

Stories of the Great War

Archibald (Archie) Victor Kirby 1898 – 1963

By 1916 it was apparent that the Great War would not come swiftly to an end; the “Pals Battalions” had suffered great losses on the Western Front and fighting in the Middle East had also taken its toll on men from Gloucestershire. Many regular soldiers and reservists had fallen in the early campaigns. Of the nineteen Minchinhampton recruits photographed outside the Crown Hotel in September 1914, eager to join Kitchener’s Army, four had already died and two had been badly wounded. However, this only spurred on those at home to take up arms to continue the fight, even before conscription of able-bodied men was introduced by the U.K. Government.

One of those who enlisted, rather than being conscripted, was Archie Kirby, as his elder sister, Eva, remembered much later: *“They had recruitment sessions in all the villages. Colonel Ricardo organised one and he stood on a platform in the Market Square asking for volunteers. My brother got up and volunteered, but my father stood up and said “You can’t have him! He’s only seventeen ... but Archie went into Stroud the next day and joined up”*. Assuming the age to be correct, Archie must have joined early in 1916, as his medals also testify. Those who served in a theatre of war before December 1915 were awarded the 1914/15 Star but Archie’s medals, in the care of The Museum in the Park, comprise the British War Medal, recognising service overseas and the Victory Medal. Both are in remarkable condition, with their ribbons intact, and were loaned for the Minchinhampton Local History Group exhibition “Sunshine and Shadows” in 2014.

By the time Archie enlisted there were four boys and three girls in the Kirby family; their father, Victor, had worked in local mills but by 1907 he was sexton at Holy Trinity and they lived in Church Cottage (now Vestry Cottage), All the children attended the Minchinhampton Schools (their mother, Sarah nee Flocks, had been an excellent pupil during her time there), Sunday School and were confirmed at Holy Trinity. Archie joined the 10th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment and by the summer of 1916 this was one of twelve battalions of the county regiment on the Western Front. There would have been a period of training first for Pte. Kirby, but it is likely he was in France and Flanders for about two and a half years.



His sister recalled: *“Whenever he came home on leave, we were told not to ask him when he was going back. He’d come home in the middle of the night, after walking up from Stroud station. I can still remember how upset my mother was every time he had to go back “... “My grandfather (John Kirby who lived in West End) would come to our house during the war with the daily paper and he used to sit down in our kitchen and say to my mother, “Now I’ll read ‘ee the casualty list.” And he used to go all through the casualty list and my mother held her breath because, of course, my eldest brother was in the war. She was quite alright after grandfather got beyond the ‘K’s and she used to know her son was alright.”* This scene was typical of many other household throughout the parish in the four years of conflict.

The 10th Battalion was disbanded in February 1917, its survivors transferring to 1st and 8th Battalions, Gloucestershire Regiment and then took part in be the three month long Third Battle of Ypres, or Passchendaele, which began that summer, on 31st July. One veteran soldier of 8th Battalion recalled in old age: *“Don’t think that I’m saying we weren’t scared. But we had a job to do – so we did it, and we depended on our officers – a better bunch of men never lived than what we had. No wonder they used to say: ‘Halt the Bays and steady the Greys, but let the Glosters pass!’*. (This well-known saying was tribute to the fact that The Glosters were known all along the front for their courage and willingness for any job.) At home Archie’s mother and sisters were helping with the war effort: picking blackberries, knitting socks and balaclava helmets and Sarah made a shirt for a soldier almost every week that the war was on.

The Armistice came in November 1918, and again the experience of the Kirby family reflected that of others locally: *“One of the things I remember most about the end of the war was that the Armistice was signed on a Monday. My mother was doing the washing and she was so excited and so thrilled to think that the war was over, that during her washing she starched the woollen socks. I shall never forget the service we held in church on Armistice Day. The church was simply packed. Every time we hear now the hymn “Now thank we all our God” I shall never forget that service. The people were crying and singing. It was the most wonderful day, when the war ended in 1918.”*

Archie returned to Minchinhampton in time for the official Peace Celebration in July 1919 and paraded through the town in pouring rain, before partaking of dinner in the Market House with the other returning servicemen. He continued to live with his family in Bell Lane until 1924 when he married Alice Pond, a close friend of his sister Eva (the two girls had been together as cooks on an early Scout Camp attended by Archie’s brother Matthew). Sadly, Alice died at just thirty years of age, in 1929, when the couple were living in Cirencester Road. A few years later Archie again found happiness when he married Muriel Chamberlain, from the well-known farming family of Box. Finally, life in Minchinhampton rewarded him for the years lost to the Great War.

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