

WHILTON LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

THE MAKING OF A LOCAL HERO

We met on 12th September 2014 to hear about the early life of Henry Reynolds, the ninth child of Thomas Henry and Tryphena Reynolds, born in 1879 in the farmhouse where the Whilton Locks carpet shop now stands. Harry was educated at Daventry Grammar School. He excelled on the sports field and captained the school football team. In the late 1890s Major Cecil Bingham had become the owner of Whilton Lodge, and also the Reynolds' landlord. When the Major came home from the Boer War, this was the occasion for Harry to be involved along with about a thousand others in a great show of patriotism. Harry was in the mounted escort formed mainly of Pytchley riders proceeding from Long Buckby Station to East Haddon Hall, with bells ringing and flags waving.

As a young man many Harry shared many of his father's interests, enjoying fishing, shooting and the Pytchley Hunt. Harry's favourite mare was "Daintree", with whom he won a number of prizes during 1904. Harry had her photograph on the wall in his Whilton home.

Harry joined the new Northamptonshire Imperial Yeomanry, attending their first camp in Althorp in 1902. Camping in bell tents men were occupied with drill, cricket matches, parades and local manoeuvres. Like his father Harry revelled in this kind of pageantry and patriotism. At the Yeomanry's first Annual Sports Day, his younger brother Ned was second, and Harry third in the Rapid Firing Race, suggesting some brotherly rivalry. Meanwhile, "the Regimental Band played a delightful selection of music during the afternoon, and at the close of the sports the Countess Spencer graciously distributed the prizes."

Harry began to be promoted, gaining experiences of leading and supporting his peers in sometimes difficult tasks. In the 1905 camp there was a fatality after a young man galloped into a tree. It was Harry who was brought as a witness at the inquest, described as a farmer of Whilton Locks and Sergeant in the Northants Imperial Yeomanry.

Following the death of his mother in 1901 and his father in 1903 Harry continued to run the farm and his father's coal business in partnership with Ned. In 1905 he married Gwennie Jones, a farmer's daughter from East Haddon Grange. The wedding was in East Haddon church decorated with flowers from Mrs Guthrie of East Haddon Hall. Mrs Guthrie was sister of Colonel Bingham of Whilton Lodge. As the wedding party left the village children strewed the path with flowers.



After their honeymoon in Brighton, Harry and Gwennie returned to life at the Whilton Locks farmhouse. Their son, Thomas Henry William, was born in September 1906. In November 1907 their daughter was born in the old house and named Gwendolen Tryphena Alice. Sometime after this Harry moved to Watling Lodge, Norton, running the coal business with Ned, and then moved on to helping his father in law.

Married with two children, he had left the Yeomanry. However, he chose to rejoin at the outbreak of war, but soon after received a commission in the Royal Scots. He embarked for France in August 1916. He was then 37 and was about to become the father of a third child, Velia Rosemary, born at East Haddon on 29th September 1916. The family spent the war years at East Haddon Grange.

Harry fought in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, where he was slightly wounded. Early April 1917 was unseasonably cold and miserable in northern France. There was sleet and snow on Easter Monday 9th April, when the battle of Arras began, with men exhausted and frozen. Harry's part in the assault led to his award of the Military Cross, "for a series of actions on 12th April 1917, which meant being under artillery, machine-gun and rifle fire for a considerable time." He had shown: "conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in reorganising his company when all the officers became casualties, and leading it to the attack with great courage and coolness. His fine example had a most steadying effect upon the men, who had been badly shaken."

Harry and his Battalion, part of the 9th Scottish Division, were in Flanders by 20th September, the beginning of the Battle of the Menin Road, which was part of the larger and longer 3rd Battle of Ypres and/or the Battle of Passchendaele. The Germans had prepared a heavy concentration of concrete "pill-box" fortresses, part of a trench system, forming an interlocking line of defence with other pillboxes by providing covering fire to each other. Captain Harry Reynolds was now in command of A Company, whose aim was to seize the blockhouse called A1 and the strongpoint, Potsdam. Preparations began in the early hours, in pouring rain.

One of Harry's men, Corporal George Soutar described part of what happened that day: "Captain Reynolds is absolutely fearless. But for him, we would have been beaten back that day... It became necessary to silence the enemy in the pill-box nearest us, and Captain Reynolds took that job on entirely on his own. Leaving the men to keep the enemy as busy as possible he rushed along the shell-holes until he was near enough to throw a bomb into the pill-box. Under fire all the time from the machine guns, it was nothing short of a miracle that he escaped. It was really a case of dodging death all the way. The enemy peppered him all the time, but he never seemed to mind.

Just when he was near enough he threw a bomb, but it missed the entrance, and the enemy then opened up a furious fusillade on our brave officer. Captain Reynolds took cover in a shell hole for a few minutes but if the Germans thought they had done with him they were mistaken, for he started crawling along towards the pill-box. ...The enemy kept up incessant fire, but Captain Reynolds wriggled and wormed his way toward the pill-box. Suddenly he rose to his feet. We saw his arm go up in the air. We also saw the enemy potting him and then we saw a great bright glare come from the pill-box. He had thrown in a 'devil's fire

bomb', and set the place alight... a party of them came rushing out. Captain Reynolds stood waiting to receive them with a revolver in his hand...The Germans were so terrorised by this brave officer that not only did they surrender themselves, but they brought out two machine guns and handed them over as well.”

Harry and his men went forward again. Harry was wounded, but Corporal Soutar was full of admiration: “... he would not go out of the fight so long as there was any need for him to be in it...He led his men in person against the next positions, and in the very hard fighting that followed his personality was as good as a strong reinforcement to the Royal Scots. ...It was marvellous how he escaped, and even more marvellous the courage he displayed – in pressing on at the head of the men, unmindful of his wound, and thinking only of the need for carrying through the operations successfully...The final charge on the enemy position was led by Captain Reynolds himself, and the men would have followed him anywhere.”

On 8th November the London Gazette announced that Harry had been awarded the Victoria Cross, and he gained the newspaper title of the “Pill Box Hero”, but his wounds led him to hospital first in Boulogne and then London, and later to convalescence in Scotland.

With months of recovery still ahead for him, Northamptonshire decided to celebrate his achievement. His family were at East Haddon which was also the home of General H S Horne, who was home on furlough in December 1917, and it was agreed that this was a good opportunity to make a presentation to Harry. Harry was brought from hospital to attend a special service in East Haddon Church and speeches and presentations in the Institute. The notables of the village and county were present. Lord Spencer sent a message, which concluded, “I congratulate East Haddon on having a friend and neighbour, who by his undaunted fearlessness, has added another example to the splendid courage shown by Northamptonshire men during this terrible war. We are all proud of Captain Reynolds.” The villagers followed with a dance after Harry had left.



At our meeting we were able to see photos of the gold watch presented to Harry on this occasion, and treasured by his descendants, and the illuminated address which was bound in leather after the presentation.

This is not the end of Harry’s story and more will be told as we commemorate his courageous act in September 2017.