

George Thomas Hance

Gunner 61663, Royal Garrison Artillery

George Thomas Hance was born on 24 July 1897 at Grimsdells Cottages, Grimsdells Lane, Amersham Common, Buckinghamshire, to George and Minnie Hance (née Cox). He was the eldest of eight children: Dorothy (b.1898), Hilda (1900), William (1902), Alfred (1905), Joseph (1907) Alice (1910) and Frederick John (1912). Minnie died in 1921 after giving birth to another son, who died a few months later. George was baptised on 30 July 1905 and his father was recorded as being a labourer.

At the time of the 1901 and 1911 Censuses George was living with his parents and siblings at Grimsdells Cottages, which consisted of four rooms. Aged 13 years, his occupation was recorded as “works in garden” and his father’s as farm labourer.

George subsequently moved to 17 Choumert Road, Peckham, and was working as a farrier. On 1 November 1915 he enlisted at Deptford in the Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA). The RGA was one of three elements of the Royal Regiment of Artillery. It developed from fortress-based artillery located on British coasts. The RGA grew into a very large component of the British forces. It was armed with heavy, large calibre guns and howitzers that were positioned some way behind the front and had immense destructive power.¹

On his attestation papers George Hance gave his age as 20 years, although he was actually only 18 years old. He was described as 5’ 7 ¾ “tall with a 39” chest and had a scar on his forehead. He gave his next of kin as George Hance, the Pheasant, Amersham Common. His regimental number was 61663 and he served as a gunner. He was posted on 22 January 1916 and posted overseas on 23 February 1916 to the trench war zone in France as part of the British Expeditionary Force. On 13 July that year he was reported as being in hospital in Rouen having been badly gassed and with a gunshot wound to the head. His family was informed and he left France on 19 July 1916 and was returned to the military hospital at Fordsham, Cheshire, on 20 July. In December 1916 he was with a Military Proofing Party working at Woolwich Arsenal. This was designated as ordinary military service, but on 22 August 1917 he was discharged due to total incapacity. He was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis and it was recorded that he refused sanatorium treatment and would attend his own doctor. He qualified for a pension of 27/6d per week.

Gas Warfare in WW1. The decision to develop gas as a major weapon was taken by Germany in the autumn of 1914. The High Command was worried about the shortage of explosive shells and their ineffectiveness against entrenched troops, so they accepted a proposal from the head of the German chemical giant Bayer to explore the mass production of poison gas for use in battle. On 22 April 1915 chlorine from gas cylinders enveloped a section of the Allied line at Ypres, killing large numbers of soldiers and instilling panic into the rest. There was no effective gas mask in the early years of the war. One of the problems of using gas was that it could only be used when the wind was blowing from a certain direction, otherwise it caused difficulty for the home troops. Chlorine gas caused severe coughing, and vomiting and the affected soldiers rolled around in agony. Later in the war, the Germans used mustard gas which caused burning and blistering of the skin and blindness. In retrospect most commanders judged that the use of poison gas had made life worse for all troops, to no decisive effect.

(Ref: Overy Richard. *World War 1- the Definitive Visual Guide*) DK 2014.

It is apparent from the descriptions of George’s suffering, that he was affected by Chlorine Gas.

Gunner Hance was awarded The Allied Victory Medal and The British War Medal, 1914-18. He was given a Silver War Badge, which would show that he had served but been discharged.

¹ The British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918. “The British Artillery of 1914-1918 “. www.1914-1918.net



The **SILVER WAR BADGE** similar to that issued to George Thomas Hance. It was issued in the United Kingdom to service personnel who had been honourably discharged due to wounds or sickness during World War 1. The badge was first issued in September 1916, along with an official certificate of entitlement.

The sterling silver lapel badge was intended to be worn on civilian clothes. The badge was to be worn on the right breast while in civilian dress. It was forbidden to wear on a military uniform.

The Silver War Badge would have been worn with pride.

George died unexpectedly on 20 January 1918. According to the report in the *Bucks Examiner* of 25 January, a coroner's inquiry investigated the death. His father claimed that his son had been discharged on account of the effects of wounds and having been gassed, from which he had suffered a great deal. He had not expected his son to die suddenly as he had made very little complaint. Before he went into the army he had been of sound health and had no sign of lung problems.

Minnie and Frederick Salmond of East View, Chestnut Lane, Amersham Common, told the inquiry that on the Sunday evening George had called at their house just before seven o'clock. He banged on the door without using the knocker, and they found him in a crouched position, holding on to the wall and saying 'I am dying, I am dying'. He was vomiting blood copiously. They helped him into the kitchen and a doctor was sent for, but George had died before he arrived. A post-mortem examination revealed that the right lung was very much diseased and there was a large cavity from which the bleeding had taken place. Gassing was assumed to have been the original cause. In summing up, the Coroner described the case as a sad one, and expressed his sympathy, a sympathy in which the jury and all present concurred.

Gunner Hance was buried with full military honours at St. Mary's Cemetery, Amersham, Grave no 1055.

The Rev. P. S. Warren officiated and made all the arrangements on behalf of the family.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, having been contacted in 2013 by a descendant of George, had agreed to arrange for the erection of their official headstone on his grave.

Happily, this work was completed in early 2015 in time for a photograph to be included with this narrative.

