

Cenotaph: **HOLDEN G F**

Memorial Hall: George F Holden, 2/5 Seaforth Highlanders

Name on both correct, full name George Forster Holden, unit probably the one he was assigned to at start. *(There is a problem with going down to battalion as many soldiers changed battalion during the war and some even changed regiment – one of those at Elmfield even changed service.)*

Date & Place of Birth: Q4 1889, North Shields, Tyneside, Northumberland

Methodist connection: None detected to date, except his studying at Elmfield College. Assuming he entered age 11 and left age 16 he would have been there from 1900 – 1916 and should have shown up on the 1911 census return for Elmfield, which he did not. I suspect he may have been at another fee paying school and was transferred to Elmfield after April 1911 for financial or educational reasons.

War: When the Great War broke out George was ranching in the USA, probably South Dakota. He returned to the UK just over a year later arriving at Liverpool on 5th September 1915. Presumably he enlisted soon after his return but no exact details are available except that he was assigned to the Seaforth Highlanders. Records show that at the time of his death he was serving in the 1st Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders, a regular battalion. At the outbreak of war the 1st Battalion were serving in India. They moved to the western front in France in September 1914 and stayed there for 15 months before transferring to Mesopotamia in December 1915. George was presumably initially assigned to the 2nd/5th Battalion as shown on the Memorial Hall panel. This battalion was a territorial battalion serving in the UK for home defence purposes and as a training unit to provide reinforcements for units serving overseas.

During 1915 in Mesopotamia the 1st Battalion were involved in heavy fighting and by the end of the year were under strength. In January 1916 they suffered further and on 7th January alone the casualty list numbered 20 officers & 314 other ranks killed, wounded, missing or sick (a full strength battalion was considered to be 1,000 in number). At the end of the month, in spite of receiving significant reinforcements from the UK in the meantime, it was decided to amalgamate the battalion with the 2nd Battalion of the Black Watch and they were called the Composite Highland Battalion. George may have been one of these reinforcements although he would have received less than 6 months training in the UK. If he did not arrive with this consignment he would have come later in the summer and his “real” war lasted 6 months at most.

By July 1916 the fighting the composite battalion were involved in was much less intense and the main casualties were men going sick on an almost daily basis. Perhaps not surprising as the temperature for much of the month was in excess of 100°F with a maximum of 120°F (49°C) in the shade being recorded. George’s death is recorded as 15th July 1916 some three days after the composite battalion was “reconstructed” back into the two original battalions. The Battalion War Diary lumps the 15th – 20th July into one with the comment “In trenches. Situation normal. Casualties – 2 Officers sick, Other Ranks – 5 wounded, 39 sick.” So we can definitely conclude that George was not killed in action. The records of his death merely state the day he died which probably means he died of sickness. In these hotter climes, where the sanitary conditions were indescribable, it was noted that new recruits were more prone to succumb and then be more likely to die. Presumably the older lags had built up some immunity in their more gradual descent into unsanitary conditions.

George was buried in the Basra War Cemetery, Al Basrah, Iraq. At some stage during his army career he had been promoted to Lance-Corporal and his service number was S/12282.

Family Life: George’s parents were Robert Holden & Margaret Hall. They all appear together on the 1891 Census Return for North Shields. This shows Robert was a “builder” and 63 years of age when George was

born whereas Margaret was 36. George also had two older brothers – James (5 years older) & Gilbert (2 years older). They also had one “General Domestic Servant”.

The 1891 census is the only one showing the whole family together. Robert died two years later and Margaret almost certainly pre-deceased George.

The 1901 census for Hexham, Northumberland finds George as a “Boarder” with a family called Pickering consisting of two brothers, aged 60 & 51 and their 58 year old sister – their occupations are respectively, “Roadman”, “Drainer” & “Housekeeper (Domestic)”. George’s “occupation” is given as “School-boy”. Hexham High School dates back to the 16th Century.

The 1911 Census return for East Butsfield Farm, Tow Law (about 10 miles west of Durham) finds 21 year old George listed as a “Nephew” and “Independent Gentleman”. The Head of the household was a 48 year old widow called Margaret Hall. I presume this Aunt Margaret was not a blood relation but married a brother of George’s mother. Also present are four of Aunt Margaret’s nine children who would all have been George’s cousins – they range in age from 5 to 20 with the two older ones working on the farm. This 6 room farmhouse must have been a lively place as it was also home to a live-in farm worker aged 19 and a 15 year old domestic servant.

The next I can definitely find of George is his September 1915, aged 25, incoming voyage from New York to Liverpool as a 2nd class passenger aboard the SS Philadelphia. He gives his address as Eadon (?) Bush, Riding Mill, Northumberland and occupation as “Rancher”, a tick in the last column of the ship’s manifest shows it was his intention to return to the USA – sadly he never returned.

His probate is of interest:-

HOLDEN George Forster of Haydraw South Dakota **United States of America** lance-corporal Seaforth Highlanders died 15 July 1916 in the Persian Gulf Administration **London** 25 September to James Holden musician. Effects £1420 18s. 4d.

Haydraw is an unincorporated community in Meade County, in the U.S. state of South Dakota. A post office called Haydraw was established in 1910, and remained in operation until 1954. The community was named for its location within a hay-growing district. These days his estate would be worth about £140k.

The fact that James, one of his elder brothers, was a musician may be significant. On the 8th July 1914 the Philadelphia leaves Southampton for New York with a group of musicians on board – one of their number was a George Holden. Unfortunately the manifest lacks addresses for all the passengers and an age for George. Again the last column shows it was the intention of all of the musicians to stay in the USA.

So was George at heart a singing cowboy and if you visited grave VV19 in Basra War Cemetery would you be able to detect a ghostly rendering of “Back home on the range”?

An interesting, rather unsettled and all too short life. Sadly the memorials at Ashville College and his headstone in Iraq seem to be his only memorials. North Shields does have a war memorial but it appears to be a general one and does not include individual names.

David Redhead, March 2018.

Further work – (a) Obtain copy of war diaries for period March to June 1916; (b) Check Elmfield College Register – this should give us his exact DoB, next of kin and their address at time of admittance to Elmfield College and dates of attendance at Elmfield College.