

Private Freeman WILSON

(Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment)



Freeman Wilson was born on the 9th December, 1897 and christened on the 9th January 1898 at Birstall Parish Church. His parents, David Wilson and Eliza Garnett had married there on the 26th May, 1883. David was born in Birstall in 1854 and Eliza was born in Gomersal in 1857. They endured much sadness in the early years of their marriage as 7 of their children died as infants. Pearl (1884 - 1884), Reuben (1886 - 1886), Martha (1887 - 1888), Annie (1889 - 1892), Alice (1890 - 1891) Flora (1892 - 1893) and Emma (1895 - 1895).

The 1901 census shows the family living at 46 Bradford Road, Birstall. David, the father is a cloth dyer in a woollen mill. The other members of the family are Eliza his wife and Ellen (1893), David (1896) and Freeman (1897). David senior died in 1909 and by 1911 Eliza and the children had moved to 63 Bradford Road. Freeman was a worsted frame doffer as was David junior. They worked at Wm Holton and Sons, College Mills, Birstall. Ellen is a soap packer and her mother, Eliza, is a charwoman. Eliza's widowed sister Charlotte Barraclough was also living with the family. Charlotte had married Freeman Conway in 1876. There were no children to the marriage and Freeman died in 1887. It is almost certain that Freeman Wilson was named after Charlotte's late husband. Charlotte was married again in 1900 to Charles Barraclough but he died in 1910 and she moved in with Eliza and the children.

Freeman enlisted aged 18 years in September 1916 and was sent to the Front. He was courting Mabel Cross of Westgate Hill, Bradford who was the same age. Freeman's family still have two postcards sent to Mabel from Freeman. He was not allowed to disclose any information but merely let her know he was well and had received her letters. It is estimated that 12 million letters a week were delivered free of charge from soldiers. The delivery of post was vital for two reasons. Firstly, receiving well wishes and gifts from home was one of the few comforts a soldier had on the Western Front. For some, it was a welcome distraction from the horrors of the trenches. Secondly, letters served a propaganda purpose as everything that soldiers sent back was subject to censorship. The British Army claimed this was to prevent the enemy finding out secret information, but really it was to prevent bad news from reaching the home front. Letters from serving soldiers had a powerful role, not just in keeping families informed of the well-being of their loved ones; they also helped to sustain popular support for the war across the home front.

The Batley News dated 9th June, 1917 stated that Freeman was officially reported missing. The report also said that he was connected with Birstall Parish Church and was a member of the Church Institute, His brother David was also serving at the Front, having just recovered from septic poisoning in the hand. The sad news was eventually given to the family that Freeman had died on the 3rd of May, 1917.

After the war David Wilson and Mabel Cross were married on the 15th of April at Tong Parish Church.

Private Freeman Wilson 235103, 2nd/5th Battalion, Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment is remembered with Honour at Arras Memorial, Pas de Calais, France. He also appears on the Roll of Honour in St. Peter's Parish Church, Birstall.

Researcher

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