

Private Pharoah Alexander, 31991  
Bricklayer's Labourer, Warrener, Husband, Father and Soldier  
*"No Grounds for appeal. Reject Award"*



*Victory Medal*

*British Medal*

One hundred years ago, on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1918, two days before the Armistice was announced, 'The Times' newspaper was full of the impending Victory for the Allies. For more than four years Britain together with many countries across the world had been engaged in a War resulting in the deaths of millions of lives, both military and civilian. The numbers were so high they are almost impossible to calculate accurately. Almost every town, village and community in Great Britain saw a diminution in their population. The Trimleys were no exception and as you may recall from an earlier article, Barbara Shout has now researched the lives of all those who went to fight in the First World War and any subsequent conflicts. As this year's Remembrance commemorations became closer I asked Barbara, who knows "her boys" very well, which particular village Soldier should step forward from the shadows to be presented afresh to our Village. The person she proposed for St. Martin's was Pharoah Alexander. I regard him as an excellent choice, not least because his story personifies the experiences of the First World War Tommy and particularly because he is a quiet, enduring Hero.

I offer Private Pharaoh Alexander's short life to you for consideration and reflection.

In common with most of his fellow villagers, his background was ordinary enough. Pharoah Alexander was born in June 1881, narrowly avoiding the decennial census taken a few months before his birth. But we know his father was John Alexander and his mother Rebecca Brown and that they married in 1864. By the time Pharoah arrived, his parents had been married for nearly 17 years. He was not the first child in the family and nor was he to be the last. The family he was born into was typical of the many Trimley residents at this time, in that his father worked as an agricultural labourer and was therefore unlikely to be the recipient of a substantial wage; he would certainly have known hard physical conditions working on the land. It is probable Pharaoh's own life became harder in 1886,

when he experienced his first major bereavement following the death of his mother when he was just five years. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the life of a single parent is not easy and a man in the 19<sup>th</sup> would have been desperate for help. I suspect Pharoah and his siblings went to live with relatives for a while because his father was unlikely to have been in a position to have provide domestic care for his three sons. One way or another, young Pharoah would have been a small bereft child in need of love, care and cossetting. Did he receive these requirements? We have no way of knowing. But what we do know is that in 1891 his father John, married an Eliza Benham and ordinary family life was likely to have resumed, albeit for just a few years. By the time Pharoah was 19, he was to experience bereavement again when his father died in early 1900. He was working by this time, possibly having left school by the age of 14 although realistically he is more likely to have finished at the age of 12 or 13, especially if the family needed his income. He was employed as a Bricklayer's labourer until at least 1911 by which time he had married Mabel Turner and become the father of Doris Mabel. A second child, Edward was born in 1912. By 1914 he had changed his occupation and was a Warrener. Life in Maple Cottage, Mill Lane, may have been hard but surrounded by his small family I hope it was happy one.



*Maple Cottages, Mill Lane, Trimley St. Martin*

Those are the simple headlines of his life and bar one or two more children and normal circumstances, there wouldn't be much more to add I imagine. But on the 28<sup>th</sup> July 1914, everything was to change for everyone living and yet to come. Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian Empire, was assassinated along with his wife Sophie in Sarajevo; international events accelerated; on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, Britain declared War on Germany. By the end of the year over 1 million men had enlisted, although the Authorities knew this number was insufficient to match the growing number of casualties. Conscription was introduced in 1916 but Pharoah Alexander, pre-empted it when he enlisted in Ipswich on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1915. He was 34 at this point, slightly older than many of the other men and his reasons for joining are not recorded in the military paper work but I believe they were likely to be driven by patriotic motives. He joined the Suffolk Regiment and became Private Alexander, 31991. Standing at 5 feet 10 inches (1.78 metres), he weighed 11 stone 8 oz (73.48 kilograms). He was cursorily examined, deemed to be in good physical condition and gained admission as a Tommy in the Army. His daily rate of pay was probably 1/-; the 2017 equivalent is about £4.90 a day and way below today's minimum wage of £7.38.

He appears to have escaped wounds from the shells and bullets, assuming his medical record is accurate, for nothing of such a nature is recorded. This seems quite remarkable as July to November 1916 were the months when the Battle of the Somme occurred although, of course, he may not have been on that particular front.. On the first day of the Battle, July 1<sup>st</sup>, was the highest rate of attrition in the history of the British Army with casualties totalling 19, 240. The following days were little better. For the wives and families back home, the news filtering through must have been unbearable. For Private Alexander's wife, Mabel, the tension of not knowing must have been an unconscionable burden but it is hoped she received a reassuring letter or card at some point indicating Private Pharoah was comparatively unscathed. However, everything began to change for the worse by the start of 1917. On the 28<sup>th</sup> December, just a year after joining up, he was sent to hospital with Bronchitis.

At this point I need to deviate a little from the main story to explain the effect of conditions in the Trenches. Early on in 1915, perhaps about six months after the war had started, Medical officers began to note a condition they referred to as ***Trench Nephritis***. It was to result in hundreds of deaths and 35,000 casualties. The symptoms could be: breathlessness, oedema in the legs and face and Bronchitis. It was also recognised Trench Nephritis was different to acute Nephritis:

*"The medical response to trench nephritis was largely ineffective, with medical commentators recognizing that there had been a lack of medical progress."*

A second condition connected to the Trench warfare was the better known ***Trench Feet***.. This was first recorded as early as the Napoleonic Wars and as late as the Falklands War. The condition was often caused through standing in stagnant or infected water for hours on end, with no opportunity to change sodden socks and boots. Later in the war, Officers were required to ensure the men carried three pairs of dry socks when in the trenches and that the feet were covered in whale-oil.. The net result of prolonged exposure in static water could well lead to Trench Feet, whereby they might turn red or blue and then become gangrenous. If not halted in good time, the gangrene could lead to amputation of a foot or leg. Arthur Savage, a man who served in the Trenches commented in later life,

*"My memories are of sheer terror and the horror of seeing men sobbing because they had trench foot that had turned gangrenous. They knew they were going to lose a leg."*

This was the frequent state of affairs in the Trenches and Private Alexander's medical records tell a sorry story. Returning to the medical records concerning his Bronchitis, which was first recorded on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1917, it is possible to see he was examined four times before being returned to England on the Hospital Ship, "Carisbrooke" on January 21<sup>st</sup> . He was to remain there until he was discharged on January 22<sup>nd</sup> and on March 16<sup>th</sup> he re-embarked for France from Folkestone. He was posted back into the field on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1917. Back in the fray he continued the fight, being temporarily promoted to an (unpaid) Lance Corporal in October 1917. But at the start of 1918, he was back in hospital, this

time with Trench Feet. Firstly, he was transferred to Cliff Military hospital in Felixstowe on February 1<sup>st</sup> before being transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Northern General Hospital on March 29<sup>th</sup>. He was to remain there for 75 days before he was tersely declared “better”. However, he didn’t return to the theatre of war immediately, but was sent to Amptill Command Depot and at the start of July he received two typhoid vaccinations.

Private Alexander doesn’t appear to have returned to France after this and as we all remember, the War officially ended on November 11<sup>th</sup>. In England, The East Anglian Daily Times said this on November 11<sup>th</sup> in their editorial:

*“...After such prolonged and vehement war how are peace and industry to be reproduced, the production of ploughshares to come back, the making of swords and ammunition cease. Our men have been heroic, have raised the fighting prestige of the British race to the highest pinnacle of fame; they endured and triumphed mud, slush and snow. Just the old tactics and nothing more. ... in fact, have proved ourselves the old race of Britons, ... The women have been superb, and have come into their own...”*

Private Alexander’s war career was almost over. His discharge papers showed he was transferred to the Reserves on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1919 and significantly, they prove he signed a disclaimer upon his release to civilian life:

*“I do not claim to be suffering from a disability due to my war service.”*

I suspect he may not have appreciated the full implications of this statement and may have been continuing a stoical approach to his conditions, as did many other men. Private Alexander was returned home; he was reunited with his family; he had survived. But the fearful trench conditions had taken their toll and although he had endured, it was not for long. He died just a few months later on September 25<sup>th</sup> 1918, aged 38, shortly after the announcement that all those who participated in the War were to be awarded the Victory Medal and British Medal; the recognition of a grateful Nation for his service and the thousands of others.

Private Alexander had been perhaps six months with his family but as this isn’t recorded we can’t grant him such a reassuring fact. He was buried in Trimley St. Martin Graveyard where you may still see his War Graves Commission headstone. The Headstone was made of Portland stone by Clay and Wright of 133 Cemetery Road, Ipswich and the Grave Registration Report states;

*“Parishioners Graves. Burial fees only.”* And *“Died since demobilisation from the effects of the War.”*  
And *“Headstone for this grave is not included in the Contract”*

From this it would appear the headstone was permitted to be erected for someone who was engaged in the War but the cost was borne by the widow, Mrs. Mabel Alexander, as it wasn’t part of the government contract. And please note, the phrase *“Died...from the effects of the War”*, because this

is pertinent to what followed next for Mrs. Mabel Alexander who applied to the War Pensions Committee for a War Widow's Pension. The decision was recorded on November 19<sup>th</sup> 1919 and states:

*"Acute Nephritis – not in any way connected with Military Services. No grounds for award. Reject appeal... Pension - REJECT"*

Of all the many indignities which happened to Private Alexander, 31991 and his Widow, Mabel Alexander, this rejection appears the harshest. But you must decide for yourself if Trench feet, Bronchitis and "acute" nephritis were insufficient injuries, whilst recalling this is in direct contradiction to the Grave Registration records which state, *"Died...from the effects of the war"*. It was left to Private Alexander's widow to accord him the greatest honour and respect, for there was no assistance with the cost of the headstone, just as there was no assistance with the cost of her loss. And it fell to her to soldier on with two children and the probability of limited income in Maple Cottage. The times the Alexanders lived in demanded heroism from everyone, on every level and I can only quote from the King James Bible, as they might have done and which we do well to remember:

*"...let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."*

Or as Shakespeare had it,

*"Even for the service that long since I did thee,  
When I bestride thee in the wars, and took  
Deep scars to save thy life; even for the blood  
That then I lost for thee, now grant me justice."*

*King Lear*



If you have any comments or would like to be part of this Trimley St. Martin project, please contact me at:

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