

Accidents in WWI by David Gray

This is the story of people from **Peterborough**, mostly in the Armed Forces, who had war related accidents during WWI. These accidents took place while the men were serving or working and some of them were fatal. A few people in the city had fatal accidents carrying out war work and these are included but there would have been many more injuries of a minor nature, and as my main source is the *Peterborough Advertiser*, most minor industrial injuries would not have been reported during this period in history.

As if it is not enough that men had to go and fight and die in the greatest war the world had ever known, there were also those who purely by accident, either met their deaths or were injured in various levels of seriousness. This article does not claim to be complete, as I always believe that '*we don't know what we don't know.*' If accidents were not reported in the press, simply because news was not sent in letters to the family or men who returned home did not talk about their experiences, then that detail is lost. However, the *Advertiser* was pretty good at finding information relating to the forces in particular, and I don't think there will be many omissions.

1914

Naval Death

Bad news regarding casualties began to filter through from the services as soon as the war started and Peterborough was feeling the effects. The funeral took place on Wednesday 9th September 1914 at Portsmouth, with naval honours, of Chief Petty Officer George Bentley, second son of Mr. and Mrs. Bentley of Scotney Street, Peterborough, whose body had been recovered from the sea after what appeared to be an accident, on the previous Friday after he had been missing for several days. CPO Bentley, who had been serving on the destroyer HMS FAULKNOR, was to have retired the following March and during his naval career was decorated with a medal for gallantry in saving life at sea. He was to have sailed in a short time in a new battleship from Portsmouth.

Another accident of a slightly less serious nature occurred after three days fighting in the trenches at Mons, when a Peterborough gunner, A. G. Harrison, went with his company to rest in a cornfield. He slept on after the bugle call to retire and an ammunition wagon wheel went over his ankle. He was now in a London hospital.

Accident Roll of Honour for 1914

BENTLEY, George Thomas, Scotney Street, 154411, Chief Petty Officer, HMS FAULKNOR, Royal Naval Reserve. Accidentally drowned, aged 39, at Portsmouth on the 26.8.14. Awarded Long Service and Good Conduct Medals, also Royal Humane Society Medal for life saving, 26.1.07. The son of George and Matilda Bentley of Peterborough. Buried in Haslar Cemetery, Hampshire, Grave E.21.11.

1915

Lieutenant Mellows Injured

Lieutenant Charles Mellows, youngest son of the Town Clerk of Peterborough, was involved in a serious accident while on military duty on the Yorkshire Coast on the night of Saturday 6th March. He was riding a motorcycle on his round as officer of one of the companies on guard duty, when a motor

vehicle approached at high speed and crashed into him. The motorcycle was crushed and Lt. Mellows suffered injuries sufficient for him to be detained in hospital at Filey.

A Fractured Ankle

In March, Sapper J. A. Taylor, of All Saint's Road, Peterborough, and formerly a Telegraphist and sorting clerk at Peterborough Post Office, was returning to his military duties after being invalided since the end of December 1914. He went out to France at the end of November and was stationed near La Bassee, where he was engaged in dealing with the postal correspondence to and from the trenches, and frequently came under the fire of the enemy.

During one journey from the trenches with a companion, they were sniped at by the Germans, and on reaching their headquarters they found that the wooden butt of the rifle carried by Sapper Taylor's friend had been struck by a bullet, whilst Sapper Taylor's sleeve had been singed by another. Sapper Taylor met with an accident one dark night whilst on duty, falling into a hole and fracturing his ankle. He was in two hospitals in France and afterwards went to Birmingham Hospital and a Convalescent Home, being discharged from there on 18th February. He left Peterborough for the front on Friday 12th March.

News of the Yeomanry

A member of 'B' Squadron, of the Northamptonshire Yeomanry, Corporal W. Sewter, who had formerly been employed at Peterborough Post Office, was home on sick leave from France in April 1915. He had sustained injuries in an accident while in the trenches, and after being in three hospitals in France had finally been brought back to England, going to Leicester and afterwards to the convalescent home at Melton Mowbray. Corporal Sewter had served with the Leicestershire Regiment in the Boer War, and was at the Relief of Ladysmith.

Gunfire on a Train

On the arrival of the 10.58 am train from March, at Whittlesey, on Tuesday 13th April, a passenger informed the railway officials that as the train was travelling between March and Whittlesey, a missile of some character had entered his compartment, breaking the window and striking the luggage rack. After investigation it was found that in an adjoining compartment were two privates belonging to a Welsh Territorial Regiment and a lady passenger. One of the soldiers explained that he was showing the action of a rifle to the young lady, when he accidentally discharged the weapon, which had a live cartridge in it.

An examination of the carriage revealed that the bullet had passed about shoulder high, through the woodwork corner of the seat and from there it went across the adjoining lavatory and then through into the next compartment. There it hit the bottom of a bracket supporting the luggage rack, just above the head of the passenger who was sitting in the corner of the compartment.

In hitting the bracket, the bullet seemed to have split and part of it broke the side window. Other parts went into the woodwork of the carriage and the glass in a photograph frame on the opposite side of the compartment was also smashed.

From all appearances, the passenger had had a remarkable escape. If the bullet had penetrated his

compartment a few inches lower, he would certainly have been killed. The affair created quite a sensation and two porters were placed in the carriage with the soldiers as it continued its journey to Peterborough. At Peterborough, a report was made of the incident and the soldiers were allowed to carry on with their journey to Birkenhead.

This was not an accident that caused injury, but the consequences could have been very much more serious.

Fatality at Munitions Factory

A shocking accident happened at Peter Brotherhoods Works at Walton, Peterborough, [a factory making munitions] just before midnight on Friday 27th August. Alfred Towers, a labourer, was crushed to death by a steel plate weighing 35cwt (around 1.75 tons). Charles Davis, a foreman moulder, and John Hobbs, were moving the plate near a wall when it slipped off the hook of the crane from which it was being hung. The plate landed on the floor on its edge and then overbalanced and fell on the three men. Towers was killed, and the other two men received injuries and were taken to Peterborough Infirmary where they recovered.

The inquest was held at the 'Paul Pry,' Walton, on Monday 30th August, before the Deputy Coroner, Mr. W. B. Buckle, and a jury. H.M. Factory Inspector was present as was Mr. William M. Towers, Midland Railway Policeman, 125, Westwood Street, Peterborough, father of the deceased, who identified his son's body and confirmed his age at death as 31 years. He said his son had been employed as a labourer and was married with five children. The crane driver, Arthur Middleton, 3, Milton Road, Old Fletton, Peterborough, was also present. He said he had been a crane driver at Peter Brotherhoods for four years.

The Coroner asked Middleton if he had been present when the accident took place.

Witness: "Yes."

"When did it occur?" – "About 11.45 on Friday night."

"I want you to tell us what took place." – "Charles Davis who was the foreman in charge of the iron foundry gave instructions for the plate to be moved."

"How many of you were there?" – "Davis, Hobbs the deceased and myself."

"Will you describe the plate?" – "It was a round plate, 12ft in diameter and weighing 35cwt."

"That was to be lifted against the wall?" – "It was to be shifted closer."

"What happened then?" – "John Hobbs put the hook into a hole in the plate, and Davis gave the order to hoist."

"Where were they standing at the time?" – "At the foot of the plate. I lifted the plate from nine inches to a foot high."

"What kind of crane is it?" – "An overhead travelling crane."

“Yes?” – “They gave the order to lower, with the intention of putting the plate closer to the wall. I lowered the plate steadily. As they shoved it closer to the wall, I noticed the hook was out.”

“Had the plate reached the ground?” – “Yes, and they had pushed it a certain way towards the wall.”

“At that moment was the plate lobbing inwards or outwards to the wall?” – “Another two inches and they would have got it over.”

“It was more or less balanced?” – “Yes, but a little on the wrong side.”

“What happened then?” – “I shouted ‘Charlie, the hook’s out,’ and in a few seconds the plate fell over, outwards from the wall.”

“Did it fall on the deceased?” – “Yes, he was on the outside, Charles Davis lay next and Hobbs was next to him.”

“How was it they were not killed?” – “The plate fell on a cylinder, and that saved them.”

“Did Towers say anything?” – “I never heard him.”

“Did you see him move?” – “No.”

Another munitions factory incident took place at J. P. Hall and Son’s factory at London Road, Peterborough, on Thursday 9th September. A sixteen-year-old boy from Farcet, named William Hales, was looking for his tools. It appears they had been hidden by another boy as a prank. He was searching for them in a machine which someone had started up when something called a ‘shaping arm’ came down and struck him on the back of the neck, killing him instantly. William Hales had been the son of the proprietor of the ‘Black Swan’ public house at Farcet.

Tripped on a Bayonet

Sapper P. Clark, Royal Engineers, 7, Green Lane, Millfield, had now had the misfortune to be accidentally injured at the front. Just before midnight a few days earlier, he dropped into a trench which had been evacuated by the Germans, and was caught by a bayonet which went right through his thigh. He was now in hospital but progressing well. To make matters worse, the bayonet had turned out to be British.

There is no **Accident Roll of Honour for 1915** as fortunately, no members of the military forces received a fatal injury in any accident that occurred.

1916

A report was published which involved the death of two soldiers, one of them from Peterborough which occurred at Rochester on Sunday night, 30th January 1916. The Peterborough man was Albert Edward Abbot, 38, of Lincoln Road, New England, Peterborough, who left a widow and five children. He and his comrade had gone out for a stroll; it was in the extreme darkness of the night and under the new lighting restrictions. They were walking up Strood Hill, a motor bus was coming down and the wheel of this caught him and he was run over and seriously injured, sustaining a fractured pelvis, crushed thigh and several fractured ribs. He died within a quarter of an hour, and his comrade died within two hours.

Mrs. Abbot and Private Abbot's mother were present at the inquest on Tuesday 1st February. Evidence went to show that the driver of the motor bus couldn't see the men, the first he knew was a bump, as though the wheel had passed over something, he applied the brakes and got out to find the two soldiers lying in the road. Other evidence was called and the jury found a verdict of accidental death, exonerating the driver, but adding a rider condemning the new lighting restrictions. Private Abbot was Chef at the 3rd Northamptonshire Regiment's Officer's Mess, stationed at Strood, and until a few minutes before the tragedy had been on duty at the Mess.

Soldier's Terrible Experiences

Private Frank Cowley, 7th Northamptonshire Regiment, aged 23, eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. William Cowley, Gladstone Street, Peterborough, had returned home after being in hospitals and convalescent homes for nine months. He was suffering from Neurasthenia (shell-shock), brought on by an injury to his spine, caused by a shrapnel wound he sustained in his neck at the Battle of Loos. During the past month he had had several unusual experiences. Walking in the Strand on June 17th he witnessed a collision between two motor cyclists, and the shock of this caused him to lose his speech. Three days afterwards, he was in the Strand again, when he saw a horse slip down, and once more, he was so affected by the shock that he suddenly regained his speech.

He was later involved in another remarkable incident on Sunday 9th July in Peterborough. He was standing in Long Causeway, when an explosion occurred in an electric pavement box, the shock caused Private Cowley to jump, and when he landed on his feet, he found that the violent trembling in his legs which had been a symptom of his illness, had ceased, and he was able to walk more comfortably than he had for some time.

Private Cowley had joined up with 'Whitsed's Pals' on 8th September 1914, having previously been a groom with Mr. Kitchen at Whittlesey. Before being wounded he had been hailed as a hero after a very gallant act. He was in a trench when it was hit by a shell and he discovered that Private A. C. Thompson, of Peterborough, had been buried up to his waist. Private Cowley got his entrenching tool and was in the process of digging out his comrade when he saw German soldiers advancing up the trench. He picked up his rifle and fired ten rounds at point blank range at the advancing Germans, holding them up for a short time. However, after running out of ammunition, seeing that the rest of his company had retired, and realising that he was not going to be able to release Private Thompson, he clambered out of the trench and regained the British lines.

After this incident he took part in four bayonet charges, and was next to Private Frederick Bradshaw of Eastfield Road, Peterborough, when he was killed on 26th September 1915. Private Cowley was later wounded while climbing over a parapet, and he lay on the field of battle for three days before he was picked up by an ambulance party. Private Thompson was taken prisoner by the advancing Germans, losing his right hand, and soon afterwards took part in a prisoner exchange and was now at home in Peterborough.

Neglected Streets

With regard to the lighting restrictions in place to impede the vision of enemy bombers, on 7th October a letter to the editor appeared in the 'Advertiser' from Mr. John A. Percival. "Sir, are not the ratepayers justified in asking the Town Council to keep the electrical and other obstructions in the streets and the

kerbs to some extent visible during the coming dark days of winter by luminous white paint? A little was done in this direction last winter, but to a very small extent. The footpath on the north side of Thorpe Road, always faulty in its construction, should have the edges of the asphalt defined as far as Alderman's Drive. By the means suggested some accidents may be prevented. If you agree with me, will you insert this appeal in your next issue?"

The editor added, "It is a public scandal how the darkened streets in the City of Peterborough are neglected. A very great deal could, and ought to be done for the ordinary safety of pedestrians."

One cannot help thinking that the above was a swipe at the authorities for the strict lighting regulations that were being enforced. Also, the City Council appeared to be using this as a convenient excuse to cut spending on the highway.

Saddler Edmund Plumb, 20th Reserve Park, Army Service Corps of 20, Queens Road, Old Fletton, Peterborough, who after being home on leave for ten days, returned to his camp in France on 15th December 1916, was accidentally killed by a bullet on the same day. The official news was received by his brother at Queens Road. Saddler Plumb was originally in the Hussars, and saw service in India for several years. In March 1915 he rejoined at his country's call and was sent to the Dardanelles, and then to Alexandria and the Suez Canal, and finally to France. Much sympathy was felt for the family who so recently parted with him in the best of spirits and instead of receiving the news of his safe arrival, a notification of his death arrived.

Accident Roll of Honour for 1916

COBB, John Charles, 113 North Street, Stanground, 4963, Gunner, Royal Field Artillery. Died, aged 37, on the 26.1.16 in the Peterborough Infirmary, as a result of an accident. The son of Charles and Fanny Cobb of 113 North St, Stanground, Peterborough. Buried in Peterborough (Stanground) Cemetery, Grave 511.

ABBOTT, Albert Edward, 203 Lincoln Road, New England, Peterborough. 17271, Private, 3rd Northamptonshire Regiment. Killed, aged 39, through an accident 30 January 1916, at Strood. The husband of Mrs Abbott of 203 G.N.R. Cottages, New England, Peterborough. Buried at Fort Pitt Military Cemetery, Kent, Grave 1357.

PLUMB, Edmund, 20 Queens Road, Old Fletton, 5445, Saddler, Army Service Corps. Accidentally killed, aged 37, on the 15.12.16 on the Somme. The son of John and Jane Plumb. Born at Peterborough. Buried in Albert Communal Cemetery Extension, Grave I.R.42.

1917

Killed in Action

The death of Corporal Allan George Barley, second son of Mr. and Mrs. A. G. Barley of 87, Taverner's Road, Peterborough, occurred in France on Good Friday. Corporal Barley's brother, Captain Leslie Barley D.S.O. had left for England the previous evening on a round of visits to special duty to the Home Commands. He was in Scotland when information was received via the War Office on the Saturday evening of the death of his brother, and he immediately returned to Peterborough.



For some months Corporal Barley (*left*), had been engaged on the staff of N.C.O. instructors at a headquarters defensive gas school, and had shown such aptitude and ability in the work that he was to have received his commission as a gas officer during the next few weeks. He had done a lot of work on a special type of gas bomb device which had gone on to be accepted by the military authorities. It appears that with his fellow N.C.O.s of the staff he was working with defensive gas appliances when an explosion occurred and killed him, and others working with him.

It was reported in June 1917 that Leading Signalman George E. Yerrell, Royal Navy, son of Mrs. Yerrell, South Street, Peterborough, had been accidentally wounded. Mrs. Yerrell had five sons serving in the Forces, two, John and Samuel, had already been killed in action. We don't know the nature of George Yerrell's injuries but he did survive the war in good health.

Flying Accident



Second Lieutenant Victor Sidney Smith (*left*), Royal Flying Corps, only son of the late Mr. T. F. Smith, Lincoln Road, Peterborough, had been killed on 6th October 1917. His sister, Mrs. Percival of Rushden, received the following letters: "Please allow me to give you my deepest sympathy on the loss of your brother, it was a terrible accident as far as I can gather from eyewitnesses. The engine gave out at 500 feet from the ground; the aeroplane stalled in turning and nosedived to the ground, the altitude being too low to allow the pilot to right her before he crashed. Your brother and I went through the same course of training at Aboukir, and later came to the same squadron together, so perhaps I can claim closer acquaintance with him than anybody else in the squadron. He was a very nice, quiet chap, and everybody liked him here, and his tragic accident came as a great shock to us all. I attended his funeral; he was buried at the military cemetery Deir al-Balah [Palestine], with full military honours. The number of his grave is 301. E. J. Gorst, Lieutenant."

Another letter from Captain Hewitt who was Second Lieutenant Smith's flight commander said: "He had been making a flight at another aerodrome not far from ours, it is quite impossible to say what was the cause, such accidents will happen sometimes, the pilot is too badly injured to remember much about it. He was a good pilot, and the machine, which was my own, was a very new one, and in good condition. Poor little Smith was killed at once, and it is some slight consolation to know that he cannot have been in pain. He had only been with me for a few days so I did not know him well of course, but from the day he arrived we were struck with his keenness and cheerfulness, and were all more deeply affected by his sudden loss than soldiers dare show. He died in a great cause, as many have done, and many more may have to do. Now there is nothing left for those who remain but to try and believe it is for the best. He was buried the next day, Sunday 7th October, in a cemetery where many other British soldiers lay on the shores of Palestine. I have written this most inadequate note out of a sense of duty, and a token of respect for him and sympathy for you, and I sincerely trust that it is not out of place."

Terrible Accident at Fletton

A terrible accident occurred on the afternoon of Tuesday 20th November, when Reginald Skinner, aged 13 years, of Duke Street, Old Fletton, Peterborough, was seriously injured. He had been employed by the London Brick Company for a few days, and no one witnessed the accident, but it was thought that he was riding on a light wagon used for carrying the clay, when he slipped off. In falling it was thought that he got his legs entangled in the wire by which the trucks were worked, and the wheel, with the result that he suffered severe injuries to his legs. He was taken to Peterborough Infirmary, where his right leg was found to be crushed and his left leg fractured. It was found necessary to remove the right leg just below the thigh. After a few days he was found to be getting on as well as could be expected.

A lot more children found themselves at work during this period of the war, many doing essential jobs that they were either too small, or not strong enough for. It is difficult to say if young Reginald was up to carrying out this particular work, but even so, those that pour scorn on "Health & Safety" in our modern age, would have learned something had they been able to see this boy as he lay in Peterborough Infirmary.

Accident Roll of Honour for 1917

BARLEY, Allen George, 87 Taverners Road, 424547, Corporal, 43rd Bn. (Manitoba Regiment) Canadian Expeditionary Force. Accidentally killed, aged 22, on the 6.4.17 by an explosion whilst attached to the 2nd Army Headquarters Gas School. The son of Alfred George Barley of 87 Taverners Road, Peterborough. Buried in Hazebrouck Communal Cemetery, Grave I.E.11.

BRADLEY, Arthur, MM, 11 Silver Street, 7731, Sergeant, 1st Northamptonshire Regiment. Accidentally shot and died of wounds, age unknown, on the 28.4.17 in a casualty clearing station at Cerisy. No known next of kin. Buried Cerisy-Gailly Military Cemetery, Grave I.C.7.

WILKINSON, George Henry, 250 Lincoln Road, 204391, Private, 4th Bedfordshire Regiment. Killed in an accident, aged 34, on the 7.7.17. The husband of Mrs Wilkinson of 250 Lincoln Road, Peterborough. Buried in Albuera Cemetery, France, Grave A.18.

SMITH, Victor Sidney, Lincoln Road East, Second Lieutenant, 113th Squadron, Royal Flying Corps. Killed in action, aged 19, on the 6.10.17 in Mesopotamia. The son of Sidney and Bessie Smith of Peterborough. Buried in Dei al-Belah Cemetery, Israel, Grave D.47. Victor Sidney Smith was killed in a flying accident in Palestine. He was the observer in a 113 Sqn BE2e.

1918

Able Seaman Alfred Frank Leslie Poyser, HMS ATTENTIVE II (a shore base at Dover), nephew of Mr. and Mrs. F. Leeding, of Gladstone Street, Peterborough, with whom he had lived for many years, had been accidentally drowned in the River Thames on the 3rd July 1918, and was buried at Paston, Peterborough, on Friday afternoon, 19th July. He was 25 years of age and had been in the Navy about seven years. The first part of the service was conducted in Paston Church. The coffin bore the inscription, "A.B. Alfred Frank Leslie Poyser, aged 25 years." Amongst the beautiful floral tributes was one from "Commander and Shipmates." A.B. Poyser had taken part in the Battle of Jutland, and also in the great naval raid on Zeebrugge.

Second Lieutenant, W. C. Benton, RAF, eldest son of Mrs. A. C. Benton, of Cowgate, Peterborough, was now in hospital in France suffering from injuries received when his aeroplane crashed. On Monday

30th September, Mrs. Benton received a telegram from the Air Ministry stating that her son had been injured the previous Thursday. A letter received from Second Lieutenant Benton on Wednesday 2nd October said, "I am in hospital as the result of an accident. It is nothing serious and is not a wound. When we were landing on Thursday night we crashed. There are no bones broken but it has badly shaken me, and made a mess of my face. There is not the slightest need for you to worry." Second Lieutenant Benton had only been in France for just over a week. His younger brother, Second Lieutenant John Walter Benton, RAF, had been shot and killed while flying over German positions on the 31st May, just five months previously.

All deaths in action were a tragedy, but one can't help feeling that the death of Corporal William Fogarty, 3rd Light Railway Operating Company, Royal Engineers, was particularly poignant. The son of Mrs. Fogarty, 53, Eastgate, Peterborough, Corporal Fogarty, who was 21 years of age, was killed in France on Armistice Day, 11th November, 1918. The garrison Chaplain in a letter to Corporal Fogarty's mother said, "I want just to write you a few lines in sympathy, and perhaps I can tell you a little more than the official letter. Your boy was accidentally killed by the derailing of an engine on the light railway on which he was working. He was killed instantly so did not suffer greatly; this I know to be a relief to you. He was buried in the cemetery at Arras, a large number of men and officers of his company with a firing party being present. It must be a particularly hard blow to you to bear this sad loss, just as the time of danger is over."

Accident Roll of Honour for 1918

POYSER, Alfred Frank Leslie, Gladstone Street, 11163, Able Seaman, HMS ATTENTIVE II, Royal Navy. Accidentally drowned, aged 25, on the 3.7.18 in the Thames. The nephew of Mr and Mrs F. Leeding of Gladstone Street, Peterborough. Buried in Peterborough (Paston Church) Cemetery.

FOGARTY, William, 53 Eastgate, 175415, Lance Corporal, Royal Engineers (Railways). Killed in an accident, aged 21, in France on a light railway, Armistice Day, 11.11.18. The son of Mrs Fogarty of 53 Eastgate, Peterborough. Buried in Faubourg D'Amiens Cemetery, Arras, Grave VI.G.8.

HAWES, Harold Austin Edward, 91 Princes Street, 49293, Sapper, Royal Engineers. Killed in a railway accident, aged 26, on the 7.12.18. The husband of Beatrice May Hawes of 32 Brook St, Peterborough. Buried at Herzele Churchyard, Belgium.

WEBER, Victor Joseph, 59 Narrow Street, Lieutenant, Border Regiment (attached RAF). Killed, aged 18, in a flying accident on the 15.12.18 at Tourmignies, south of Lille, France. The son of Charles and Emile Weber of "Bogatells", Westwood Park, Peterborough. Buried in Brebieres British Cemetery, Grave BB.3.

Accident Roll of Honour or 1920

1920

REYNOLDS, Ernest Abbiss, 19 Gladstone Street, 209355, Driver, Royal Engineers. Died of wounds caused through an accident, age unknown, on the 16.2.20. No known next of kin. Buried in Peterborough (Eastfield) Cemetery, Grave 4.272.