

The Story of Gunner Harold Meadows

I was sorting through some old photographs on my computer recently and I came across a few I had taken some years ago and never used. Just occasionally when walking through Peterborough it can coincide with refurbishment work being carried out on old buildings. One of my jobs before I retired was to manage shop fitting projects, so I was mildly interested when I came across the work being carried out on this shop in Westgate in the picture below.



Actually, the only work they had done so far was to strip off the shop sign, which only revealed an older sign behind it. This sign however went right back to the First World War, and I remembered almost immediately that there was a rather tragic story connected with this old shop.

In 2014 I wrote a book entitled *Peterborough at War 1914-1918*, and in that book I recorded a story relating to a soldier called Harold Meadows. The main information came from an article published in the *Peterborough Advertiser* in April 1916, which is set out below:

Sad End of a Peterborough Gunner

An inquest was held at Peterborough Law Courts on Wednesday 26th April on the body of Gunner Harold Meadows, Northants R.F.A. 4th East Anglian Brigade (T) stationed at Hertford. The deceased was found hanging in an outhouse in Geneva Street, Peterborough, after attending a public dance on the previous Monday evening.

The inquest was conducted by Mr. W. B. Buckle, Deputy Coroner's Officer. Mr. George Meadows, Fruiterer, of Peterborough, father of the deceased, identified the body as that of his son, and said he was 27 years of age. He had joined the Army three weeks earlier and previous to going away, helped him in his business as fruiterer. He was healthy, troubled a little sometimes with indigestion, hardworking and steady. He last saw him alive on Monday evening between six and seven; he had his tea with them, and went away soon after. He went away in good spirits, and was due to return to his regiment on Tuesday morning, which worried him.

The Coroner: "Would it worry him sufficiently to account for him taking his life?"

Mr. Meadows: "No, he is the last I should have thought to do so."

"Is there any suggestion of mental trouble in former generations?"

"I have never heard of any, not the slightest."

"Any domestic trouble?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Did the premises in which he was found belong to you?"

"No, to Mr. Neal."

Doctor R. W. Jolley, who examined the body stated that he was fetched by the police at about 3.45 and taken to the mortuary, where he saw the body of the deceased in the uniform of the R.F.A. and described the appearance. Under the left ear there was an indentation, which might have been produced by a knot of a rope. He must have been dead at least six hours, there was no other mark or injury, death was due to hanging.

Joseph Nicholls, munitions worker of 23, George Street, Fletton, said he had been a friend of the deceased for five or six years, he last saw him alive about midnight on Monday near the Recruiting Office. They had both been to a dance in the Cooperative Hall, he was quite cheerful, but

complained of having a pain in his stomach which I did not take much notice of, as he often had indigestion.

The Coroner: "Did he say anything about taking his life?"

Mr. Nicholls: "No."

"Did he say how he had been getting on?"

"Yes, he said he had had a jolly good time, a real holiday."

"Perhaps you know that he did not care much about going?"

"Yes, he had not much liked the idea of joining the army."

"This Easter time he seemed to you that he had settled down?"

"Yes."

"Was he cheerful when he left you on Monday night?"

"Yes, there were four of us; he went off alone back down Long Causeway, as if he was going back to the Cooperative Hall."

"Was there any trouble with a young lady in the case?"

"I do not think so; he never said anything to me."

Charles Albert Meadows, of 3, Trinity Street, in the employ of Messrs. Brotherhoods said he was no relation to the deceased, but was a great friend; he was not at the dance and had not seen him over the weekend.

"Did you find the body?"

"Yes sir, between 2:15 and 3:00 on Tuesday afternoon, he was hanging from a beam in a half sitting position, legs on the ground."

"Did you obtain assistance?"

"Yes sir, I went to the nearest policeman, I never touched the body."

"You went for assistance at once?"

"Yes sir."

"Quite right."

P.C. Arthur Andrews stated that in consequence of what was told him by the last witness, he went to Neal's Yard, Geneva Street, about 2:30 and saw the body hanging from a beam, and his feet touched the ground, the beam was about seven feet from the ground. The body was quite stiff and cold; he at once cut him down and removed the body to the mortuary. While searching the body in the presence of Inspector Drake and two other police officials, he found one shilling and one halfpenny, one leather purse, one door key and one pocket knife, nothing at all was found in writing except a few postcards. The jury retired and after a few minutes returned with the verdict that the deceased took his life during a fit of temporary insanity, and they wished to sympathise with Mr. Meadows and the brother in their trouble.

Gunner Harold Meadows was buried at Peterborough Cemetery on Friday 5th May. The coffin was of polished Elm with brass fittings, on the breastplate was inscribed: 'Harold Meadows, born June 22nd, 1888. Died April 25th, 1916.' The Rev. C. Curtis officiated and the remains were borne to their resting place by the following six comrades from his regiment in charge of Sgt. Smith: Gunners Smith, Piggot, Afford, Goodwin, Wright and Smith.

This is not the first suicide that I have come across while researching servicemen from the local area, and it is sad that apart from this newspaper article, there is no other information to be found about Harold Meadows. He is not on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website nor on the Pension Record Cards and Ledgers. He died at home by his own hand and therefore the army would have no more interest in him. The basic details below show the location of his grave.

MEADOWS, Harold, Peterborough, 4981, Gunner, Northants RFA, 4th East Anglian Brigade (T). Committed suicide (Hanging) in Peterborough aged 27, on the 25.4.16. The son of George Meadows of Peterborough. Buried in Peterborough (Broadway) Cemetery, Grave 8.1.313.

I also discovered in my old photographs that I visited Broadway Cemetery and took a picture of Harold's grave. We might expect that after the passage of 109 years, Harold's grave might have ended up in some state of disrepair. We can see below that whatever was on the top of the memorial stone, probably a marble cross, has been broken off over the passage of time and appears to be lost. What I am aware of is that like many other city councils, the one in Peterborough visits old graveyards and removes memorials that it believes to be unsafe and might fall on somebody. In the modern day culture I am sure the local authority can become over enthusiastic with regard to this, knocking over leaning headstones, when actually, they add to the character of old cemeteries and would probably never fall over unless physically pushed.

We will never know why poor Harold took his own life, but he must have been fully aware regarding the men from Peterborough who had already been killed in action and almost certainly must have known many of them. Perhaps he just couldn't face what he saw as the inevitability of a horrendous, violent death and chose to cheat the battlefield in this lonely way.

