



History:

Topic: Charles Steele – A Soldiers Story

Date of Record: November 2021

Author: Nicholas Newman

Notes: Lance-Corporal Charles Steele Soldier and Survivor of the Great War.

Lance-Corporal Charles Steele Soldier and Survivor of the Great War

The Great War took a heavy toll of life on both sides of the conflict, and locally Hargrave's fallen are rightly recorded on a memorial plaque in St Edmund's church. Whilst not paying the ultimate sacrifice, many more suffered physical and mental wounds, some so severe that they would carry their effects for the rest of their lives.

One man with connections to Hargrave, Charles Steele, may not have carried such severe scars, but few can have had the number of wartime experiences he had. Wounded five times, affected by frostbite and shell shock, captured by the enemy and then escaping and making his way to freedom. Throughout it all he must have had an indomitable will to survive.

Charles Steele was born in Bury St Edmunds in 1891 to Arthur John Steele (1853-1891) of Bury and Emma Steele (Rayner) (1856-19**) from Hengrave. His father Arthur was a Groom by profession and the family had moved from Bury to Horringer and back whilst he was alive.

Arthur Steele died in 1891 and Emma had to bring up the family including her new born Charles on her own. She is lost in the records for several years, but by the outbreak of war in 1914 she had moved to Hargrave, probably initially living with her eldest son William, a coach painter, his wife Alice and their children who had a home at Birds End.

She then became the partner of Albert Hubert Ruse (or Ruce) (1844-1923) who was living on Bury Road, Hargrave. On occasion she would call herself Mrs Ruse although there is no record of their marriage. Albert was single having lived for many years with his sister Jane (1841-1911) who was a spinster and had formerly earned a living in domestic service as a maid and then housekeeper. His trade was as a miller, the same as his father Stephen Ruse who had also been a miller at the former windmill at Mill House in Hargrave in the early part of the 19th century.

Following schooling Charles enlisted in the army, joining the 2nd Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment (Reg. No.8127) and he is recorded at Barrosa Barracks, Aldershot at the time of the 1911 Census.

As a regular soldier with the Suffolk Regiment his Battalion would have been stationed abroad in 1914, but would have returned to barracks in England in October of that year ready for deployment, following Great Britain's declaration of war on Germany in August 1914.

Charles now part of the 1st Battalion arrived in France on 16th January 1915, and was posted to the trenches at Ypres. Winter weather conditions were particularly harsh that year with heavy snow and freezing temperatures. The trenches were also often flooded sometimes to a knee high level. Many men suffered from exposure and Charles is reported as being admitted to hospital with frost-bitten feet, on 20th March 1915.

The major battles of Ypres that year occurred in April and May, but soldiers were always at risk from shrapnel resulting from enemy bombardment and from sniper fire. On 21st July 1915 Charles is again in hospital having been wounded. This would be the first of five occasions when he received wounds during the course of the war. A wounding would be officially recognised, with him being allowed to sew a 'wound stripe' on the sleeve of his uniform.

In to the following year, now with the 7th Battalion, he was involved in the Cambai operations. On the 21st January 1916 he is wounded again and then on the 2nd September 1916, he is admitted to hospital with shell shock. Returning to his unit he is involved in the 'Great Advance' and is wounded again on 28th October 1916.

Having recovered from his latest wounds he has some respite with a visit home accompanied by his good friend and comrade Private W Stevens, to see his mother in Hargrave on 24th February 1917. During this period at home he is reported to have married. Sadly shortly afterwards his friend Private Stevens (No.15729) Suffolk Regiment, died of wounds received in action on 9th August 1917.

On Charles return to Flanders he is promoted to Lance Corporal. He is then wounded again on the 6th November 1917. 1918 doesn't start well either, as he is initially recorded as missing in action and it is then confirmed that he has been captured by the enemy on 5th January 1918. There is little news of his welfare until 3rd of August 1918 when his mother receives notification that Charles has received food parcels via the Red Cross. However, Charles later recalled that food was generally scarce and they felt starved. Indeed they were grateful to "eat potato peelings off a dirt heap."

With the war coming to an end Charles along with two colleagues took the opportunity of perhaps reduced surveillance to carry out a daring escape from his prison camp. They then had to make their way to safety through over 40 miles of German occupied territory without being caught, eventually reaching Belgium. Charles remembered one night, when cold and in ragged clothes they took refuge in piles of straw in the hay loft of a barn. Fortunately the person that overheard their voices was a friendly Belgian farmer who took them in, gave them a hearty meal, and allowed them to bed down in front of a roaring fire. Charles kept his details and hoped to repay his kindness one day. But for this, and the help of others, they would never have reached the Allies' lines, for they were far too weak to make the long journey without it.

Once safe he was able to send a postcard from France to his mother in Hargrave to let her know he was safe. The army recorded him as a returned Prisoner of War on 10th December 1918. Home in England in January 1919, he was given leave and able to visit his wife in Chelmsford and his mother in Hargrave. He was able to tell her the full story and to show her the wound on his leg and large mark on his head, caused by a blow with a butt-end of a rifle, which was evidence of mistreatment by one particular guard at the prison.

Charles was then placed in the army reserves on 30th March 1919, and subsequently demobbed, returning no normal civilian life.

Charles was not the only casualty in the Steele family. His older sister Agnes was married to Private Ireland Manning, 2nd Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment (reg. No.203166). He died on 26th September 1917 as a result of action at the Battle of Polygon Wood. Agnes then passed away in 1919 leaving four orphaned children. In addition Emma's 18 year old grandson William Steele (Charles' nephew) also a Private in the Suffolk Regiment (Reg. No.5427) and son of her eldest son William, and thus a former Hargrave resident, was also severely wounded in action in 1917.

Other Hargrave soldiers recorded in the local press as having been wounded in action were: Lieutenant Keith Boldero, Lincolnshire Yeomanry; Private George Gooch, Grenadier Guards; Private Sidney Hurst, Northumberland Fusiliers; Private Simon Last, Suffolk Regiment; and Private Gerald Plummer, Suffolk Regiment.

Following the cessation of hostilities in November 1918, a Memorial Service was held at St Edmund's Church on 20th October 1918 in memory of those men in the parish who had fallen in war.

Nicholas Newman
November 2021.