

Sidney Thomas Pressley

We've reached the fourth name on the Rownhams War Memorial, Corporal Sidney Thomas Pressley, of the 2nd Battalion Hampshire Regiment. While it's easy to dig up a wealth of information about soldiers from wealthy families, (like Charles Cobbold who featured last month) once we get onto the rank and file it's more difficult. With one exception, which I'll come to.

Sidney (Sydney? The 'y' seems to come and go) was born in 1889, and at the time of the 1891 census was living at Upper Toothill farm like Alfred Bennett. Sidney's father, Robert, was a shepherd. By 1901 they were in Middle Toothill, Robert was a labourer and Sidney an errand boy. In 1911, Sidney was serving with the 2nd Hampshires, in South Africa – his civilian occupation is given as waiter.

He was killed in action on 18th October 1916, another casualty of the Battle of the Somme. He had previously been wounded. The regimental history states that on 18th Oct.16 the 2nd Hampshires attacked German trenches north of Gueudecourt, going "over the top" at 3.40 a.m. Casualties were 35 killed and over 100 wounded. His medal record shows the award of the British, Victory and 1914 star medals. Corporal Pressley has no known grave and is also named on the Thiepval Memorial. The memorial lists a further 610 men from the Hampshire Regiment.

While I was researching Sidney, I came across an intriguing item on the Rootsweb community. In 2010, an autograph book was listed for sale on Ebay. The description included:

"A neat red leather autograph album, the front endpaper inscribed "Awarded to Victoria Pressley from "The Teachers Aid" July 1911 1st Prize Knitted Lace", and inside the first entry is a little rhyme written at the "School House Rownhams, July 26th 1911". The majority of the contributions are between 1915-18 with a number written by servicemen at Bordon, including South African (and South African Scottish) servicemen, as well as members of the Royal Artillery etc. Included in these contributions is a nice caricature of the Kaiser by Private Redwood of the 2nd S.A.I. interestingly inscribed "It took fifteen Springboks to beat dear old England what will 6000 do to me? I'll fight man but not Boks" - the reference to the fifteen Springboks may allude to the triumphant tour of the Springbok rugby team to Europe in 1912-13, during which they beat all four home nations, as well as France.

Another anonymous three page entry is entitled "The Song of the "Tigers" Hants Regiment" and a note explains the song was written by a "Rownhams lad who was wounded - whilst fighting with the Hampshire's at the front" - and copied from the Hampshire Independent newspaper in May 1915."

Sidney had a sister Victoria; I'm sure this is her book. I wonder if he was the lad who wrote the song?

Ann Laird - Rownhams August 2013