

The Angel Brothers in the First World War



Left to right: Edward, Richard and William Angel

Below and side: Sisters Mere Angel, Annie Williams (née Angel), Eva Tohu (née Angel)

It all started with a letter to my maternal grandfather:

*2nd Military War Hospital, Holly Moor,
North Field, Birmingham.
18-10-15*

Dear Cousin,

You will be surprised to hear from me but I wrote to your mother and she was kind enough to give me your address and having nothing to do just now I thought I would scribble you a few lines. This is my first visit to England and I am glad to say I like it very much and hope to see a great deal of it before I leave. I don't know whether you knew that you had relatives in New Zealand. Your father was my father's brother. When the war began I enlisted and came to that nice little place called the Dardanelles and I can tell you we had quite a lively time there but I had the bad luck to get a piece of shrapnel in my right hand. It was thought at first that I should lose my right hand but I wouldn't let them take it off but they took one of my fingers the middle one but my hand is almost well. I expect to be out of the hospital in another week. I hope so at any rate as I am tired and sick of this life. I have never been shut up so long in my life but of course we get splendid treatment here but I would sooner be back in the firing line than be shut up here for weeks at a time. Some people came last week with a motor and took some of us for a drive. It was grand. I never enjoyed a ride so much before and I think England a very pretty place. Of course we didn't go far, only through Birmingham

and North Field but it was nice. I have promised to go and see your mother when I get furlow. I am getting fourteen days. I should like to see you if I can. After that I suppose I shall very likely go to France. I would much sooner go to France than back to the Dardanelles. For one reason I want to see France and if I get there I shall be satisfied. I only had my finger taken off last Thursday, week tomorrow and my hand is rather stiff and a little painful at times but the stitches are making it sore. I have another brother wounded in Malta and another in the peninsular so you can see that there are three of us. Perhaps you will get tired of reading this scribble. I think I will close. Hoping you are in the best of health. Excuse my scribble.

Wishing you will reply I remain yours Cousin,

Willie Angell

Private W Angell 16/550

The letter passed through my mother's family, ending up in my cousin Lisa's attic, together with the letters written from the Western Front by our great-uncle, Arthur George Angell, killed on 2nd July 1916, the second day of the Battle of the Somme. Another cousin, Susan Ord (née Angell), transcribed all the letters during the 1990s – and our search began for our New Zealand cousins, much helped by the fact that William had included his service number (16/550) in his letter.

William Henry Angell (1852-1929), my great-great uncle, was born in Malmesbury, Wiltshire in 1852. His family name was erroneously recorded in the Malmesbury parish records as 'Angel' rather than 'Angell' and he retained that spelling when he emigrated to New Zealand. He settled in Matakoho, Northland, married at least twice, and had eight children, among them Richard (born 1888), William (born 1894), and Edward (born 1898). William Henry and his sons were all farm labourers.

When the First World War broke out, Richard, William and Edward all signed up to join the Army and on 14th February 1915 they embarked on the 'Warrimoo' as part of the 1st Maori Contingent.

The Maori contingent was not at the initial landing at Gallipoli in April 1915 but were camped in Malta awaiting orders. They finally left for Gallipoli in June 1915.

On 6th August 1915 at the Battle of Sari Bair, William was wounded and subsequently medically evacuated back to Malta and from there to England, to the Military Hospital in Birmingham, from where he wrote the letter to my grandfather. In February 1916 he returned to New Zealand minus a finger and with a bullet wound to the leg. He was medically discharged on 10th May 1916. He attempted to re-enlist at the beginning of June 1916 but was not accepted.

The Angel brothers may well have been together when Richard led a section out to clear barbed wire entanglements from Chailak Dere before the main attack on 6th August 1915. When the battle was over Richard was promoted to Corporal and awarded the Military Medal for bravery as a result of his actions. His citation reads:

'Bravery in attack on Turkish trenches on Bauchop's Hill and removing wire entanglements in Chailak Dere, Gallipoli, on August 6th. Led his section with the utmost dash.'

After the evacuation of Gallipoli Edward and Richard embarked for France at the beginning of April 1916. In July 1916 Edward was admitted to hospital suffering from 'debility', possibly shell shock. Edward was at the most only 17/18 years of age and had been exposed to all the horrors of war while still a boy, witnessing more death than life. This must have had a profound negative effect on his physical and mental health. Yet less than a month after hospitalisation he was back at the front until he contracted mumps in May 1917. After recovering he returned to the front again and

spent a short spell at the casualty clearing station with influenza, before going on leave on 18th July 1917. He returned from leave at the end of July and was promoted to Lance Corporal on 8th December 1917. Shortly after his third Christmas as a soldier away from his home and family in New Zealand he was fatally wounded on 28 December 1917. He is buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Ramparts Cemetery, Lille Gate, Ypres, Belgium.

What happened next?

Richard survived the war. When the armistice was announced on 11th November 1918, he was on leave in Paris. He returned to New Zealand in February 1919 and married Margaret Elsa Price in January 1920. Their son, Richard Athelstan Angel, served with the 28th Maori Battalion in Italy during the Second World War. Athelstan is the patron saint of Malmesbury, where Richard's father was born, so it is clear that their English roots were important to the brothers. William's service record notes that he had the Cross of St George tattooed on his shoulder. William married Winifred Grey in January 1918 and died in 1955.

William Henry Angel, the brothers' father, died in 1929. Richard died in a farming accident in 1930. Contacts between the Malmesbury and New Zealand branches of the family were lost until my cousin Susan and I began to investigate our family history. I was able to obtain the service records of the brothers from the Auckland Museum, and some details are also on the Online Cenotaph. This information helped me to document our family records, together with help from the Family Search Centre. Amazingly, via a chance sighting on Facebook, I have established contact with various (rather distant!) relatives and hope to visit them in New Zealand one day.

Lest we forget

On 15th June 2020, my New Zealand friend, Jackie, and Belgian friend, Myriam, laid a wreath on Edward's grave in the Ramparts Cemetery, Ypres. They found that a crucifix and a British Legion cross had been laid there, not seen on previous photos. **We will remember them.**



Commonwealth War Dead (1914-1918)

ADAMS, Private, ROBERT, 8335, 1st Bn., Northumberland Fusiliers, 5 March 1915. Grave Reference: D. 22.

AIKIN, Private, HUGH, 2671, 9th Bn., Royal Scots. Died of wounds received at Ypres the previous day, 8 April 1915. Age 22. Son of Robert and Mary Aikin, of 15, Fairlawn St., Moss Side, Manchester. Grave Reference: H. 10.

ANDERSON, Captain, WILLIAM FRANCIS, 3rd Bn., Royal Fusiliers. Died of wounds, 15 February 1915. Grave Reference: C. 18.

ANGEL, Lance Corporal, EDWARD, 16583, New Zealand Māori (Pioneer) Battalion. Died of wounds, 29 December 1917. Age 19. Son of W. H. and Mary Angel, of Matakohe, Kaipara, New Zealand. Also served at Gallipoli. Grave Reference: J. 2.

ARMSTRONG, Private, NOAH, 3464, 2nd Bn., York and Lancaster Regiment, 9 August 1915. Age 33. Son of Thomas and Mary Armstrong; husband of Betsy Armstrong, of 26, Adwick St., Denaby Main, Rotherham, Yorks. Grave Reference: H. 7.

BAILEY, Private, J C, S/894, 1st Bn., Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment), 7 April 1915. Grave Reference: G. 4.

BAKER, Serjeant, WILLIAM, L/12164, 4th Bn., Royal Fusiliers, 3 March 1915. Grave Reference: D. 12.

BALDING, Private, ALFRED, 13055, 17th Bn., Manchester Regiment, attd. 2nd Tunnelling Coy., Royal Engineers, 30 June 1917. Grave Reference: J. 7.



Susan Fortescue

Daughter of Ann Fortescue (née Angell)

Great great niece of William Henry Angel

June 2020