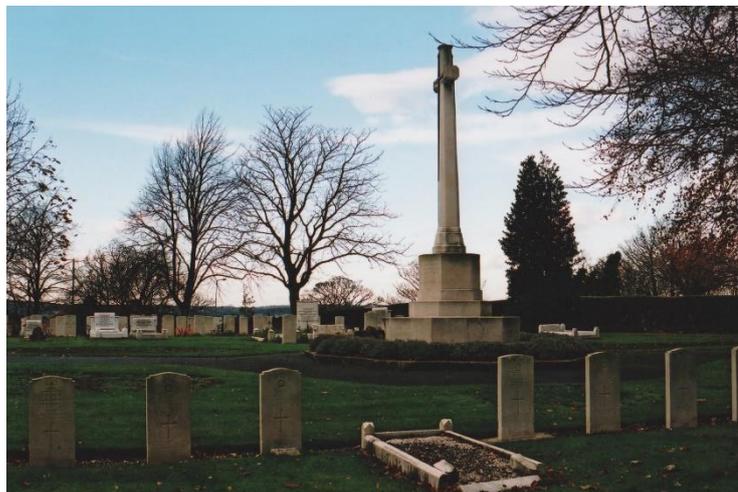


SAPPER SILAS SARGENT CORPS OF ROYAL ENGINEERS

Silas Sargent was born in 1881 at Bloxwich, Staffordshire, the second son of Silas and Sarah Ann Sargent. The 1891 Census recorded that the family were living at 109-111 Church, Street, Bloxwich, Walsall and the household members were Silas (senior) aged 39, Sarah his wife aged 40, daughters Clara aged 16, Eliza aged 12, Julia aged 4, sons Alfred aged 16, Silas aged 10, William aged 8, Thomas aged 6 and Leo aged 3. Silas, their father's occupation was that of a hairdresser. He had been born at Bloxwich in 1852 and had married Sarah (née Holloway) aged 20 on the 7th November 1870, at Rushall, Staffordshire. She had been born at Pelsall, near Walsall. At that time of his marriage Silas was employed as a bridle bit maker.

In 1901 the Sargent family were living at 103 Church Street, Bloxwich and the members of the household were Silas (senior), working on his own account as a



Fort Pitt Military Cemetery Chatham Kent

hairdresser, Sarah, sons William, a bridle bit filer, George, daughters Julia, Sarah and living with them was William Holloway, Sarah's widowed father aged 88 years. Silas died aged 70 in July 1920 and Sarah died in October 1917 aged 66.

Bloxwich, a market town in the Metropolitan Borough of Walsall, originates from a small Mercian settlement dating back to the Anglo-Saxon period. There was significant rivalry between Bloxwich and Walsall during the English Civil War. Walsall was parliamentarian and Bloxwich, a centre of 'Foreign' Walsall was Royalist. Bloxwich expanded in the 18th Century due to coal mining, iron smelting and manufacturing industries as part of the Industrial Revolution. The manufacturing industries produced, bridle bits, stirrups, keys, cabinet locks, plane iron, buckle tongues, chains and saddles. In recent years a number of redevelopment projects have been completed and the town centre has a number of Victorian and Edwardian buildings, parks and gardens.

Silas (junior) moved from family home and at the age of 20, in 1901. He was living as a boarder with the family of Henry Mellor at The Limes, Walsall Road, Willenhall. His occupation was that of a self-employed hairdresser. He married in the summer of 1910 Ada Taylor, who was

born at Smethick in 1881, and they resided at 8 Station Street, Cheslyn Hay, Walsall. Within a few months Ada gave birth to a son. Later for reasons which are unclear the couple separated.

After the outbreak of the First World War, Silas responded to serve his country and enlisted in London into the Corps of Royal Engineers. Unfortunately his service record has not survived. He was posted to the 1st Reserve Battalion and Depot Battalion, at Chatham. These battalions were organised on mobilisation in August 1914. The Reserve Battalion Companies trained new recruits and the Depot Companies 'G', 'L' and 'M' received men returning from the British Expeditionary Force and also enlisted men for Tunnelling Companies, Special Companies and other specialist units. 102052 Sapper Silas Sargent was allocated to 'M' Company, Royal Engineers. It is a reasonable assumption from the newspaper report below that Silas enlisted at the end of May 1915 into the Royal Engineers. However, his service with them was abruptly curtailed. At the age of 34 years, on the 3rd June 1915, he committed suicide in St Mary's Barrack's, Brompton, near Chatham.

Chatham, Rochester & Gillingham Observer ~ 5th June, 1915.

Tragic Barracks Discovery ~ Sapper Found With Throat Cut

An inquest is being held at Old Brompton this (Friday) afternoon touching the sad death of Sapper Silas Sargent R.E., who was found by a comrade in an outer office at St Mary's Barracks at 1135 on Thursday morning with his throat cut. Assistance was at once obtained but it was found that the deceased was beyond all aid. A razor inside a case was discovered near the body.

Chatham, Rochester & Gillingham Observer ~ 12th June, 1915.

Another Barracks Tragedy ~ Soldier Found Dying By A Comrade ~ A Sergeant Commended

Another case of a soldier taking his life was investigated by the County Coroner (Mr C. B. Harris), at the Holy Trinity School, Old Brompton on Friday afternoon when an inquest was held on the body of Silas Sargent, a private in the Royal Engineers who was found in a dying condition with a terrible wound in the throat and died shortly after the arrival of the Army doctor. Mr J. Cox was foreman of the jury.

Separated From Wife

James Francis Baldwin, miner of Walsall, Staffordshire identified the body as that of his brother-in-law, Silas Henry Sargent, a hair dresser of Cheslyn Hay, Cannock. Deceased was a married man, and was thirty-four years of age. He had one son.

The Coroner: "I see that your brother-in-law enlisted as a miner."

Witness: "Yes, but his trade was that of a hairdresser, although he came from a mining district."

The deceased enlisted proceeded witness, when he went to London. He then appeared to be alright. About thirteen or fourteen of them joined up together. The deceased likely to enjoy himself and would have a glass of beer, although he was not a drunkard. Witness had heard from him since he enlisted, but the letter had no bearing on the tragedy at all. It was a cheerful letter and witness could not account for his brother-in-law being found with his throat cut.

The Coroner: "Any insanity in the family."

Witness: "No sir. He told me that his brother had enlisted. The deceased had been enjoying himself all the week. He always led a free and easy life."

The Coroner: "Perhaps when he came to find himself under military discipline, it may have seemed a bit rough to him to start with?"

Witness: "Perhaps so. He had been drinking a little freely the week previously and when he left to enlist he asked me I would look after his child if anything happened to him at the Front and I promised to do so."



Grave Of Sapper Silas Sargent R.E.

The Coroner: "He was not living with his wife?"

Witness: "No sir, they separated soon after the child was born, four or five years ago."

Rather Depressed

Corporal Henry Milner White R.E., stationed at St Mary's Barracks, deposed that he was with the deceased on Thursday morning at 10.20 when he took him to the Institute for the purpose of being finally tested, but as the recruiting officer, was not present they had to go back. Sargent asked where he was going, and whether anything was wrong, as he thought that all that required to be done had already been attended to.

The deceased inquired after his chum, who had been taken to Fort Pitt, after having been at the Casualty Hospital.

The Coroner: "What was the matter with his friend?"

Witness: "He had gone out of his mind."

The Coroner: "And has been detained in hospital to be treated?"

Witness: "Yes sir."

The Coroner: "Was the deceased worrying over that, do you think?"

Witness: "He seemed rather depressed and kept on bumping into me as though his mind was on something."

The Coroner: "Was he sober?"

Witness: "Yes."

The Coroner: "Did he ask for a drink when you were with him?"

Witness: "Yes, he asked for a drink of water to clear his throat."

Witness added that the deceased was eventually tested just before 11 o'clock. The man seemed to be under the impression that something was wrong, but witness told him that everything was all right. There was nothing done wrong, in fact.

The Discovery

Sapper W. Shute, R.E., spoke to finding the deceased in one of the latrines at St Mary's barracks about 1115 on the previous Thursday. The deceased was in a sitting position, with his legs opened out against the two partitions. Blood was gushing from a wound in the throat, and witness got assistance.

The deceased was alive and groaning very heavily. On the right-hand side of the seat was a razor in a case. Both razor and case were blood-stained.

The Coroner: "That's an unusual circumstance the razor being found closed and out in the case. Perhaps it was a mechanical act on the part of the man, due to his being a hairdresser."

Sergeant's Commendable Conduct

Sergeant Ernest Bradfield, R.E., of St Mary's Barracks, stated that when he went to the latrine he found deceased with a very deep wound extending from the left ear to the centre of the throat. It must have been a right-hand cut. The deceased was alive and struggling. Witness put a wet

towel round the neck, and bent the head over to close the wound as much as possible. The doctor had already been sent for and there was no delay. Witness held the deceased in the position he had described until the arrival of the doctor. The deceased expired shortly after the arrival of the doctor.

Medical Evidence

Dr Herbert Spoor, R.A.M.C., who was called to the deceased said the case was hopeless from the first. No doctor could have done more than Sergeant Bradfield did to the deceased.

The Coroner: "What Bradfield did was the correct and proper thing to do?"

Witness: "Yes."

Witness went on to say that the man expired about two minutes after his arrival. The wound was 6¼-inches long and 1¼-inches deep in the deepest part. The cut had not touched the windpipe or the greater artery. The wound was in the opinion of witness, self-inflicted by such a weapon as a razor. A peculiar feature of the case was that the razor was found closed and put into the case.

The Coroner: "Have you ever known such a thing to be done before?"

Witness: "I have not. Probably it was due to the deceased's occupation in ordinary life being that of a hairdresser. Habit is second nature, they say – That's the only explanation I can think of."

The Coroner: "Probably taking too much drink to affect him?"

Witness: "Very likely."

The Foreman: "Was there any chance of the man living if the bleeding had been stopped in the first instance?"

Witness: "I don't think so. I could not have done more than Sergeant Bradfield did had I been called earlier. The man must have lost three pints of blood before he was found by the witness Shute."

The Verdict And Rider

The Jury returned a verdict of "Suicide whilst temporarily insane" and added a rider strongly commending Sergeant Bradfield for the prompt action he took in rendering assistance.

The Coroner: "I thoroughly agree with the commendation."

Sergeant Bradfield briefly returned thanks for the commendation.

Sapper Silas Sargent lies buried in Fort Pitt Military Cemetery. Grave Location: Plot 1321.

Fort Pitt was built between 1805 and 1819 on the high ground boundary between Chatham and Rochester in Kent. Its primary function as a fort was not fulfilled and instead it became a hospital used between the 19th and early 20th Centuries. Queen Victoria visited the hospital on three occasions to visit the wounded from the Crimean War. Florence Nightingale chose the Fort for an Army Medical School prior to its move to Netley in 1863. During the First World War it was a garrison hospital to which King George V and Queen Mary came in 1914 to meet the wounded servicemen. The hospital closed in 1919.

Gradually over a period of time from 1879 onwards various buildings within the Fort were demolished allowing the capacity of the hospital to be enlarged. By the early 1930s the Fort, including all the buildings had been demolished and the ground cleared. In 1929 the Chatham Education Board purchased the land from the War Office and a Girls Technical School was built, now known as Fort Pitt Grammar School.



Grave of Sapper Silas Sargent R.E. – (Left)

Fort Pitt Military Cemetery was established in the mid-19th Century to bury the deceased from the hospital. It is situated beside the A229 (City Way) Rochester to Maidstone Road. Dominating the entrance is a large stone memorial in memory of soldiers who died for their country between 1854 and 1858. The southern section of the cemetery is the oldest part, now sparsely populated with 19th Century gravestones. To the north is the large Commonwealth War Graves Commission section with a Cross of Sacrifice overlooking 584 casualties from the First World War, Second World War and Post War.

There is no indication that his wife or next-of-kin made a claim for a dependant's pension and neither is there any reference to medal entitlement. From the information in the newspaper report given at the Coroner's Court, Silas' attestation formalities had been completed just prior to taking of his own life. His actual service time with the Royal Engineers could only therefore have been a few days and did not qualify him for any medal entitlement.

Sources

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