

James Williams

Rifleman, 470724, 12th Battalion (County of London) London Regiment (The Rangers)

James Williams was born in 1890 in Amersham to Thomas and Mary Williams. He was baptised on 10 July 1890. The Williams family appear, by the time of the 1881 Census, to have become an established family in Amersham, with family members living in premises either side of the 'Sir Wm Drake's Almshouses' on the High Street. His parents, both from Amersham, were born in 1851. At the time of James's birth they were living on the High Street, immediately east of the Alms Houses. His father was a dairy manager.

From Census data we learn that his grandparents were stockmen; his paternal grandfather, b.1824 in Amersham, a cowkeeper, married his grandmother, Mary (b.1826) in 1849 in Amersham. Although, his great grandmother, Jane Ellis (b.1801) and her daughter, Mary, are both recorded as

being born in Peterborough, by 1841 Mary Ellis was in service in Windsor End, Beaconsfield. The 1881 Census describes her as a "brazier (*sic*) & cowkeeper" – whilst potentially an enumerator's mis-hearing of 'grazier & cowkeeper', the close link with 'stock' and later as 'plumber' suggests the term, meaning a 'worker in brass', could well be correct – the adornment of harness with brasses as well as the use of brass in taps would have required local artisans to work the metal. By 1901 the premises, Town Farm, to the west of the almshouses were described as a "Dairy and plumbers shop" with Mary Williams (James's paternal grandmother) recorded as "dairy farmer & plumber" with the status of "employer". Also in the household was his aunt, Mary Williams (b.1852, his father's sister and a dressmaker) together with an uncle, also James (b.1863) working as a plumber.



Town Farm, High Street, Amersham. A 'dairy and plumber's shop' in 1901, run by James's grandmother Mary Williams. James was a milkman. (Photo taken in Sept. 2014, H.Garas).

James's parents, Thomas and Mary Williams, had 5 children, one of whom died in childhood. His mother (née Stevens) was from an established family in the locality; his maternal grandfather, James Stevens b.1827 in Chenies, was a shepherd, whilst his maternal grandmother, Unity (b. 1829), came from Amersham. Living on the High Street in 1881, Mary had been employed as a domestic servant to Miss Matilda L. Statham, an annuitant 20 years her senior. Thomas and Mary Williams married in 1882 in Brentford, Middlesex. James's elder brother, Thomas (b.1884), became a plumber's apprentice and subsequently established his own family in Lambeth working as a plumber. His sister Agnes Louisa (b.1886) worked in the Rectory at Aldbury, a household having 5 domestic servants, as lady's maid to Lucy, the wife of the Reverend Henry Wellingson Wood. James, referred to in the family as 'Jim' (sometimes 'Jimmy'), became a milkman - probably working for his grandmother at Town Farm – whilst his elder brother, Joseph b.1887 (known as 'Joe') was a carpenter. Thomas Williams died in Amersham in 1907, aged 56. According to the 1911 Census, widow Mary Williams, then aged 60, was living at 91 High Street, Amersham with her mother Unity Stevens (82) and widowed sister Louisa Cheshire. Joseph (24) and James (20) were both still single and living at home.



Number 92 High Street, Amersham which was renumbered in the 1950s and used to be 91. It is now named "Appletree Cottage" and is next door to the Alms Houses. The house is the last known address of James Williams. He lived here with brother Joe, widowed mother Mary, grandmother and aunt at the time of the 1911 Census.

Mary Williams was still living at this address in the 1935 Kelly's Directory.

(Photograph taken in Sept. 2014. H.Garas)

James Williams's military service was with the 12th (County of London) Battalion (The Rangers). This was formed in August 1914 in Chenies Street, Bedford Square, London, where James enlisted. The brothers Joseph and James were in the 'Second List of Names' in the 'Roll of Honour' published by the *Bucks Examiner* in October 1914 as both enlisting into 'The Rangers'. This was part of the 3rd London Brigade of the 1st London Division. From London they moved first to Bullswater, then Pirbright and subsequently Crowborough. In October of that year they moved to their war station guarding the railway from Waterloo to North Camp and then to Roehampton. In December they were mobilised for war and embarked for France leaving the 1st London Division and arriving at Le Havre on 25 December 1914; they were moved to defend the 'Lines of Communication'.

Whilst fighting alongside his brother in early May 1915, James was wounded. The *Bucks Examiner* reported on the 11 June 1915 that his mother received a letter from him telling her that he was taken prisoner on 8 May and was then in Giessen Prisoner-of-War (PoW) Camp. That report, filed by the paper's Amersham correspondent, by describing his letter as "*a most cheerful one, which is typical of Rifleman Williams*", provided an insight into James's nature. It continued that he assured his mother he was being well treated and was comfortable. "*With his usual thought for others, he expresses regret at the anxiety which he has caused her*". It is interesting to note that James could receive letters without restriction and that letters should be addressed to him at No. 1177, Camp 2, Barrack E, Giessen (Allemagne), via Holland. He spent 3 years 7 months as a PoW.

Research coincidentally identified a transcript from the BBC of the recollections of Pte. James Brady (UK locality of origin not known) who was also a prisoner in Giessen. "*.....Nov. 11th came and went within the dreary confines of Giessen prisoner-of-war camp, without us having the slightest inkling of what was going on in the 'free' world outside....*" The piece further describes "*one of the most comprehensive delousing stations [the prisoners] had ever come across*", of being stripped and the "*bizarre in extreme*" process of delousing until "*we were reduced to the bald bareness of our birthdays*". Then dressed in their "*own clean, lice-free uniforms, everybody felt there was a good deal to commend German de-lousing methods. It was the nearest approach to bliss in captivity that we'd ever experienced*"

Initially James Williams was engaged on land-work and from a diary he kept it was reported he experienced no special hardship during the first year as a PoW. Subsequently, he was compelled to work in quarries and mines, where he suffered considerably through a shortage of food. It was reported that "but for the parcels of food sent from this country, he could not have held out for so

long". He was repatriated in December 1918 and after a tedious and extremely slow train journey, he arrived at Dover on Wednesday, 11 December "almost in a state of collapse".

He was sent onto a Military Hospital at Canterbury in a critical condition. His relatives were telegraphed for and travelled down to see him. He made some improvement, such that on the Sunday his brother, Thomas, returned to his work in London. Unfortunately, he had a relapse and died the next day, 16 December 1918, in the presence of his mother and sister. The cause of death was recorded as pneumonia and syncope. Given that he had survived over three years as a PoW, the impact of his demise must have been traumatic within the community. As the *Bucks Examiner* reported he *"had a cheery, though retiring disposition and was held in the highest respect by all who knew him, so that when the news of the signing of the Armistice was received there were many glad hearts at the prospect of the privilege of welcoming 'Jim' home and many suggestions for arrangements. In the place of this gladness there is a gloom ... a home robbed of its joy and the town of one whose past deeds had marked him as a townsman worthy of admiration and esteem"*.

James Williams's funeral, which took place on Saturday 21 December 1918, was comprehensively reported in the *Bucks Examiner* of 27 December 1918. He received a full Military funeral.

"The body enclosed in a polished elm coffin had been brought to Amersham on the previous Thursday Preceding the coffin was a detachment from Halton Camp, and the coffin was borne by four men from the Camp. Following the committal sentences, the 'Last Post' was sounded by two buglers from Halton".

Again, the character of the man and the respect he had within the community, came out in the descriptions on the floral tributes, not only by the poignant family messages – ..."Our darling 'Jim' from your brokenhearted Mother and Sister: Nearly four years we have patiently prayed, watched and waited for you: safe at last"; "In loving memory of our always cheerful 'Jimmy' ... from Daisy"; but also by others: "From Grace and Harry in memory of a life-long chum who gave his life for his country". The tributes included a wreath ".... from the Members of the Amersham Conservative Club".

James Williams was awarded The Allied Victory Medal and The British War Medal, 1914-18.



James Williams is remembered with Honour
and is buried in Plot 1423
Amersham Consecrated Cemetery

In Loving Memory of

JAMES WILLIAMS

County of London Regt. Rangers

who died on the 16th Dec.1918 on his way home from
Germany after being a prisoner of war 3 years 7 months.
Aged 28 years

*"HIS COUNTRY CALLED, HE ANSWERED
NOW IN GOD'S HANDS HE RESTS"*

Photo Peter Underwood

www.buckinghamshireremembers.org.uk

Sources:

Bucks Examiner – editions dated 20 October 1914; 11 June 1915; 20 & 27 December 1918.

GRO Death Certificate; registered at Canterbury, 17 December 1918 by his brother, T Williams, and

BBC Schools Online – <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone/survivor/memoir01>