

William John Smith

William John Smith was born on the 19th of February 1894, the son of Benjamin and Jane Smith, who lived at 1, Bank Cottages with their five sons and two daughters. Benjamin was working as a river keeper in 1901. By 1911, Benjamin was a farm labourer and William a labourer in a market garden. One of his brothers was a platelayer on the railways.

William served as a private with the Royal Marine Light Infantry, who were formed in 1855 and disbanded in 1923. He enlisted in 1914, training at Deal and Portsmouth before joining HMS Black Prince in 1915, when she was part of the Grand Fleet. She'd been modified in March 1916 to improve capability, but that didn't help her at the Battle of Jutland, where she was lost with all 857 of her crew being killed. The manner of her loss is still a matter of debate, the German account being that she became separated from the rest of the British fleet, approached the German lines then turned away, at which point it was too late. She was fired on by up to six German ships at pretty well point blank range. Hit multiple times, she sank within 15 minutes, on 31st May 1916. There were no survivors from HMS Black Prince's crew of 857.

William died aged 22; his body was not recovered for burial.

If you're interested in finding out more about life at sea during WWI, you could do worse than read "Scrimgeour's Small Scribbling Diary - The Truly Astonishing Wartime Diary and Letters of an Edwardian Gentleman, Naval Officer, Boy and Son". Alexander Scrimgeour, who kept a diary against all regulations, died aged 19 on the same day and in the same battle as William Smith, although Scrimgeour was a junior officer on HMS Invincible.

Ann Laird - Rownhams March 2015