrade who stayed put was shelled and lost both legs.

The Distinguished Conduct Medal was instituted in 1854 and was an extremely high level award for bravery awarded to other ranks. When the Military Medal came out on 25th March 1916, the DCM was second only to the Victoria Cross. Recipients of the DCM between the years 1914-1920 totalled 24,573 compared to 115,600 awards of the Military Medal. A money grant of £20¹⁰ went with the award and the recipient was entitled to put the letters DCM after his name.



"Rue de la Mairie, Marcoing, after its capture by 20th (Light) Division." Imperial War Museum copyright image Q3196. Within days the Division would be pressed back out of the village.

Details of the ASC are not always easy to find but I was helped by "Fourteeneighteen Research" By looking at records available, it appears that William enlisted on 31st May 1915 and received only brief training at Grove Park, London before being sent to Hallines, France with the 61st Field Ambulance in July 1915. The latter was attached to the 20th (Light) Division formed as part of K2 as a result of Kitchener's expansion of the army in August 1914. The role of the Field Ambulance was to deal with casualties by setting up various points to evacuate and treat men. These points included Bearer Relay Posts, Advanced Dressing Stations (ADS) and Main Dressing Stations (MDS). Cemeteries on and behind the battlefields mark the locations of many of these dressing stations. Set up to deal with casualties of about 150 men, the war diary of the 61st Field Ambulance¹¹ describes dealing with 2000 lying casualties in 24 hours in the Somme. The diary modestly describes getting the first taste of the Flanders mud and rats and men being billeted in shelters made with sand bags. Comment was made on the atrocious conditions by stating that the mud was so bad that it took 10 draught horses to pull a horsed ambulance. The diary/report I have seen is acknowledged by the writer to be brief but its author writes that it would not be complete without mentioning the 29th and 30th November 1917 during the Battle of Cambrai when the Germans overran a village and dressing station, but were pushed back by the infantry. A staff officer was awarded a VC, Major Robertson a MC & a bearer officer a MC. Particular comment was made about the bravery of the bearers one of whom was my grandfather. The report concludes that "the greatest proof of its efficiency can be found, not in the list of decorations and awards, but from the praise which has been bestowed upon it from the lips of the men from 20th Division in whose service it has been its honour and privilege to serve".

Cambrai was originally conceived as a short high-speed operation that was in effect a very large raid. The town was a major railway centre and a location of many German headquarters, stores, barracks and the like and was not far behind the formidable defences known as the Hindenburg Line. Key to the British operation was the first use of massed tanks (more than 300 of them). The attack went in on 20 November 1917 and was immediately successful – so much so, that church bells were rung at home for the first time since the war began. 20th (Light) Division had been part of this attack: it captured La Vacquerie after a hard fight and then advanced as far as Les Rues Vertes and Masnières where there was a bridge crossing the St Quentin Canal.

On 30 November a large German counter attack began in earnest. On the British right flank, south of the Gouzeaucourt-Bonavis road, the break into British positions was swift. Eventually the Germans were held at Gouzeaucourt but it was in this area that William Wellcome showed his duty to his patients and country.



Wolsey Ambulance 1916. 61st Field Ambulance had their original vehicles replaced by these. Photo reproduced from Wikipedia.

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Knockchis_wolsey_ambulance.jpg

The war diary for 2 January 1919 notes that William was at home on leave when he “passed through a Dispersal Station” and was struck from the strength of the Field Ambulance. He was transferred to Class Z Army Reserve on 4 March 1919. This was the standard route out of military service for those who enlisted for the duration of the war. Being transferred meant that the soldier could now return to civilian life but for twelve months after transfer remained subject to being recalled if required. In the event, no Class Z men were recalled and the Class was abolished on 31 March 1920. On that date, those men who still had a Class Z liability were formally discharged from the army.

William returned from the army on 9th May 1919 according to my grandmother’s records. He married Jessie Chadwick on 8th Sept 1919, Jessie was registered as being born in Congleton, Cheshire on 24th September 1897 & the marriage was also registered at Congleton. In the 1911 census,¹² Jessie was a “scholar” of 13 with a sister, May aged 16 described as a dressmaker. Her parents were Joseph & Helen Chadwick, both 39 at the time of the 1911 census, living at the School House, Congleton Road, Butt Lane, Talke, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire. Joseph was described as a Colliery fireman working underground working for the coal mines, He was born in Talke, Staffordshire whereas Helen & her daughters were born in Lawton, Cheshire. Here is a link with William’s

family as his sister Nellie was also born in Talke, and their father was described as a coal merchant.

William & Jessie had three children, Doreen Helen who died on 2nd February 1931 aged 7 from appendicitis, Roy William Wellcome born February 1925 & died 5th March 1925 & Josephine May born 5th July 1930 & died 11th December 1987.

William ran a taxi rank in Chichester from South Bank and family recollection recalls the trade to Goodwood Races. His hobby was dog showing and family papers show he had some success. William joined the Home Guard & was awarded the Defence medal. The marriage foundered in 1943 with Jessie & her daughter, Josephine, moving from 8 South Bank to 10, Watertower Buildings, Sudley Road, Bognor Regis as shown in Jessie Wellcome's national registration identity card no FP179793. William, Bill or Billy as he was also known died from heart trouble on 31st Oct 1954 at the age of sixty and Jessie Wellcome then ran the taxi company from 8 South Bank, Chichester. There is a sample of the invoice sheet, "Dr. to Mrs J Wellcome, car proprietor, 8 South Bank Chichester, Wedding & funeral cars any distance & the undated sheet is marked with 1960s. Jessie Wellcome remained in Chichester until she died at the age of 99. Jessie and William's grandchildren live locally.

End Notes

Books

Ken Green, Chichester an Illustrated History (The Breedon Books Publishing Company Ltd 2002)

Original Records

61st Field Ambulance War Diary held at the National Archives Kew

61st Field Ambulance Short History 1914-1918 held at the National Archives Kew.

British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards 1914-1920 WO372/21/75721

Imperial War Museum image 03196, art IWMPST 13484 artist Pollex VC

London Gazette 28th March 1918 p 3879

Observer and West Sussex Recorder Wednesday 20th June 1917

Observer and West Sussex Recorder 3rd April 1918 p.4

Observer and West Sussex Recorder Wednesday 16th January 1918

Chichester and Southdown Observer 23rd June 1945

Websites

Ancestry.com

www.1914-1918.net

www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land-/generalinterest/79-brit-a-s-c.html

A special thank you is given to my father, David Chiverton for sharing his first-hand knowledge about William Wellcome. Also for the report produced for me by Chris Baker of Fourteeneighteen Research and his subsequent support.

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- ¹ 1911 Census for William Wellcome from Ancestry Library Edition (viewed May 2013)
- ² 1881 Census for Edmund Wellcome from Ancestry Library Edition (viewed May 2013)
- ³ 1891 Census for Edmund Wellcome from Ancestry Library Edition (viewed May 2013)
- ⁴ www.ancestry.co.uk UK Incoming Passenger Lists 1878-1960- record for Nellie Wellcome.
- ⁵ <http://boards.ancestrylibrary.com/topics.immigration.ships/2158.1/mb.ashx>
- ⁶ source citation Class BT26 Piece 594, item 180 www.ancestry.co.uk Incoming passenger lists
- ⁷ The Long Long Trail <http://www.1914-1918.net/asc.htm#mt>
- ⁸ <http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/general-interest/79-brit-a-s-c.html>
- ⁹ British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards 1914-1920 Ancestry Library viewed May 2013
- ¹⁰ <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=193833>
- ¹¹ National Archives, Kew 61st Field Ambulance War Diaries ref WO95/2109/2 fdate range 01/11/1915-30th June 1919.
- ¹² 1911 Census for Jessie Wellcome from Ancestry Library Edition (viewed may 2013)