

Robert W. Sparks **1894 – 1918**

The Sparks family lived at 11 Park Terrace for several generations. Robert was the youngest child of Joseph and Caroline (nee Philpotts) and had three older brothers and three older sisters living at the time of the 1911 Census; another brother, Ernest had died in 1883 at the age of just three weeks.



At the outbreak of the Great War Benjamin Sparks was one of the recruits photographed outside the Crown Inn after enlisting in the 8th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment, aged 22. The eldest son, Henry, was a carpenter, married with a young daughter and living at Lemon Villa, Friday Street. At that stage of hostilities married men were not encouraged to enlist, and it was not until 1917, aged 35, that he entered the newly-formed Royal Air Force, where his skills were much in demand with the wooden and fabric machines of that time. The third brother, John, had left for Sydney, Australia in 1911, although there is no record of him enlisting, either there or back in England.

Robert grew up in Minchinhampton, in a family closely linked to Holy Trinity Church. He was both baptised and confirmed there and became a member of the choir. He and his sister Lucy, whom older residents will remember living in Park Terrace, joined the “Band of Hope”, a temperance group where they regularly raised money by performing in plays and pantomimes. He was also recognised as an excellent scholar at the local school, playing a major role in the Empire Day celebrations of 23rd May 1906, when he recited Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” in the Market Square. In 1907 he was awarded a Foundation Scholarship, tenable for three years, to Marling School. By 1911 he was working as a chemist’s assistant.

According to his obituary, Robert was at a Training Collage for Elementary School teachers when war broke out in 1914. He completed his training before enlisting in 1915. Family stories place him with the 11th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment, but he rose rapidly through the ranks and was commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant in 1917 with 18th Battalion of The Kings Liverpool Regiment. This was one of the four famous Liverpool Pals Battalions, recruited between August and October 1914 by Lord Derby which went to France in November 1915. Generally speaking, blue-collar workers joined the 11th - 16th Battalions while white-collar workers, especially the shipping, insurance and brokerage clerks, joined the Pals, 17th - 20th Battalions. Following heavy casualties new officers were drafted in from other regiments – hence Robert’s commission. At the end of 1917 his new regiment was stationed in the very north of France but by Spring of the following year they were in action in Flanders, to the south of Ypres.

From 9th April 1918 the Battles of the Lys was fought to counter the German offensive “Operation Georgette” which had the objective of capturing key railway and supply roads and

cutting off British Second Army at Ypres. After initial successes the German attack was stopped, after British and French reserves were deployed. It was during the early stages of this campaign that the Military Cross was awarded to Robert Sparks; “*For conspicuous gallantry and devotion during a withdrawal through a town, when by his coolness and total disregard of personal safety he was largely responsible for the admirable order in which the men fell back. Although surrounded by the enemy he continued to resist with a handful of men, only leaving the town when the enemy had obtained full possession of it. Several times he was called on to surrender, but never gave up the fight*”. He wrote home to Minchinhampton of the honour, but a few days later, on the last day of the battle on 29th April, he was killed, although his body was not recovered. One of the senior officers wrote to his parents expressing “*in the warmest terms of their son’s gallantry and popularity with all ranks.*” As he has no known grave, he is commemorated at the Tyne Cot Memorial near Ypres.