

## Albert James TAYLOR

<b>Born</b>	14th July 1897
<b>Killed in Action or Died</b>	20th July 1917, age 20
<b>Commemorated</b>	Panel 5 and 9., Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, Ieper, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium
<b>Unit</b>	"B" Battery., 298 <sup>th</sup> Brigade., Royal Field Artillery
<b>Rank</b>	Gunner, Service Number 622345
<b>Awards</b>	British War Medal and Victory Medal

**Albert James Taylor** (1897 Ely) was the oldest child of Harry Albert Taylor (1878 Ely) and Priscilla (nee Turner, 1879 Ely). In the 1901 and 1911 Censuses the young family can be found in Chapel Street, Ely, and Harry is shown as working as a "boot laster" or boot repairer. Albert had younger siblings Elizabeth Ann (1899), Beatrice Edith (1902), Harold (1905), Ivy Gladys (1907), Frances Amelia (1909), William (1911) and Harry (1914).

Albert attended Ely Boys School, and then, on 16th January 1911, was enrolled in Needhams Secondary School for Boys on Ely's Back Hill. He left the school on 17th July 1912 to work as a clerk in the City of Ely Rates Collecting Department. During his time at school he attended Harold Archer's catechism class at St Peter's Church in Broad Street.

Albert was a member of the City of Ely Band and played the French horn—the photograph to the right shows him in his bandsman's uniform in 1914, aged seventeen.

Albert worked in the refreshment room at Ely Station and then became a clerk in the Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society in Cambridge Road, Ely. When news of his death reached Ely his fellow employees held a commemorative tea at Ye Olde Tea Rooms in his honour, and sent their commiserations to his parents saying *"he was a noble lad, one whom to know was to admire"*.

Albert joined up at Hemel Hempstead, unsurprisingly, as a trumpeter. Albert first served with the 298th Brigade, which was a Territorial Brigade and was originally a second line home service force. Later he was sent out to France, in March 1916, with the Royal Field Artillery. He only became a gunner a matter of a few weeks before his death.

Albert was killed in action less than a week after his twentieth birthday, when he was unloading a wagon—a shell burst nearby and he was killed by the flying shrapnel. His battery was in the process of setting up their new emplacement on the line of the Ypres-Comines Canal. His officer wrote to his parents that Albert was buried with full military honours in a cemetery behind the lines, but his grave was not later identifiable and now he appears on the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing.

When the Army came to sort out Albert's effects the record shows that he was actually in debt to them for 14s 3d, so his mother Priscilla received nothing at first—however she was sent £4 10s in the 1919 payments. The family had by this time moved to Silver Street, Ely.

Albert is remembered on the Ely Market Place Memorial and in St Mary's Church, as well as in St Peter's Church.



## James Victor THOMPSON

<b>Born</b>	1897
<b>Killed in Action or Died</b>	21st November 1918, age 21
<b>Buried</b>	Grave 1. B. 9., Perreuse Chateau Franco British National Cemetery, Seine-et-Marne, France
<b>Unit</b>	Army Service Corps, attached. "O" Special Company., Royal Engineers
<b>Rank</b>	Private, Service Number DM2/209078
<b>Awards</b>	Military Medal, British War Medal and Victory Medal



**James Victor Thompson** (1897 Ely) was the youngest child of Walter Thompson (1858 Little Downham) and Mary Ann Field (1857 Littleport). Walter Thompson was an agent for mineral water with his own shop. James' older siblings were all born in Ely, these were: Ellen (1880); Bertha (1882); Kate (1883); Walter (1886); George Sidney (1888); Joseph (1890); and Louise (1893).

In 1901 the family lived in Lynn Road, Ely, and in 1911 in St John's Road. The census records show that Kate and Louise became dressmakers, while Sidney worked for a baker, and Joseph was an assistant in a boot shop. James himself became one of the boy choristers at Ely Cathedral from 1906 to 1913.

James became an apprentice with Messers A and B Hall on Ely's Forehill and spent two and a half years in their engineering department before he joined up on 28th August 1916 and was sent to France the following February. He served with the Army Service Corps as a member of their Motor Transport wing. The ASC was the logistics arm of the British Expeditionary Force, responsible for the movement of everything from food to weapons through to the Fronts. They were the "unsung heroes" of the conflict on whom everyone else depended. The Special Company of the Royal Engineers to which James was first attached would have been handling particularly dangerous weapons, including gas shells and flamethrowers and disposing of empty canisters afterwards. James earned himself a Military Medal for exceptional bravery in the field in September of 1917, this is probably in relation to the action at Lens on 30th July when someone, perhaps James, repaired damaged gas canisters charges during an attack.

James was a driver, and was attached for a period in this role to the American Forces. It was at this point he was stricken with the influenza which was beginning to sweep through Europe, and which had already started to bite in the American troops he joined up with.. On 14th November 1918 he was admitted to a hospital in a French chateau, near La Ferte Sous-Jouarre and wrote to his parents to tell them of his whereabouts. He died one week later of pneumonia (ten days after the end of the War) and was buried in the grounds of the chateau, which had become a cemetery. James' parents did not receive the news of his death until about six weeks later, probably because of the fact he was with the Americans rather than his own unit.

Five months after his death James' father Walter was sent his total effects of £27 7s 3d. The record shows that by this time the Thompsons were living in West Fen Road, Ely, but by the time the War Memorial was created they had moved away to Grange Road in Cambridge.

James is remembered on the Ely Market Place Memorial, the St Marys Memorial, and on the Choristers; Memorial in Ely Cathedral.

## Ernest Robert THORBY

<b>Born</b>	18th February 1898
<b>Killed in Action or Died</b>	21st September 1918. age 20
<b>Commemorated</b>	Panel 4 and 5, Vis-en-Artois Memorial, Pas de Calais, France
<b>Unit</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment
<b>Rank</b>	Private, Service Number 15755
<b>Awards</b>	Military Medal, 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal

**Ernest Robert Thorby** was born in Barway, which was under the parish of Soham, early in 1898. He was the oldest son of Robert Thorby (1871 Soham) and Elizabeth Ann Irons (1878 Burwell, Cambridgeshire). Ernest had three surviving brothers and two sisters, namely: George William (1900); Percy Sidney (1902); William Thomas (1906); Annie Maud (1907); and Elsie Louisa (1915).

Robert Thorby was a farm worker, specifically a horsekeeper, and the family lived in a large ten-roomed cottage on the Fen at Barway where all the children were born. It is probable that Ernest also became a farmworker, although he was still at school when the 1911 Census was taken. The Thorby family moved into Stuntney and Ernest was then employed and lived at Upware.



Ernest joined up with the Bedfordshire Regiment soon after the outbreak of the War, arrived in France on 26th July 1915, and served at the Front for more than three years. His battalion had taken part in the Battle of Loos in September 1915 and the Battle of Albert (including their famous assault on Trones Wood on 11th July) and the Battle of Delville Wood in July, as well as the Battle of Le Transloy in October 1916. 1917 saw the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line in March and the Battle of Arras in April. During the Battles of Passchendaele the battalion was engaged in the Battle of Pilkem in July and August but were spared direct assaults for the rest of the year, being confined to aggressive patrolling and raiding instead. In 1918 the members of the battalion were heavily engaged in the First Battles of the 1918 Somme, specifically the Battle of St Quentin, the actions at the Somme crossings and the Battle of Rosieres in March. During the Battle of the Lys, they were also engaged in the First Battle of Kemmel and the Battle of Scherpenberg in April. Once the Allied army went on the final offensives they were engaged in several actions - The Battle of Amiens in August, the Battle of Albert in August and the Second Battle of Bapaume in September.

Ernest was awarded the Military Medal for "gallant conduct and devotion to duty in the field on March 22nd (1918) near Jussy." This was for his part in the Battle of St Quentin when the Germans had broken the British Line the preceding day and driven them back, and the forces regrouped and held the new line at the Crozat Canal.

Ernest's parents moved from Barway to Cambridge Road in Ely and Ernest was home in Ely just days before he was killed in action, as he is recorded as being present at the funeral of his great grandmother Mrs Ann Webb at Burwell Congregational Church early in September 1918. Ann Webb had reached the age of one hundred just three months earlier. The newspaper records "seven of her grandsons and three of her great-grandsons are now serving in the Forces."

The Cambridge Daily News of 16th October 1918 reported Ernest's death:  
*"Pte. E. Thorby, Beds. Regt., son of Mt and Mrs R. Thorby, Cambridge Road, Ely who was awarded the Military Medal a few months ago, was killed by a piece of shell on September 21st, while resting in a shell hole before going over the top. A Lieut. of the deceased's company, in a sympathetic*

*letter, stated that Thorby was formerly his servant, and was most straightforward and reliable."*

Ernest's friend Private F G Ashby of Ely, who was in the same platoon, wrote to Ernest's parents to say that their son had died instantly and (as was customary) when their parcel had arrived from home the contents had been shared out amongst Ernest's friends in the platoon. They were then undertaking operation snear Rossoy.

Although Ernest's place of death was known, at the end the place of his burial was lost, and so he is remembered on one of the memorials to the missing. He is also commemorated on the Ely Market Place Memorial and in St Mary's Church.



## Ernest Edward THORPE

<b>Born</b>	1889
<b>Killed in Action or Died</b>	11th April 1917, age 28
<b>Commemorated</b>	Bay 4, Arras Memorial, Pas de Calais, France
<b>Unit</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion Suffolk Regiment
<b>Rank</b>	Private, Service Number 24547
<b>Awards</b>	British War Medal and Victory Medal

**Ernest Edward Thorpe** was born in Middle Fen Bank, Prickwillow, early in 1889 to Harry Hills Thorpe (1868 Ely) and his wife Mary Goat (1868 Ely). He had an older brother, George Harry (1887 Prickwillow) and two younger sisters called Edith Margaret (1891 Prickwillow) and Dora Mary (1893 Ely). Harry was a farm worker, and both George and Ernest followed him on to the farms. The two Thorpe girls married: Edith to George Smith late in 1911, and Dora to James Thorpe in 1912. George married Sarah Thorpe late in 1912. Ernest's father Harry then died in 1913 aged just forty-four. Ernest was the last to marry, to Millie Gathercole (1892 Prickwillow) early in 1916; Millie was the daughter of the Prickwillow blacksmith.

It is possible that Ernest and Millie deliberately decided to marry before Ernest was conscripted into the local Suffolk Regiment. He enlisted at Ely, and would have arrived at the Front in time to be a participant in the horrors of the Somme battlefields. He was killed in the Battle of the Scarpe during the Arras Offensive of 1917. He is named on the Arras Memorial with the other 833 "missing" who fell on the same day.

Ernest's effects amounted to £1 3s 7d which was sent to Millie after his death; she received a further £4 10s late in 1919.

Ernest is remembered on the Ely Market Place Memorial and the Prickwillow Memorial.



## Reginald TOOMBS

<b>Born</b>	1898
<b>Killed in Action or Died</b>	27th September 1919, age 21
<b>Buried</b>	Ely Cemetery D99
<b>Unit</b>	12th Battalion Tank Corps
<b>Rank</b>	Private, Service Number 205127
<b>Awards</b>	British War Medal and Victory Medal

The Toombs family was one of the oldest in Ely—it was said that they could trace their origins back to a Dutch artist who had arrived in Ely soon after work began on the great Norman cathedral. In the middle of the nineteenth century it was Richard Toombs and his wife Elizabeth who set up Ely's first hairdressing business; by the time the Great War began the third (and last) generation of Toombs hairdressers were at work in Ely. This was George Albert Toombs (1856 Ely) and his wife Laura Harper (1868 Cambridge) who raised a large family in Ely. Their children were: Alice (1888); George (1889); Ernest (1891); Percival (1893); Harry (1895); **Reginald** (1898); Hector (1900); and Alexander (1902). The family lived at 2 Broad Street, Ely, and George worked out of the family home. George's brother Richard and his family also ran a hairdressing business in Ely and they worked in a shop in the Buttermarket. George and Richard's father Richard had been a master hairdresser before them and worked in Broad Street, so the Toombs family business can be traced back to at least 1851.

Reginald's mother Laura died when he was just seven years old, in August 1905.

In the 1911 Census five of the eight children were still living with their widowed father. Alice was not in employment and was running the household in her mother's place, while Harry was assisting his father in the hairdressing business. By this time Reginald had left school and was working as an errand boy for a local butcher—he continued to work as a butcher's assistant until he enlisted. Reginald's brothers George and Ernest had both joined the Royal Navy and were actually in Portsmouth at the time the census was taken.

Despite already having several brothers in the Royal Navy, seventeen year old Reginald enlisted in the Army and served from 31st May 1915. He declared on enlistment that his age was 19 years and 2 months, two years more than he was in reality. His papers show that he was 5 feet 8 inches tall and in good physical condition.

Reginald joined the local militia while they were billeted in Ely (2nd/1st Suffolk Yeomanry service number 2099, later 305110) and was on Home Service. He was later transferred into their Cyclists Section, and was actually sent abroad in 1917 with the Machine Gun Corps (service number 107700) before transferring into the Tank Corps (service number 205127). He saw one year of service in France. Before his transfer into the Tank Corps Reginald was sent away to cookery school by the Army and he doubled up as a cook in the Tank Corps.

In September 1915 Reginald spent five days in the 3/3rd London Field Ambulance Station being treated for an ulcer on the left thigh.

The Tanks Corps which Reginald eventually joined was formed in 1917 as the Heavy Brigade of the Machine Gun Corps and although they were often ineffective and dangerous to deploy, the presence of tanks on the battlefield boosted troops morale. By the time Reginald became part of the Corps the tanks were proving to be especially useful in tasks such as crushing barbed wire and over-running machine gun posts and strong points. However, tank losses were always significant in any conflict in which they were engaged, and from 21st August 1918 to the Armistice on 11 November 1918, approximately 2,400 men and officers of the Tank Corps became casualties. One of those badly injured on the opening day of the Battle of the Selle (17th October 1918) was Reginald who was hit in the head and both legs as well as being gassed. The records also show that he had reported sick the day before the battle with a cough (this was possibly the tuberculosis with which he was

diagnosed later—he had also lost two stone in weight since he enlisted) but he was sent back to the ranks for the big attack the next day.

The severely wounded Reginald was taken first to the 29th Casualty Clearing Station at Bapaume, then transferred to the 68th American General Hospital, before eventually being transported back to England. Reginald's medical notes from Reading War Hospital, which he reached on 12th November 1918, prescribed plenty of fresh air for his tuberculosis, and noted that he had a gunshot wound to the head where there was a large piece of bone missing and that the brain could be seen pulsating through the hole, but that other gunshot wounds were healing.

Reginald was allowed back to Ely on March 3rd 1919 to attend his brother's wedding, and was then taken on to a sanatorium at Ipswich for a further ten weeks. In view of the severity of his wounds Reginald was awarded a Silver War Badge (No. B156881). The Silver War Badge was given to those who were honourably discharged from the Army as no longer physically fit to serve; Reginald therefore officially served to 3rd March 1919 when he was formally discharged. Reginald was asked to make his own statement of how he was affected by his injuries and his notes state; "Fractured skull caused by shell splinters, also gunshot wounds in both thighs. Cannot walk far. Aching head and acute dizziness. Eyes affected after reading. Wounds caused through enemy action and active service conditions." When he was sent home the medical notes stated that he was expected eventually to recover but that it would take at least another year, that he was 100% disabled and would require constant attention at home. On 2nd July 1919 Reginald returned to Broad Street in Ely to live with his family.

On discharge Reginald was granted six months of pension at 27s 6d, but when the time came for this to be reviewed he was already dead.

The Cambridge Daily News of 10th October 1919 reported his funeral:  
"Ely Family's Wonderful Record"

By the death of Mr Reginald Toombs, Mr G.A. Toombs, of Broad Street, loses his first son out of seven, who have served in His Majesty's Forces almost throughout the war—a truly remarkable record. Mr Reginald Toombs was invalided out of the Army quite recently, but the other six sons are still serving in various parts of the world, five of them are in the Navy and one is in the Army, while Mr Toombs' daughter served for some years in the V.A.D. (Voluntary Aid Detachment—nursing) Great sympathy is expressed with the family in its bereavement.

Mr Reginald Toombs passed away on Sunday last, after a long illness, due to wounds and complications arising from them. He had a very varied military career. Enlisting in the Suffolk Yeomanry when it was stationed at Ely, he was transferred to the Machine Gun Corps and his last corps was the Tank Corps. He proceeded to France last year with the Tanks, and saw considerable service before being badly wounded at a big engagement at Quirey on 17th October (1918). He was also gassed at the same time. Invalided home, he was a patient in various military hospitals, but did not make any progress, for consequent upon being gassed he developed pulmonary tuberculosis. After three months in a special sanatorium at Ipswich, he came home in July, and passed away as stated. The funeral took place very quietly at the Cemetery on Tuesday."

Reginald's father George married his sister-in-law Alice Rowell Harper (1864 Cambridge) late in 1921 and died less than a year later in June 1922. Alice had been listed amongst the principal mourners at Reginald's funeral. She lived on in the Toombs' Broad Street home until October 1942.

Reginald's family must have chosen not to have his grave marked with an official military gravestone, and so his name and resting place does not appear in the records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The family also requested a quiet funeral without any military honours, something which attracted criticism in the letters pages of the Ely Standard. Reginald is remembered on the Ely Market Place Memorial and the Holy Trinity Memorial. His was the last of the deaths which are recorded on the Market Place Memorial.

The Ely Standard records Reginald "enjoyed the respect and esteem of a large circle of friends".

## (Emery) Austin TOPPING

<b>Born</b>	1878
<b>Killed in Action or Died</b>	7th August 1917, age 39
<b>Buried</b>	Grave II. P. 14A., Wimereux Communal Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France
<b>Unit</b>	10 <sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers (London Regiment)
<b>Rank</b>	Private, Service Number G/65678
<b>Awards</b>	British War Medal and Victory Medal

**Emery Austin Topping** was born in Ely's West End in the summer of 1878. He was the oldest surviving child of Ely tailor Arthur Topping (1853, Ely) and his wife Ann Louisa Thompson (1852, Abergavenny, Monmouthshire). Arthur and Ann's first child Lily (1877-78) had lived for eleven months and died while Ann was pregnant with Emery, but four more daughters followed and finally another son: Harriet (1880); Nellie (1883); Laura (1884); Beatrice (1886); and George (1888).



It appears Emery was normally known by his middle name of Austin.

The family moved from West End into Gaol Lane where they can be found in the 1881 Census, then after a few years they moved again to West Fen Road. In the 1891 Census twelve year old Austin was still living at home, but had left school and was employed as a page boy in one of the larger houses in Ely.

Arthur's tailoring business grew and he was able to employ others to work for him, which may have included his daughter Harriet who was a dressmaker. However the 1891 Census shows that Austin had not joined the family business, but had instead set himself up as a market gardener. His sister Beatrice was also in work, and was assisting in a grocery store.

By 1911 Austin was no longer running his own business and was instead employed by Archdeacon Chapman as a gardener. He was still living with his parents, who had moved to Chiefs Lane, as were most of his siblings, except Harriet who was working in a large tailoring establishment in Romsey, Hampshire, and living in. Austin had also worked for a period for Messers J.M. Harvey and Sons who were local drapers.

In the autumn of 1912 Austin married Eliza Goodman at Tydd-St-Mary in Lincolnshire; in July 1913 their only child, Thomas Arthur Topping, was born after the family had settled in Cambridge. Austin continued to work as a gardener in Cambridge.

A few weeks after the outbreak of the War, late in December 1914, Emery's sister Laura died back in Chiefs Lane, Ely.

Once conscription was introduced Austin attested in Cambridge in 1916 in the Royal West Surrey Regiment (service number 12867). He was later transferred to the Royal Fusiliers and was badly wounded on 1st July 1917 after he had been in France for about six weeks. He was conveyed to the major medical centre at Boulogne cum Wimereux where he died over a month later after having a leg amputated.

The Cambridge Daily News of 6th September 1917 recorded:

*"Pte. E. Austin Topping, son of Mr and Mrs Austin Topping, of Chief's Lane, Ely, has died of wounds received in action. The deceased was shot in the right arm and both legs, one of which was subsequently amputated. He had been in the trenches two days when he met with his injuries, having joined the colours over a year ago. Pte. Topping, who was 39 years of age, was a native of Ely, and was well known and respected in the city."*



Eliza was sent Emery's effects of £4 5s 9d, with a further £3 10s in 1919.

Austin is commemorated on the Ely Market Place Memorial and in St Mary's Church, he is also remembered in Cambridge in St Luke's Church and on the main Cambridge Guildhall Memorial.

## Arthur George TYNDALL

<b>Born</b>	16th May 1898
<b>Killed in Action or Died</b>	18th November 1917, age 19
<b>Commemorated</b>	Panel 145 to 147, Tyne Cot Memorial, Zonnebeke, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium
<b>Unit</b>	"A" Company, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion Rifle Brigade
<b>Rank</b>	Second Lieutenant
<b>Awards</b>	British War Medal and Victory Medal

**Arthur George Tyndall** (1898 Ely) was the only child of George Herbert Tyndall (1870 Oughtibridge, Yorkshire) and Annie (nee Wembling, 1870, Harston, Cambridgeshire). The family lived at Minster Cottage, St Mary's Street, Ely and George was a bookseller, printer, stationer and newsagent, trading as "The Minster Press, Ely". When the War broke out in August of 1914 George Tyndall posted up telegrams in his shop window about the progress of the War, and this drew large crowds anxious for the latest news. He could not have known that he would lose his only son as a result of the ensuing conflict.

Arthur was one of the original entrants to Bedford House School (later Ely High School) in May 1905, and was there for three years before moving to the Lynfield Preparatory School for Boys in Hunstanton (where he can be found as a boarder in the 1911 Census). From Lynfield Arthur came back to Ely and attended the King's School. From Kings School Arthur became a pupil of the County Surveyor for the Southern Division of the Isle of Ely, and remained with him for one and a half years. On his eighteenth birthday Arthur attempted to enlist with the Suffolks, but when they would not accept him he then proceeded to Fitzwilliam House in Cambridge. Fitzwilliam House was a non-collegiate institution, providing Cambridge education to undergraduates who were unable to afford membership of a college.

At Cambridge University Arthur was a member of the Officers Training Corps for six months and was then able to enlist; he received a commission, and was gazetted Second Lieutenant in the Rifle Brigade from 29th August 1917 (London Gazette 17th September 1917). Arthur reached France on 18th October 1917, and was killed in action exactly one month later at Passchendaele by a shell.

His Commanding Officer Lieutenant-Colonel Brand wrote: "*He had only been with us a short time, but had shown promise of doing excellent work.....I am very sorry that a promising young officer's life should have been cut short.*"

Those who knew Arthur spoke of his: "steady courage and an unflinching determination"; "earnest anxiety to give his best"; "integrity of character"; "happy and faultless life"

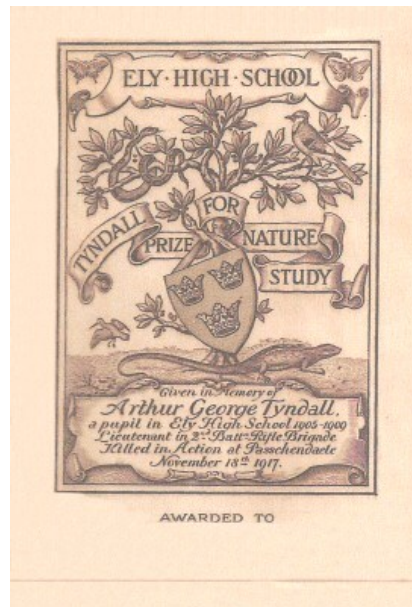
Arthur's body was not identified for burial and so he is remembered on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing. He is also commemorated on the Ely Market Place Memorial and the Memorial in St Mary's Church. His story is told in the Marquis de Ruvigny's Roll of Honour, Volume 2.

The memorial for Arthur and the other 42 students of the former Fitzwilliam House who died in World War One takes the form of a memorial playing field on Fitzwilliam College's Oxford Road site.

Arthur is also remembered on the Memorial in Ely's Kings School.



At Ely High School the “Tyndall Prize for Nature Study” was given annually in Arthur’s name (donated by Helen Smith), a very appropriate award as Arthur was well known as a keen naturalist with an excellent knowledge of local flora and fauna.



*Bookplate for the Tyndall Prize for Nature Study*

## Herbert Charles VAIL

<b>Born</b>	18th July 1896
<b>Killed in Action or Died</b>	16th July 1918, age 21
<b>Buried</b>	Grave D. 106., Ely Cemetery
<b>Unit</b>	Army Service Corps
<b>Rank</b>	Private, Service Number R/39828
<b>Awards</b>	1914 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal

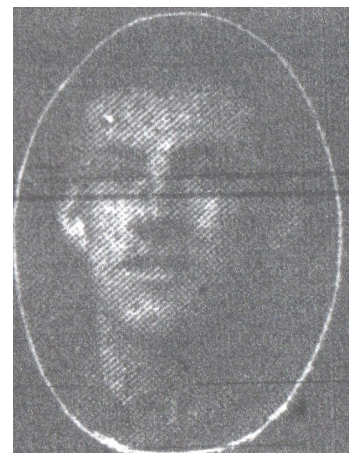
**Herbert Charles Vail** was born in the College (the Cathedral Precincts), Ely, in 1896 as his father Joseph Vail (1851 Ely) was one of the Cathedral's labour workforce and the family lived in Cathedral accommodation. Herbert's mother was Ann Dolby (1857 Ely) and Herbert had two older brothers George William (1886 Ely) and Harry Jarvis (1891 Ely). Herbert also had an older half sister, Etty Sophia Vail (1882 Ely) as his father's first wife, Sophia Frier, had died in childbirth. Herbert had the privilege of being baptised in Ely Cathedral itself on 15th August 1896.

By the 1911 Census Joseph Vail was still employed by the Cathedral but the family had moved out of the precincts to a nearby tenement known as "The Cottage" in Barton Square. George was then working as an engine cleaner for Great Eastern Railways and was making a name for himself as a member of the Ely City Cricket Team, while Harry was working as a carpenter. Herbert himself had left school by this time and was working as an errand boy for a local ironmonger—this was probably Pecks as Herbert later gained an apprenticeship at Mr J Peck's as a trainee whitesmith, but this apprenticeship expired on 17th March 1913 and he then found employment as a brewery labourer. This also was a short lived career and he attempted to join the Army. Although he was rejected on his first attempt to enlist because of his poor eyesight, Herbert successfully enlisted in the Coldstream Guards at Ely on 15th June 1914 (service number 10770). His enlistment papers describe him as 5 feet 8 9/10 inches tall, with a ruddy complexion, grey eyes and dark brown hair and with a scar on his right wrist. He was passed fit for service despite "very poor sight indeed, but is up to standard" and "loss and decay of six teeth". A later character reference describes him as "tries hard, not very intelligent".

Herbert was posted to join the 3rd Battalion of the Coldstream Guards in France on 7th October 1914 (he was a "Mons Hero") and fought with them until 15th February 1915 when he was sent back home to Aberdeen to convalesce following a gunshot wound in the thigh at La Bassee. He was placed for a period in the 4th Reserve Battalion of the Coldstream Guards, which was then on Home Service, until 14th August 1915 and his return to France. Herbert was sent back to England in January 1917 with a permanently damaged "poisonous" right toe, and was thereafter posted to the 5th Reserve Battalion at Windsor. He was then transferred into the Army Service Corps (Remounts Section) in November 1917 and served at the depot at Swaythling in Hampshire.

There are a few minor issues in Herbert's disciplinary record: in January 1915 he was awarded five days hard labour for committing a nuisance in the billets; the following April he was a day late back from sick leave after his time in Aberdeen Hospital and tried to forge his papers to cover this up and had seven days confined to barracks as a result; and finally, at the end of 1916 he had another two days confined to barracks because he was not wearing his military identity disc.

Herbert's father Joseph died late in October 1916. He had worked as a labourer at the cathedral for thirty years, but four years previously had fallen in the nave and broken his thigh. He had been bedridden for a year and was thereafter a chair bound invalid. For 43 years Joseph had also been a bell-ringer at St Mary's Church.



It is probable that Herbert was on a visit back to Ely when he was admitted to the 1st Eastern General Hospital at Cambridge on 10th July 1918 with what was originally thought to be influenza but turned out to be meningitis. He was transferred to the Isolation Hospital at Tring; upon arrival he was "unconscious and violently delirious". Despite all possible assistance being given, Herbert died on 16th July officially of cerebrospinal fever (aka brain fever) and pneumonia. He was brought back to Ely for burial.

Herbert's mother Ann was sent his effects, which amounted to £6 1s 7d, with a further £18 in 1919.

Herbert is remembered on the Ely Market Place Memorial.