

George Henry Willis

Sapper, WR/289341, 115th Railway Company, Royal Engineers

Sapper George Henry Willis with a photograph of his mother Sarah and the dog in the background.

*Photo by kind permission of Barry Warr
(Great, great nephew of Sapper Willis)
www.buckinghamshireremembers.org.uk*



George Henry Willis was born on 4 November 1890 probably in Great Kingshill where the family had moved from North Dean by the time of the 1891 Census. He lived with his parents, Richard and Sarah Willis, and four older siblings, Annie, (b.1875), Mary Ann, (b.1880), Gertrude (b.1884) and Daisy (b.1887). Both parents were born in 1847 in the locality, Richard in North Dean and Sarah (née Charge) in Prestwood. George was baptised in Prestwood Parish Church on 13 November 1890. His father, Richard, was a farm labourer, as was his paternal grandfather, George b.1811 in North Dean. Both his mother and grandmother, Elizabeth, b.1809 in Wendlebury, Oxfordshire, were lace-makers.

The family appeared close-knit. In 1871 Richard and Sarah together with their first two children, Elizabeth (b.1868) and William (b.1871), were living with Richard's parents, George and Elizabeth. Additionally, the household included his father's brother William (b.1838) also a farm labourer, and another grandson of his grandparents, also named George (b.1864). By 1881 Richard was head of the household, which then included George's widowed grandmother and his cousin George as a lodger; George was also employed in farm work.

Subsequently, his three youngest sisters gained employment as bead-workers and George's father became a carter on a farm in the Great Kingshill area. The family later moved to Amersham, probably to Amersham Common. In 1907 his father was working for Messrs. Weller on their Woodside Farm, Amersham Common, where he died in a tragic accident.

At an inquest held at Mr Percy Todham's, Amersham Common, a fellow farm-worker, Edward Harris, described how while cutting hay from a rick in August 1907, Richard Willis slipped on loose hay, fell some 8ft off the rick and suffered a broken neck. Sarah Willis gave evidence of identification and George, who was assisting in the task, stated he "did not see him fall but thought it was a pure accident". A verdict of 'accidental death' was returned. At the suggestion of their foreman, Mr G Line, "the jurors handed their fees to the widow".

According to the 1911 Census, George Willis was living with his mother in Grimsdell's Lane, Amersham together with his sister Daisy, her husband, Robert Ridgley, (b.1884 in Little Missenden and m.1909), who was a cowman, and their infant son, Robert (b.1911). George was then employed as a platelayer on the Metropolitan and Grand Central Railway. Interestingly, George completed and signed the Census form. Further evidence of the close family ties is provided by the fact that George's widower cousin, William Willis, was living next door together with his daughter, Dorothy Mary (b.1902). William was employed as a brewer's drayman.

Given that the process of mobilisation, involving troop movements at the start of the war on a vast scale throughout Europe, was dependent on railways and gave rise to the phrase "war by timetable", and that the railway was the primary means of movement of men, munitions and supplies, the important contribution to the war effort of the Railway Construction Companies of the Royal Engineers, appears largely to have been under-reported; indeed, there is a view that this essential, if unglamorous, element in military operations has been underestimated. The officers of such companies were recruited from railway workers provided by the British railway companies on the recommendation of the Railway Executive Committee and the other ranks were mainly men from overseas who had been employed on colonial and foreign railways. Some of the Railway Construction Companies created in 1915 included contingents of men from particular localities where the railways employed large numbers. They thus formed units similar to the "Pals battalions" of the infantry. The primary objective was always to take standard-gauge railways as close to the front as possible to lessen the demands on light railway systems, horsed transport and manpower.

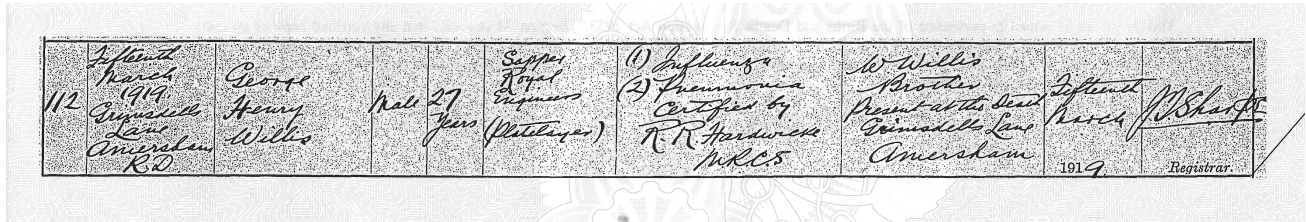
George Willis enlisted in October 1916 (according to a newspaper article). The 115th Railway Company was raised at the Royal Engineers depot at Longmoor, Hampshire, possibly in mid-1915. As he was a platelayer, George was certain to be posted to such a unit. Longmoor was the HQ of the regular railway troops before the war and training was carried out using the specialised Woolmer Instructional Military Railway. During WW1, Longmoor, and later, part of Bordon, became the centre for the Royal Engineers' railway and road personnel. From the outbreak of war until the Armistice, nearly 1,700 officers and 66,000 other ranks were sent overseas from this centre.

The 115th Railway Company of the Royal Engineers was sent to Egypt and they were in place by the end of December 1915, but George must have joined them later. One can imagine that for a young man from an agricultural area of Buckinghamshire, the thought of serving in an exotic location like Egypt would have been quite exciting.

The Royal Engineers became part of the **Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF)** formed in March 1916, under the command of General Archibald Murray at the beginning of the Sinai and Palestine Campaign. It was initially raised to guard the Suez canal, the vital link between Britain and her Empire. There were essentially two active fronts in Egypt. The Eastern Force pursued the Ottoman Turks into Sinai and then to Palestine, while the Western Force fought in what was known as the **Sennusi Campaign** against a religious Senussi sect of tribesmen from Libya, supported by Ottoman Turks and Germans. The fighting took place along the Egyptian Mediterranean coast and from November 1915 until March 1916, and in the oases of the Western Desert (the 'Band of Oases' campaign from February 1916 to February 1917). The 115th Railway Coy was part of the Railway Operating division, serving in the Alexandria District, and involved in maintaining the railways in the Delta area. The Headquarters of the Administrative services and departments for railways and water was based in Alexandria.

Most of the men in the RE Railway Companies had enlisted for the duration of the War and were keen to return home as soon as possible after hostilities ended. However, there was much repair work to be done and gradually the Railway Companies began to be demobilised. The 115th left Egypt in March 1919.

George arrived home from Egypt on 10 March 1919. In *The Bucks Examiner* dated 28 March 1919, a notice entitled "Death after Service" stated that Sapper Willis arrived home from Egypt obviously quite ill. He was diagnosed with influenza which turned to pneumonia and, despite all efforts to save him, died at home in Grimsdells Lane, Amersham Common, on 15 March 1919. He was interred in Amersham Cemetery on Wednesday 19 March 1919. The funeral was well attended and included railway employees and Nurse Brown. It was a private rather than a military funeral.



Above is a copy of the death certificate of Sapper George Henry Willis, showing cause of death as influenza and pneumonia. He was 27 years old. His brother Will was with him when he died. After waiting so long for his return from the war, to lose George only days after landing in England must have been devastating for the family.

The South Bucks Free Press, dated 4 April 1919, gave extensive coverage of the funeral of Sapper Willis and all the floral tributes in an article. One tribute read: "In ever-loving memory of my dear boy, from his broken-hearted mother" and another "In ever-loving memory of my dear brother, from his sorrowing brother, Will." There were several other tributes expressed in similar terms, showing the affection with which George was remembered.

The family obviously greatly missed George and in "*The Bucks Examiner*" dated March 1924 (five years after his death) a moving tribute from the family to George and his mother Sarah Willis, who died 21 March 1923, was published.

*"Gone are the faces we love so dear.
Silent the voices we long to hear.
Too far away for word or speech.
But not too far for thoughts to reach
Deeply we mourn in silence unseen
and dwell on the memory of days that have been."*

George received The Allied Victory Medal and The British War Medal, 1914-18.

George Henry Willis is remembered with Honour and is buried in
Amersham Consecrated Cemetery (grave ref.1342).

His name is commemorated by inscription on the Amersham War Memorial and on the Roll of Honour in St Mary's Church, Amersham.

In Loving Memory of
Sapper GEORGE WILLIS RE

Who arrived home from Egypt on March 10th 1919
and died March 15th 1919

Aged 27 years

*"FATHER IN THY GRACIOUS KEEPING
LEAVE WE NOW OUR LOVED ONE SLEEPING"*

Photo by Peter Underwood

www.buckinghamshireremembers.org.uk



Sources:

Bucks Herald; No. 3940 published Aylesbury, Saturday, 31 August 1907; p. 8.

The Long, Long Trail; RE Railway Construction Companies. www.1914-1918.net

Bucks Remembered; www.buckinghamshireremembers.org.uk

Barry Marr, (great, great nephew of Sapper Willis) kindly supplied the photograph and copies of newspapers relating to the death and funeral.