

Private

WILLIAM HENRY GRABHAM

25807 1st/5th Somerset Light Infantry

Died of Wounds 3rd December 1917

Aged 31

Buried Alexandria (Hadra) War Memorial Cemetery

Grave D. 249

Of all the 13 Buckland St Mary killed in WW1, William Grabham was the only one not to have died on the Western Front; he was wounded and later died in the 1917 fighting for Jerusalem. His name appears on the Roll of Honour that heads *The History and Book of Remembrance of the 1st/5th Battalion (Prince Albert's) Somerset Light Infantry*, by Major E S Goodland, MC, and Captain H L Milsom.

William Grabham was a boy of the Blackdown Hills, but born out of the area in South Devon, on 4th January 1888. William's father Abraham was born in Otterford in 1855, the son of John, an agricultural labourer. In 1871 Abraham was working on a dairy farm in Whitestaunton, but by 1880 he had joined the Royal Marines Light Infantry, stationed in Plymouth, and was living in East Stonehouse. William and his two older and one younger brother were born there. His oldest brother Edward was in fact a half brother, Abraham's first wife having died soon after his birth in 1884. William's mother Mary was also from Devon. By 1894 the family were back in Buckland St Mary, living at Meanwood. William and his older half brother Edward started at Buckland School in June 1894; William left in February 1900. In their particulars on the school roll their father is described as 'Pensioner', from the Marines.

In 1901 William, aged 14, was working as a Gardener's apprentice; Edward, 17, was a Blacksmith's apprentice. By 1911 William, still living at home, at Flood Cottage, Little Hill, was a Postman. There is no clue what happened to the family in the intervening 10 years, except that the 1911 Census records for each family the number of children born, and the number who have died; the Grabhams had had 8 children, of whom 4 had died as young children, Arthur at Buckland St Mary in 1904; his grave is in the churchyard.

Late in 1911 William married Alice Summers of Combe St Nicholas; one of 10 surviving children, she and two of her sisters were working as Toothbrush Drawers (setting the bristles – perhaps badger hair? – in toothbrushes, probably working at home); their older sister was an Assistant Schoolmistress, their father a harness maker. All had been born in Combe.

In October 1912 William and Alice, living at Lodge, Buckland St Mary, had a son, Robert John; William was still working as a postman. In December 1914 a daughter, Evelyn May, was born. By now they were living in Combe, and William was working as a Road Labourer.

Without William's Service Record or any other information, it's impossible to tell when he joined up. The National Registration Act of 1915 drew up a census of men aged 15-60; by the 15th December 1915 those aged 18-40 had to join up or attest, with the obligation to come forward later. A startlingly large number - two in five – were unsuitable on grounds of health. Finally conscription for single men

was introduced in January 1916, and for married men in May. William's Medal Roll Card indicates that he didn't go abroad before 1916.

He joined the 1st/5th Battalion of the Somerset Light Infantry. At the beginning of the war the 1st/5th were sent to India to take the place of regular battalions there. Drafts from the Battalion were sent to the disastrous campaign in Mesopotamia, but seem not to have included William Grabham. We don't even know for sure whether he went to India himself. In the Spring of 1917 the Battalion left India to join the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, arriving at Suez on May 6. They joined the 233rd Brigade of the 75th division. Serjeant Maidment of the 1st/5th later put together an album of photographs taken during this period; this vivid record is now in the SWHT's archives¹.



Egypt had been under British control since 1882. When war was declared on Turkey, an ally of Germany, in 1914, Egypt became a crucial staging post from which British and Allied troops were sent to the Dardanelles, Salonika, Mesopotamia, and back to the Western Front. When Turkey threatened the Suez Canal it was felt necessary to gain control of the Palestine coastal strip to protect it securely. (But of course the main prize, which lay at the heart of Middle East policy, then as now, was oil.) A Railway and water pipelines were laid, and unsuccessful attempts were made early in 1917 to take Gaza.

The unsuccessful General Murray was replaced in June by General Allenby. Charged by Lloyd George, the Prime Minister, with winning Jerusalem 'as a Christmas present for the British nation', he demanded, and got, a large increase in men and munitions. He then proceeded to do as requested – but at a high cost to those serving him.

The Third Battle for Gaza, with some clever tactical work, won both it and Beersheba by early November. Pressure was kept up on the Turks, and they were pursued, with much loss to them of equipment and prisoners, to the foot of the Judean Hills. Less directly involved in the Battle for Gaza, the 1st/5th now became heavily involved in the subsequent fighting. On the 13th their Brigade (the 233rd) captured Tel El Turmus and El Kustineh, then attacked bravely and successfully El Memiyeh and the ridge beyond; besides 6 killed, 41 other ranks were wounded.

Allenby was anxious not to be involved in a potentially damaging battle, from a propaganda viewpoint, for Jerusalem, so aimed to cut off the enemy by capturing the villages to its north; hence the engagements that followed through November, advancing through the steep and difficult Judean Hills. Weather and territory were against the British, still, despite the wet and bitterly cold weather, in their light desert kit. On the 20th the 1st/5th captured Enab; 2 other ranks were killed and 9 wounded.

On the 21st the 233rd Brigade set off over steep, difficult territory for Biddu. They were overlooked by the Turks on the Nebi Samwil ridge, part of the main defence for Jerusalem. This being taken on the 21st, the 1st/5th were ordered to capture El Jib and Bir Nebala. Laden with heavy equipment and struggling over the rocky precipitous ground, just getting along was bad enough, without having to contend with enemy artillery and machine gun fire. As on the Western Front, men were no match for the power of modern guns used in defence. Worse still, the Officer Commanding (from the 1st/4th Wilts) had mistaken the direction, and was heading for the wrong village. Impossible to correct the mistake at this stage:

"So, for the remainder of that long and trying day the tired troops lay out in the open, or behind such cover as they could find, waiting for nightfall.

The stretcher-bearers had worked heroically to try and get the wounded in under cover, but over the steep and uneven country, in full view of the enemy, they had an almost hopeless task...[By nightfall]

the wounded ... had been lying out all day without any shelter [their] wounds ... aggravated by the delay in being treated..

..After a bitterly cold night (it was the end of November, some 3,000 feet above sea level and the men wearing khaki-drill shorts and tunics, with no blankets or greatcoats) the troops woke on the 23rd to the knowledge that El Jib was still to be taken." –*The Somerset Light Infantry 1914-1919*, Everard Wyrall

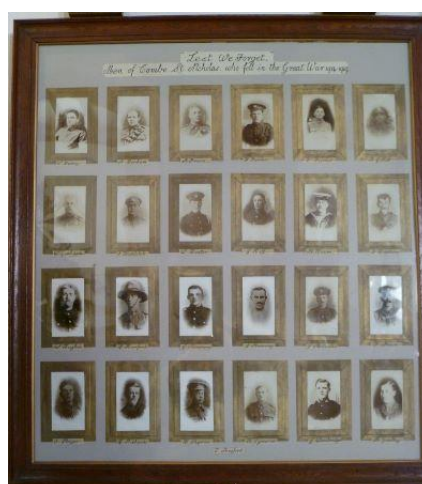
Another attempt was made to take El Jib, but it was an impossible task. Not until a much later stage in the fighting was it taken by the 74th division. By the end of the 23rd the 1st/5th Battalion had suffered 221 casualties in 2 days' fighting: 3 officers killed and 6 wounded, 51 other ranks killed or missing and 161 wounded. They were then withdrawn from the frontline, and took no further part in the direct fighting for Jerusalem.

William was wounded at some point in this fighting, but impossible to say when: it could have been at any time in November, up to the 23rd. He didn't die till December 3, 10 days or so after that last date. He would probably have been evacuated by train to Alexandria. Very likely it would have been late in the month before news of his death reached his wife. She chose an epitaph for his grave: 'God takes our loved ones from our homes but never from our hearts'.

The Army Register of Soldiers effects records that she was paid William's back pay of £4-18-7 on June 5 1918; his War Gratuity of £6-10-0 was paid on November 11 1919.

Alice didn't re-marry; she died of TB in 1952 aged 66. She was then living at Underway, and her son Robert, who was with her when she died, at Combe Head. On her death certificate William's occupation is given as 'Quarryman'.

William is also commemorated on the Combe St Nicholas War Memorial. In Combe Church is a framed photo, some 18" x 24", of the men of the village who died. William's photo (1st left, 2nd row) is rather faded, but he has a slightly wistful, troubled look. It's remarkable that this photographic record should exist at all; it must have been compiled from photographs given by the families at the time. It has now been restored after advice from the SWHT.



[illegible]

The undermentioned Houses are situate within the Boundaries of the												97			
[Page 1]															
Civil Parish (or Township) of		City or Municipal Borough of		Municipal Ward of		Parliamentary Borough of		Parish of		Village or Hamlet, &c., of		Local Authority (Municipal Council or Sanitary Authority) of		Electoral District of	
No. of Schedule	ROAD, STREET, &c., and No. or NAME of HOUSE	HOUSES No. of Tenements No. of Flats (if any)	NAME and Surname of each Person	RELATION to Head of Family	CON- DITION	AGE of Male Female	RANK, PROFESSION, or OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN		VICTIM 1. Deceased and 2. Ill and 3. Inhabitant or Visitor 4. Locality					
1	Whitehall Farm	1	Robert Ayton	Head	Mar	45	Farmer of 100 Acres employing 10 Men and 10 Boys	Leamington	Leamington						
			Joseph Ayton	Son	Mar	20	House Keeper	Leamington	Leamington						
2	Cherry House	1	George Welch	Head	Mar	45	Chairman	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Welch	Son	Mar	25	Assistant in Farming	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Welch	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Welch	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Welch	Daughter	Mar	15	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
3		1	William J. Elton	Head	Mar	45	Assistant in Farming	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
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			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			John Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			George Elton	Son	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						
			Elizabeth Elton	Daughter	Mar	20	Do	Leamington	Leamington						

4

Reference:-		PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE		1	2	3	4	5	6
RG12/1738									
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1901 CENSUS GRABHAM FAMLY1911 CENSUS GRABHAM FAMILY



Off To Fetch Daily Supply Of Water. Raffer



Some of C. Boy Scouts 1/5 Som At Apex "Gaza"



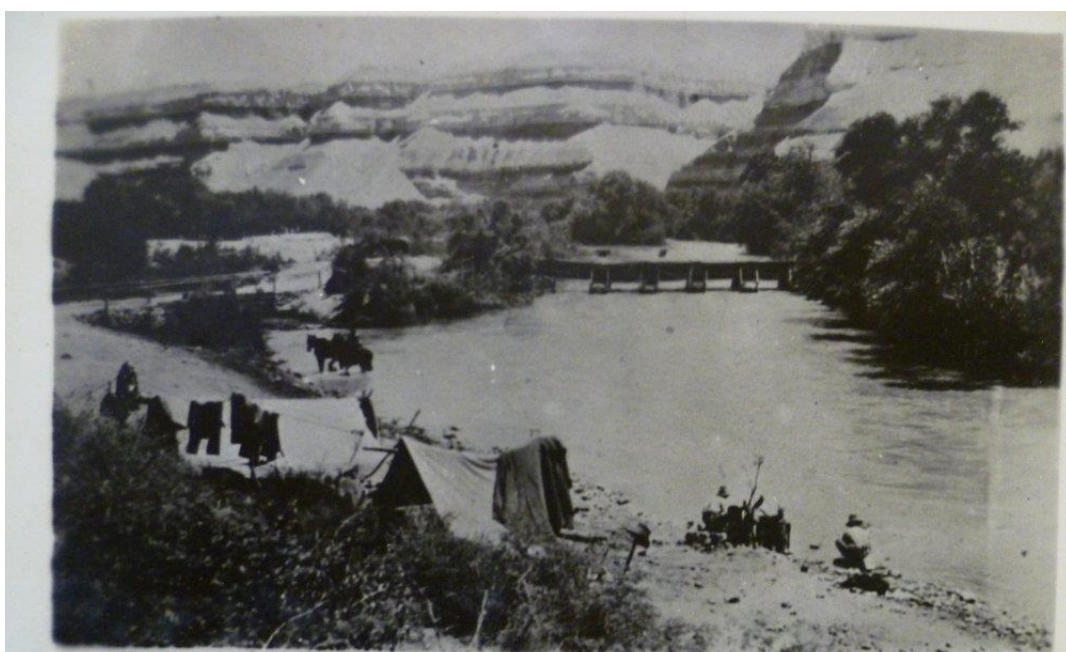
A big quarter Master's Store At Apasa In front of Gaza



Turkish Shells Bursting On Battalion H. 24. Gaza.



12. by 1/5 Some Having A Dip At Kalkilia Palestine.



JORDAN VALLEY..JUDAH HILLS.

559

Jordan Valley and Judasian Hills.

"Lest We Forget."
Men of Combe St. Nicholas who fell in the Great War 1914-1917.



W. Davey



A. Denham



A. Froom



H. Butler



J. Barber



A. Gellat



W. Graham



J. Hedditch



W. Grestor



J. Hill



M. Moore



J. Hopkins



W. Hughes



H. Harford



J. Hannam



J. Manning



J. Montague



H. Shaw



J. Hayer



A. Richards



A. Shyrie



B. Symonds



J. Wombidge



A. Zalley

J. Mayford



ALEXANDRIA HADRA WAR CEMETRY

Private GRABHAM, WILLIAM HENRY

Service Number 25807

Died 03/12/1917

Aged 31

1st/5th Bn.

Somerset Light Infantry

Son of Abraham and Mary Grabham, of Buckland St. Mary, Chard;
husband of Alice C. Grabham, of Coombe St. Nicholas, Chard, Somerset.



INSCRIPTION

GOD TAKES OUR LOVED ONES FROM OUR HOMES BUT NEVER FROM
OUR HEARTS

