

ARTHUR AND ALFRED

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I.

During last July's breathless heat, I visited the grave of Arthur Styles, my granduncle. It was in a quiet verdant cemetery surrounded by a field of beets, near the village of Houchin in Artois; a British military cemetery. Slag heaps from abandoned coalmines punctured the horizon. Surrounding us were infamous battlegrounds of the 'Great War'; Neuve Chapelle, Vimy, Arras; but this graveyard, and others nearby, were the only reminder of what had happened here 100 years before.



Houchin British Cemetery

It was an awkward experience. I was travelling with a history tour group and we were on a tight schedule. The tour leader had arranged many visits like this before and as I stepped off the coach he pushed a small cross and imitation poppy into my hand. I knew I was expected to be suitably reverent in the presence of the dead and understood that the ritual expected of me was to place these symbols at the foot of Arthur's grave. But I knew little about who Arthur was, and what I was supposed to say to him. I only learned he had been born in Canterbury, in England, had emigrated to Canada in 1910, and had worked as a general laborer. Why had he volunteered to fight for the Canadian army? Out of duty? patriotism? seeking adventure? -or just to get away from another winter in snowbound Toronto.



Arthur Style's Grave, #I.F.7

I had to kneel on the grass to read the inscription at the base of the grave stone:

'Gone but not forgotten; Mother, father, sister and brother'

I looked around; the other people on the tour were standing back, watching me. They thought I was praying, and I wasn't giving a very good performance.

Then the tour leader called us back to the bus. As I stood up and started walking down the cart track back to the main road, following everyone else, my social anxiety subsided, and I could start to think about where I was.

That is when I realized that the sister's message on Arthur's grave stone was for me. It was from my grandmother, Nellie Williams.

II

In 1916 Arthur had been assigned to an elite unit, the 42nd battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, known as the Canadian Black Watch, because they wore the same kilted uniform as their famous Scottish brother regiment.



Private Arthur Frederick Styles 42nd Battalion CEF

Arthur's battalion had participated in some of the most vicious battles of the war, including those of the Somme and Passchendaele. Two thirds of the men who enlisted in the battalion had become casualties by the war's end.

On the night of March 30th, 1918, the 42nd battalion had returned for another week-long tour of duty in the front-line trenches that snaked through the ruins of the coal mining town of Avion. Nearby Vimy Ridge had been captured by these same Canadian battalions in 1917, a battle which is now enshrined in Canadian history.

March 1918 was a time of crisis for the Allies on the Western Front. On March 21st the German army, reinforced by fresh troops freed up by the defeat of Russia, had surprised and overwhelmed 50 miles of British trenches in Picardy and were now advancing on Amiens, a key supply base for the British army.

In Avion the battle could be seen and heard only a few miles away to the south, but no attack materialized in this sector during that first week of April. This front was 'quiet'. Quiet did not mean silent. Every so often on both sides a crack would indicate a sniper had located a target, and at long but unpredictable intervals a shell would explode, 'harassment' fire from concealed mortars and artillery.

The 42nd battalion's War Diary had 'nothing to report' for April 4th, 1918.

That was the day, in a field hospital 3 miles behind the front line, Arthur died of wounds to the 'abdomen, hands, legs, and arms' caused by one of those harassment shells.

Casualties of individual private soldiers manning the trenches were considered routine and not remarkable enough to be documented in the battalion Diary. Because Arthur had no fixed address in Toronto, it was his mother in Canterbury, my great-grandmother, who answered the door to receive the official war office telegram.

Private Arthur Styles' death went unnoticed amongst the 37,000 British Empire soldiers who died that March and April during the battles in front of Amiens that finally turned back the German offensive.

In the balance sheet of this war of attrition, there was a line item for casualties on quiet sectors like this. It was called 'trench wastage'.

III

In contrast, the manner of death in the First World War of another granduncle, Alfred Williams, was known to millions of readers.

Like Arthur, Alfred had been born in Canterbury. He grew up in the same type of modest terraced house on the opposite side of same street. This proximity explains how Alfred's brother, my grandfather, met Arthur Styles' sister, my grandmother Nellie; and this, after one more generation, resulted in me.

In 1896, when he was a teenager, Alfred had volunteered for the British army as a private in the East Kent Regiment, which was headquartered in Canterbury, along with his two brothers. In 1906, on completion of his 8 years active service in India, Aden and Burma, Alfred booked a steerage berth to Quebec City on the liner Empress of Britain to find better work opportunities in Canada. By the time WW1 broke out in 1914 he was 33 years old and his time in the army reserves had expired. He had prospered, was married to Katie Powell, was living in Toronto and was father of two small children.

Unlike all the other nations going to war in August 1914 Britain had never had conscription and its army was less than 10% the size of the other combatants. Suddenly there was an urgent need for volunteers to swell the ranks. The government and most of the British public united in exhorting young men of military age to join up. Peer group pressure, accusations of cowardice and insinuation of guilt were all used in enlistment propaganda. In Canada, English Canadians,

and especially recent English immigrants considered themselves British. They had British passports and Canada still drove on the left. They were equally swept up in British nationalistic fervor.



On the 19th of March 1915 Alfred re-enlisted, this time in the Canadian Army.

In January 1916 his battalion, the 20th, was sent to the front line in Flanders and then redeployed in September to Picardy, to join in the Battle of the Somme. This British attempt to break the German lines had started on July 1st. Over the succeeding four months, continuous frontal attacks had gained the British army an advance of 5 miles over a 20- mile front- at a cost of 420,000 casualties.

Alfred survived all this. When the offensive eventually was abandoned in early November due to the cold, mud, and exhaustion; the men of the 20th battalion were granted 10 days of leave. their first since arriving in France 11 months before. Ten days freedom meant they could spend it in London, only 150 miles, and a ferry ride across the English Channel, from the Somme battleground.

IV

It was around 3pm on Sunday November 26th when the Dover troop train arrived at Victoria Station. Alfred Williams was travelling with three other soldiers from the battalion, Lance Corporal Markle, Private Head and Private Martin. The first thing they all did was check in their army kitbags at the nearby Maple Leaf Club nearby on Elizabeth Street. This Club had been

established by charitable wealthy Canadians to provide a ‘safe and familiar’ place for Canadian soldiers on leave in London.



The Maple Leaf Club

They left the club to collect some of their back pay from the Canadian Army pay office in Millbank. They each withdrew about 25 pounds cash, equivalent to about 2000 pounds today. Then, instead of returning to stay at the Maple Leaf Club they took a taxi to a less respectable, but more exciting, part of London, Seven Dials.

Seven Dials, located between Soho and Covent Garden, was named after the junction of 7 narrow roads. In the 19th century it had the reputation of being one of the worst slums in London. It was described as a ‘rookery’, a collection of ramshackle unsanitary buildings overpopulated with the poor – and the criminal classes. Charles Dickens wrote about it in ‘Sketches by Boz’. By 1916 the area had changed and prospered as new musical halls, theatres and cinemas were opening in nearby St Martin’s Lane and Shaftesbury Avenue, but its unsavory reputation lingered. The four Canadians rented two rooms in the Shaftesbury Hotel overlooking the infamous junction. They were looking forward to all the things they could spend their money on.

After having supper at the hotel, at about 6pm, the Canadians ventured out on the town. They crossed the street to the first pub they saw, the same gaudily decorated pub that Dickens had described, that still, today, is called the Crown. After a few drinks, sometime around 7pm they decided to see what else the neighborhood had to offer and started walking down St Martin’s Lane towards Trafalgar Square.

The next pub they encountered was the Sussex Arms. It looked inviting. At that time London pubs contained different bars with a clearly differentiated class division. ‘Public’ bars were working class bars with rudimentary furniture and cheap drinks; ‘saloon’ bars were more comfortably furnished for patrons with higher class aspirations. Drinks were more expensive but

single women were more likely to frequent saloon bars. The Sussex Arms had a large well-appointed saloon bar.

The Canadians started drinking whiskey and sodas. Alfred was fascinated by a newfangled automatic player piano he had never seen before and he kept winding it up to make sure it played all evening. 'Keep the Home Fire Burning' and 'Roses of Picardy' were the most popular tunes of 1916.

Martin and Merkle quickly identified two young women they wanted to spend the rest of the evening with. Martin did not want to risk losing his back pay, so before he left the pub with his new friends at around 8pm, he handed 27 pound notes to Williams for safe keeping. Alfred was the oldest of the four, and probably because he was married, was perceived to be most responsible and unlikely to get into the same circumstances Martin and Merkle were heading towards. Head was getting too drunk to be trusted.

As these two Canadians were leaving with the two women, the landlady, Mrs. Ray, gave them all a skeptical look and remarked to Alfred, who was drinking at the bar, "Too bad if they have any money on them". Alfred nodded and said to her "It's all right". Then he reached into his pocket and showed her the bundle of notes Martin had given him for safekeeping.

Across from the bar and behind where Williams had been talking to Mrs. Ray, a young woman in a black fur coat had been watching the customers come and go for the last hour. She was sitting next to the player piano. At about 10 minutes to 9, two smartly dressed young men, civilians, entered the saloon bar, ordered a quick drink and scanned the crowd which by now included many more soldiers. The younger of the two, wearing a fashionable checkered cloth cap, went over to exchange a few words with the woman in the fur coat. The older one, who was wearing a grey three-piece suit, consulted with his friend and then turning, attempted to make conversation with Alfred. Whatever was said was not well received and Williams ignored him turning away.

By 1916 the Government had enacted draconian laws restricting drinking. Alcoholism was a threat to war production. On Sundays all pubs had to close promptly at 9pm. These laws were strictly enforced; you could buy drinks up until 9pm but everyone had to leave the premises promptly at that time. There was no time allowed for finishing your drink.

At four minutes to 9 the landlord rang the closing bell and ordered everyone out the saloon onto St Martin's Lane. The two young men waited, and then joined by the young woman, followed the two Canadians out onto the dark street. It was noticeable that the grey suited man walked with a limp.

V

During this war Dover was only 65 miles away from the trenches in Flanders. When the wind blew in the right direction you could hear the artillery firing, and at night sometimes see flashes of explosions on the eastern horizon. Dover is where my father -also named Arthur, grew up. His

father [my grandfather] was away in the British army in France, and although he was only nine years old, young Arthur had assumed the task of reading the newspaper for his mother, Nellie, every morning at breakfast. That Monday morning the 27th of November he read to her the 'News in Brief' column of the Daily News. He came to this item;

"Last night, in the vicinity of Waterloo Station Private Alfred Williams of the Canadian infantry was picked up in dying condition and found to be dead upon arrival at Charing Cross Hospital. Foul play is suspected"

Arthur asked: "I wonder if that is Uncle Alf, mum?"

Nellie replied: 'Don't be silly, there is more than one Alfred Williams in the world'

Nellie was right, there were at least 50 Alfred Williams enlisted in the Canadian Army in WW1 - but this one was our Uncle Alf.

VI

Outside the Sussex Arms that Sunday night just after 9pm, St Martin's Lane was full of people ejected from all the nearby pubs, including other inebriated soldiers from the Empire on leave, Australians and New Zealanders. This was wartime and London had been suffering night bombing raids by Zeppelin airships, so a blackout was in force. There was no moon and the wintry sky was overcast. It was pitch dark in the street except for one gas streetlight about 100 feet away that threw a circle of light down onto the flagstone pavement.

Alfred Williams and Head started walking unevenly back to the Shaftesbury Hotel. By this time Head was so drunk he could hardly stay upright. They were followed closely by the three civilians: William 'Billy' Robinson -who was the one who limped, John 'Charlie' Gray -the one wearing the checkered cap, and Gray's girlfriend in the black fur coat, Maude Coleman, who was a factory worker who lived in Seven Dials. As the Canadians got closer to the streetlight Gray and Coleman walked past, and then turned to confront them. Some words were exchanged.

Facing the streetlight Williams didn't notice Robinson who had quietly crept up behind him in the shadows against the wall. In one blow with a short knife in his left-hand Robinson stabbed Williams in the neck, severing the occipital artery. Williams fell to the pavement. He didn't cry out.

In this crowd, just after pub closing time, another drunken soldier sprawled out on the pavement would have hardly been given a second look, even if he could be seen in the darkness: nor would it have looked suspicious to see some civilians bent over as if they were trying to help.

But the plan went wrong. At closing time in the Sussex Arms Williams had not finished his last drink. As he left the pub he concealed his glass under his great coat and was still carrying it when Robinson knifed him.

About ten people in St Martin's Lane heard the glass shatter on the flagstones and all turned to look at where the noise came from. They could see a soldier lying on the pavement because, by chance, Williams had fallen onto the edge of the pool of light illuminated by the street lamp.

In the crowd who heard the glass break were two special constables, Sergeant St John Dobb and Constable Birks who had just walked by. Special constables were usually upper or middle-class part time volunteers who had been deputized to alleviate the shortage of police manpower, as many in the police force had volunteered for the army and were away with the army in France. Special Constables were not particularly well trained in police procedure. Dobb, who was a stockbroker, and Birks who was an accountant, went over to the street light to investigate. By this time Robinson had slipped back into the darkness leaving Gray and Coleman slowly walking away. Private Head was too drunk to understand what had just happened; the next day he said he had no recollection of how he eventually got back to his room at the Shaftesbury Hotel.

Dobb and Birks at first thought they were dealing with yet another drunken fight. Dobb grabbed Gray's arm and ordered him 'Stay here' while he turned his attention to the soldier on the ground, but right at this moment Coleman interposed herself between Gray and Dobb yelling: "Don't take him, he never done it". It was then that Dobb saw the blood pouring from the knife wound behind Williams's right ear. Horrified, Dobb's first impulse was to try to staunch the bleeding. He told Birks to blow his police whistle and run to call an ambulance. Then Dobb realized he was suddenly the officer in charge at a major crime scene, but when he looked around for the obvious suspects, Gray and Coleman were gone.

VI

In 1916 newspapers were heavily censored, but news of Alfred's murder was impossible to suppress. Murders in London were comparatively rare, about 30 a year, but were always covered in lurid detail by the penny press. By Monday, various versions of the story of what had happened in St Martin's Lane the previous night were already appearing in papers across the country, all focused on the same tragic narrative: A brave weary soldier who had survived the dangers of the war defending the Empire, was callously murdered only 6 hours after arriving in the Empire's Capital - where he had been seeking rest and respite. [The true horrors of the Somme campaign were not yet known by the public]. By Tuesday the story had crossed the Atlantic and was plastered over the Canadian newspapers.



The police had to act quickly. Detective Sergeant Alfred Collins was assigned the case that Sunday night. By Monday afternoon witnesses had come forward with enough information for Collins to identify Robinson and Gray as the likely assailants. By Tuesday noon he tracked down Robinson and arrested him where he was working in High Holborn. Collins found in a knife in Robinson's coat pocket. On Wednesday morning he apprehended Gray in a house in Orange Street just off Leicester Square. Gray also had a knife in his pocket. Collins put both men in a 12-man identity lineup at Bow Street police station. Four witnesses identified them as the men who had followed the Canadians in St Martins Lane. Then Collins formally charged both with murder and they were remanded without bail.

VII

This was going to be a highly publicized, politically sensitive, trial at the Central Court of London – the 'Old Bailey'; if it was not handled properly Canadian popular support for the war

effort could be compromised. The Home Secretary asked one of Britain's most senior judges, the Honorable Lord Cavendish, to preside.

Proceedings opened on March 4th, 1917 with both the accused pleading 'not guilty'. Unusually they were defended by expensive barristers from the Temple Bar, retained under the Poor Prisoners Defence Act. Sixteen witnesses were called, and cross examined.

It was the testimony of witness #5 that proved most damning and explained why Sergeant Collins had been able to identify and arrest the accused so quickly.

Emily Spiller had been a performer in a music hall. She had been a trick cyclist but had been injured in a fall so was out of work. This meant she was a regular patron of the Sussex Arms, and was friends with the landlady. Mrs. Ray. She lived in the area and was familiar with many of the other regular patrons. That Sunday night on November 26th, at about 830, she had stopped by the Sussex Arms for a pint of Guinness. When Robinson and Gray came into the bar just before closing time, she immediately recognized who they were. They had a reputation for trouble.

She had arranged to meet a New Zealand soldier outside the saloon bar door next to a red post box right after closing time. As she was waiting there she was watching Robinson and Gray in the crowd who had just left the Sussex Arms. She was expecting them to get into an argument with some Australian soldiers who had also been drinking in the saloon. Instead, only a few feet away, she saw them talk to Williams and Head for a few minutes, although she couldn't hear what was said. Then, her New Zealand soldier friend arrived, and they both started walking up the middle of St Martin's Lane, arm in arm, in the same direction as the others.

Emily testified under oath that a few minutes later she saw Robinson slip his left hand in his pocket, and without hesitating, quickly strike Williams. Then she heard the glass break on the pavement and Williams fell. With some other bystanders and the Special Constables, she rushed over. She immediately knew what had happened and as she frantically tried to help staunch the bleeding with some wadding, she said to Sergeant Dobb "I know who's done this'. But Dobb was too distracted to take any notice of what she was saying. It was not until the next day that she was able to tell what she had seen to Detective Sergeant Collins.

On March 7th the jury returned their verdicts. Richardson: Guilty of murder; Gray: not guilty of murder, but guilty of manslaughter.

It seems the jury were persuaded by Maude Coleman's testimony. She swore that she had seen Robinson strike Williams, whereas her boyfriend Gray had merely pushed Williams in the chest, claiming he did this because Williams had been propositioning her.

Lord Cavendish pronounced their sentences the same day. For John Gray, he imposed three years of penal servitude.

Before he could announce William Robinson's fate the judge paused to engage in a curious English judicial ritual. He reached under his podium and placed on his bewigged head a black square of cloth. Now he didn't have to say anything more, except for the written trial record.

Everyone in the court room, and especially the press in the public gallery, knew what the Black Cap meant. The judge was going to sentence Robinson to death.



The Black Cap

Throughout the trial Robinson had maintained his innocence. He had claimed his lame leg was caused by wounds sustained as a soldier on the front line in France and that he had been invalided out of the army after leaving hospital 3 months before. Robinson's story is hard to reconstruct because for some reason his final statement to the court is missing from the trial transcript, and because most British army WW1 personnel records were destroyed by German bombs in the blitz of 1940.

The only information available is that four months before, while he was languishing in the jail cells in Bow street awaiting trial, the official monthly Police Gazette had been published for distribution to all the police stations in the country. In this Gazette William Robinson was listed as having deserted from the King's Royal Rifles regiment as of November 8th 1916. During the summer of 1916 that regiment had been heavily embroiled in the Battle of the Somme.

It seems that this was not the only time Robinson had deserted. In 1908 at the age of 18 he had volunteered for the army, but by 1911 was serving a two- year sentence for burglary. Under wartime censorship, Robinson's military history never appeared in newspaper accounts of the trial. A story of how a British army deserter murdered a Canadian hero would not have helped wartime morale.

Maude Coleman and Emily Spiller's trial testimony made it easy for Judge Cavendish to pronounce the death penalty for Robinson. Coleman had also described how after she and Gray had slipped away from the large crowd gathering around the crime scene on St Martin's lane they had met up with Robinson again at the Necchi's Café on Shaftesbury Avenue. Here they found him in an intense conversation with an Australian soldier. Neither Gray nor Robinson acted as if anything unusual had taken place and did not talk about the stabbing that had happened only 15 minutes before.

VIII

Robinson and Gray appealed their sentences. At the Criminal Appeals Court hearing on April 2nd a new piece of evidence was introduced by the prosecution. A letter Robinson supposedly had written to his girlfriend Margaret Harding, a tailoress who lived near Seven Dials, two days after the guilty verdict was handed down. According to the prosecutor this is what Robinson said in the letter:

‘Although I now tell you I was guilty of the crime, I am quite satisfied with the sentence... I look for sympathy from no-one. I don’t deserve it I want to impress upon you and everyone else that it was not done for robbery, it was simply unfortunate. I took him for someone else I had a row with on the previous day, and I had no intention of killing’

It is true that no robbery was committed. Martin’s 27 pounds and his own 25 pounds were found in Williams’ pockets when he was laid out in the morgue. But it is questionable that Robinson mistook Williams for someone else. According to the testimony of several witnesses, including Emily Spiller, Robinson had talked to Williams face to face outside the pub for a few minutes after closing time.

Who wrote this letter? According to the prosecutors Margaret had burnt the original after reading but that a copy had been obtained by the Home Office. This copy had apparently been made by a jailer in Pentonville Prison who had supposedly intercepted the original letter ‘in the course of his duties’.

This convenient confession decided the fate of both convicted men. It enabled the Lord Chief Justice to quickly determine that Robinson had admitted his crime and therefore could immediately dismiss his appeal.

William Robinson was hung in the execution room of Pentonville prison on April 17th 1917. These same gallows had last been used to hang Sir Roger Casement for treason the previous year.

Public opinion, especially in Canada, was satisfied that justice had been done.

In 1917 the war had been not going well for Britain. Battlefield attrition was taking its toll with casualties exceeding replacements, even after the Draft had been enacted in 1916. Yet another offensive was about to start that April in France. -the Battle of Arras that eventually resulted in the Canadian Division’s capture of Vimy Ridge.

Robinson’s ‘confession’ allowed Viscount Reading to quash Gray’s conviction. Gray was 24 years old, healthy and fit for service.

A private John Henry Gray, of the Leicestershire regiment survived the war. He was given a campaign medal for his time in France.

IX

In the 1960's I was a student at the University of London living in a cheaply furnished flat with four others in Chalk Farm. Our next door neighbours were drama students, so this meant we often had cheap tickets to plays performed in theatres in St Martins Lane. Afterwards we would go for drinks at the Sussex Arms because it was a lively place for students -this was the time of 'Swinging London'. At that time, I did not know that my granduncle had been murdered there.



The Sussex Arms Pub in 2013. St Martins Lane is on the left. The murder site is approximately where the pool of light is on the pavement. The red post box where Emily Spiller waited for her New Zealand soldier is still there.

When I started researching this story I visited the scene of the crime. By this time, I had obtained a copy of the Old Bailey trial transcript for "Rex v. Robinson and Gray". One of the exhibits shown to the jury was a detailed diagram of the layout of the pub illustrating details such as where the player piano was, and where Coleman and Spiller had been sitting that night of November 26th, 1916.

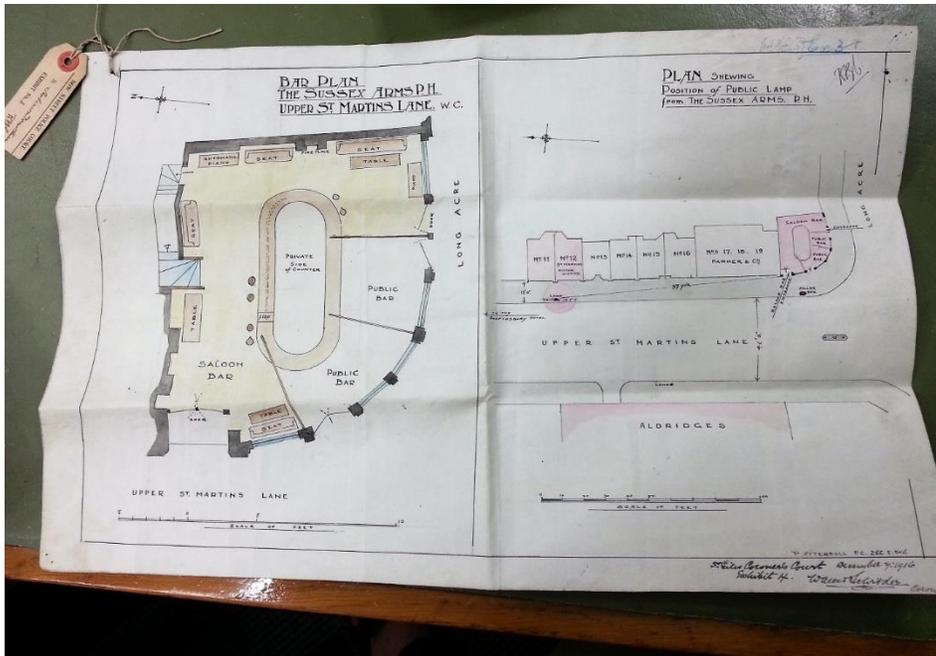


Exhibit #4 in Rex v. Robinson and Gray

I went into the saloon bar with my copy of this plan, ordered a pint of bitter and looked around. The pub was as lively as I remembered but I was disappointed, the interior was nothing like what was shown on exhibit #4. Only later did I find out why. On October 12th 1992 the Provisional IRA had detonated a bomb in the men's toilet as part of a bombing campaign aimed at popular tourist pubs in London's West End. Fortunately, only one person was killed in the Sussex Arms, but the interior was devastated.

One thing hadn't changed though. In the men's toilet was a large sign that read: "Please look after your belongings, Bag thieves operate in this area."

X

On a cold grey winter afternoon, I found where my granduncle Alfred Williams was buried. It was one of a small group of immaculately maintained war graves in a corner of London's vast Kensal Green Cemetery. As I walked through decaying leaves in this sprawling muddily dilapidated graveyard I could smell death. The atmosphere here evoked the battlegrounds of WW1, unlike the gardenized cemetery at Housh.



British Army War Graves within Kensal Green Cemetery

Alfred's gravestone looks the same as Arthur's, except here the inscription is in verse:

'Duty called him, he was there; To do his best; To do his share

Wife'



Alfred Williams, Grave #173.14

This time I was alone. I remember saying to Alfred: 'you poor b.....'