

Stories of the Great War

The Johnson Brothers of Hyde

Several of the fittings in Holy Trinity Church are also memorials to men who fought and died in the Great War. Apart from the Rood Screen, the most obvious, and the Calvary close to the west door, the font is the most significant reminder of a beloved son who perished in 1915.

Robert Thorley Johnson and his wife Lilian had three children, Geoffrey, Henry and Winifred, when they moved to Hyde Lodge from Rivington in Lancashire. He was a schoolmaster, with a first class Classics Degree from Oxford and all three children benefitted from a private education. At the time of the 1911 Census Geoffrey was a boarder at Haileybury in Hertfordshire, Henry was at St. Bees in Cumbria and Winifred attended Harrogate College. As was the norm at that time, both sons were members of the cadet corps at their schools. It was this background which assured them of early commissions at the outbreak of the Great War.

Geoffrey joined the 7th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment as a Second Lieutenant at the outbreak of hostilities. After training at Aldershot and on Salisbury Plain the officers and men left Avonmouth in June 1915, landing at Gallipoli the following month. The battalion went into battle on 7th August, just inland of Anzac Cove – by nightfall, ten of the twenty battalion officers, including Geoffrey, had been killed and the remaining ten were wounded. As a memorial to her son Mrs. Johnson tracked down the old font which had stood in Holy Trinity, Minchinhampton before the Victorian remodelling (it had been used as a garden ornament, probably at the Lammas), had it restored and replaced in the church with a new cover.

Henry joined the 5th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, another Infantry Battalion, which had also been in action at Gallipoli. Early in 1917 they were moved to the Western Front, landing in Marseilles and it was in action in Flanders that Henry received wounds which were to prove fatal. He died at Oostende, probably en route for hospital evacuation to England. One of his fellow officers was Percy Clayton; Winifred Johnson married him in Holy Trinity, Minchinhampton in August 1918. Percy survived the last few months of the war and he and Winifred lived well into their eighties. After 1918 Robert and Lilian retired to Colwyn Bay in North Wales.

The memorial to the Johnson brothers reminds those who are received into Holy Trinity of both the gift of life and the human cost of warfare.