

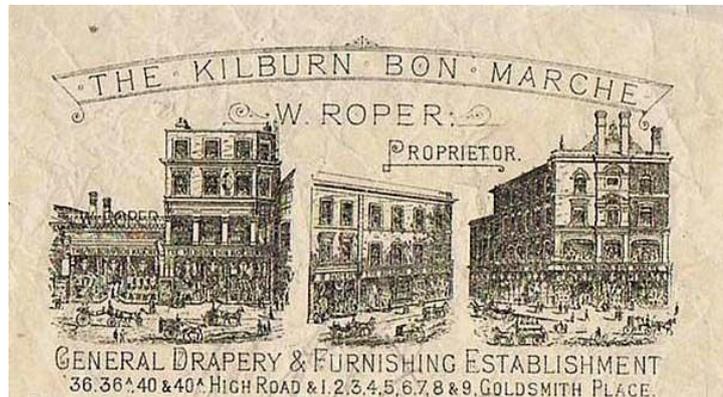
Percy Bernard Wrigley (1888 –1918)

Percy Bernard Wrigley was born on 30th April 1888 in Glenelg, a beach-side suburb of Adelaide, the State Capital of South Australia. His parents were Benjamin Wrigley and Mary Ellen Greenwood.

There are no available records to show when, why or how Percy travelled to England but by 31st March 1901 Percy was in the UK attending Southgate College, a secondary boys boarding school in Friern Barnet about two-thirds of a mile to the north-west of Alexandra Palace. The census return shows the college had 2 live in masters, besides the headmaster, and 27 boarding pupils.

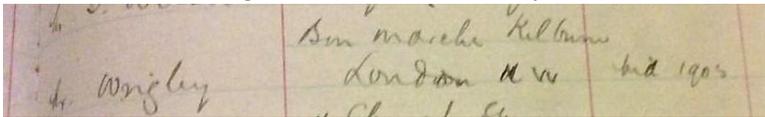
Percy's father is not apparent in the 1901 Census but a Mary Ellen Wrigley, aged 42 and a widow shows up on the census return for Streatham, London. She was living in a house off Streatham High Road where Pratts, a large department store, was situated. She gave her occupation as "Draper's Assistant" as do three of the other ladies living in the house. A fifth gave her occupation as "Lady Shopwalker" and a nineteen year old lad was a "Drapers' Porter". A seventh occupant was described as a "Housekeeper (domestic)". So she would appear to have been working at Pratts and living in a house provided for their employees.

Later in 1901 Percy moved to Elmfield College, York and the school register indicates he started there after the summer holidays and he left "mid 1905" when he was 17 years old. The parental address given in the register is Bon Marche, Kilburn, London. The Bon Marche on Kilburn High Road was also a large department store. At the time there were several department stores in England called "The Bon Marche". They all seem to have been modelled on "Le Bon Marché" in Paris but had no commercial connection either with the Paris store or each other. On the right is the header for an 1892 receipt issued by the Kilburn Bon Marche. With the exception of "Le Bon Marché" in Paris none of these stores still exist and the modern Bon Marche chain of ladies fashion shops have no connection beyond their name.



So it would appear probable that Percy's father died some time before 1901 and possibly in Australia. His mother then had to find employment to support herself and her son. Her apparent move from one department store to another occurred just before Percy went to Elmfield – perhaps increased remuneration allowed for a more expensive and better school. Another attraction may have been the Yorkshire setting as the 1901 Census shows Mary Ellen Greenwood was born in Yorkshire. Giving her address as her place of employment probably meant she lived over the shop - it is known that The Brixton Bon Marche altruistically provided good quality on-site accommodation for its staff.

There is a flaw in this argument, in that the entry in the Elmfield College



register does seem to refer to a Mr Wrigley but this could be an error.

Percy started at Elmfield College at the same time as John Fletcher Redhead and from a Redhead family photograph album they were friends in spite of their year difference in age. They were part of a group of boys who called themselves "The Fraternity". They had nicknames for each other and Percy was known as "The Worm", hopefully because of his surname rather than his character.

After leaving Elmfield, Percy moved back to London and on the 2nd April 1911 he was lodging at 18 Valmar Road, Camberwell. The census return indicates the house was owned by a George Bilton and his wife Bessie who had been married for 15 years



but had no children. They had five lodgers at the time, all male and single and ranging in age from 20 to 34, the oldest was an actor and Percy, who was the second youngest at 22, gave his occupation as "Builders Surveyor's Assistant". The Electoral Roll for 1912 shows he was still living at 18 Valmar Road a year later.

After the start of the Great War, Percy enlisted as a Private in the 28th Battalion of the London Regiment. At the time the Battalion was known as the Artists' Rifles as it was descended from a group of volunteers founded in Napoleonic times by the artist, Edward Sterling. Percy's service number, 763116, indicates he enlisted no earlier than January 1917 by when he would have been 28. The London Gazette shows that on 16th June 1917 he was commissioned to Second Lieutenant in the Royal Engineers. He was one of a considerable number of Cadets to undergo the same treatment on the same date which indicates that shortly after enlisting he was transferred to the No.15 Officer Cadet Battalion which had no formal connection to the London Regiment.

After his transfer to the Royal Engineers, Percy was assigned to the 518th Field Company and he embarked for the Western Front at the end of January 1918. The Field Company War Diary shows an unnamed officer and 5 "other ranks" joined them on 14th February 1918 when they were at Havrincourt. For the next week the Company appears to have been in reserve carrying out various support tasks. They suffered no casualties although 8 other ranks were dispatched to hospital sick.

On 22nd February they were relieved and went into billets at Royalcourt. At the time the Company strength was assessed at 7 officers, and 195 other ranks. This indicates it was slightly under strength especially as regards officers. Whilst in billets they received Lewis Machine Gun training, medical examinations for scabies and carried out various tasks.

On 21st March they seemed to get caught out by the German advance of spring 1918 and came under shell fire whilst still in billets. They suffered heavy casualties over the next three days during which 4 officers, including the Company Commander, and 71 other ranks were listed as killed, missing or wounded. Amongst their number was Second Lieutenant Percy Bernard Wrigley. His date of death is given as 23rd March 1918. His body was never recovered, showing he was killed in action, and he is commemorated on the Arras Memorial as well as the memorials now at Ashville College.

In 1922 his campaign medals were claimed by his mother who at the time was living near Boston in Lincolnshire. Her name was given as Mrs M E Armstrong which means she remarried. She passed away on 3rd November 1933, still living at the same address and leaving an estate, which included land, worth £982 (c £65k today). The probate report suggests she remarried a Lincolnshire farmer called John Armstrong.

There is no available definite evidence to show how Percy's father came to be in Australia. However, there was a Benjamin Wrigley, of identical name, who was found guilty of highway robbery at York Assizes on 15th March 1823. He was sentenced to death but this was commuted to 14 years penal servitude in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) and he was transported there in August 1823. It is not inconceivable that he was Percy's ancestor. Percy's mother, being born in Yorkshire, emigrated during her own life time.

P B Wrigley was listed in the 1921 Elmfield College Roll of Honour and presumably appears on the original Clock Memorial now at Ashville College. According to the Wharfedale Family History Society he does not have a plaque in the Memorial Hall. However, he is listed on the Elmfield College plate on the Ashville Cenotaph.

Perhaps this is really the story of a mother rather than a son – the following would fit the facts but is far from proven. Mary Ellen Greenwood was born in Yorkshire but emigrated to Australia where she married a member of an "established" Australian family. She had a son before her husband died. She then decided to return to her homeland where she found employment in department stores in London to provide sufficient funds to give her only son a good education. During the Great War, he enlisted and although he saw little action was killed in action in France during the German offensive of spring 1918. She remarried a Lincolnshire farmer and died some 15 years after her son leaving a significant estate. Hopefully her post WW1 years were happy ones although they must have been tainted by the premature death of her only son in whom she had invested so much.

David Redhead, March 2018.