

Deadman's Penny.

As the anniversary of the end of First World War approaches I began again to think about Wigan's involvement in the war to end all wars – if only it were so – and my mind wandered back to my school days at St Patrick's School and being told about Thomas Woodcock V.C., a former pupil of the school. We were told how after a Civic Reception at Wigan Town Hall he was the guest of honour at our school and that very night he left Wigan to return to the front, never to return to Wigan.

He had cheated death once but wasn't to be so fortunate a second time. He was killed in action on the 27 March 1918, only months before the armistice. His bravery was further underlined by the fact that as a recipient of the Victoria Cross, he was excused front line action, but he insisted on rejoining his comrades. Considering his experience, his insistence on returning to rejoin battle was surely as brave as his exploits on the battlefield; by this commitment surely another medal for bravery was deserved.

His citation reads:

On the 13 September 1917 north of Broenbeek, Belgium, when an advanced post had held out for 96 hours and was finally forced to retire, Private Woodcock covered the retreat. Private Woodcock heard cries for help behind him – he returned and waded into the stream amid a shower of bombs and rescued another member of the party the latter he then carried across open ground in daylight towards our front line, regardless of machine-gun fire.'

In preparing this story I had the great pleasure of meeting Mrs Veronica Ashton, grand-daughter of this outstanding man. She was able to give me an insight into the pride his family still have almost a century after his sacrifice; she allowed me to view her albums and a picture that has pride of place in her home. She recalls clearly his medals being displayed in a glass case in her grandmother's home in Cambridge Street. Mrs Ashton has visited her grandfather's grave along with her children; she tells me of the overwhelming feeling of pride mixed with sorrow, tears only just held back. Veronica is a kind person, of steely determination and it is clear that Thomas Woodcock's traits have been passed down the generations. As she is proud of him, I'm sure he in turn would be equally proud of her.

There are memorials to this brave soldier in both St Patrick's Church and School. His Victoria Cross can be seen at The Guards Museum, Wellington Barracks, London. I haven't yet seen the medal but on my next visit to the capital I shall certainly pay a visit. I'm sure it will be a surreal experience knowing that I've shared a schoolyard with a man of such outstanding courage, albeit 55 years apart!

My only real memory regarding the First World War was of seeing a large coin type ornament on the sideboard of a neighbour in McCormick Street. Mrs Kelly had lost a son in The Great War, as she always described it, and asking her about it she explained that it was given to the families of servicemen who died in the war and that it was called 'The Deadman's Penny'.

I remember saying in a childlike way, 'a penny isn't much for a life'. I can still remember her reply, 'Eh" love it's not but it's all I've got of him, and it's worth its weight in gold to me'. At such a young age I couldn't fully comprehend what she meant or understand her great sorrow, which never truly healed. Mrs Kelly died in the family home in 1951, still a broken woman. The suffering of the First World War was not only on the battlefields of Flanders and Passchendaele, but in the hearths, hearts and homes of the mothers and fathers who would never see their sons again, not even left with a grave to tend. I think I half realised, even for one so young, that part of Mrs Kelly died on that day in 1918.

As the centenary of the start of that war is remembered, my mind went back to Mrs Kelly and the so called Deadman's Penny and I resolved to find out more about her son. The following article is what I was able to ascertain with the help of the records from Wigan's Archives & Local Studies, where the newspaper index and records of the war are truly amazing; thanks are due to all who worked on its compilation. Below is the full report:

Wigan Observer, 2 November 1918.

Nineteen, and Four Years' Service.

Mrs Kelly of 34 McCormick Street Wigan has received news that her son Pte. John Kelly, Royal Irish Fusiliers Lewis Gun Corps, has been killed in action. Pte. Kelly who was nineteen years old and single enlisted in November 1914 and was last employed as a drawer at the Maypole Collieries. A comrade-in-arms, writing to the bereaved mother, tell her that her son was very well liked by all the boys in the platoon.'

John Kelly was born on the 4 June 1899, so he was only fifteen years, six months old when he volunteered (conscription was only introduced in 1916). Therefore, he must have exaggerated his age to enlist; I don't think many questions were asked in those days. The tragedy is compounded by the nearness of the ceasefire; had that taken place a week or so earlier, John Kelly would have returned to Wigan a war hero and Mrs Kelly would have been spared thirty-three years of heartache. If a week is a long time in politics, it must be an eternity in war.

I was only six years old when Mrs Kelly died and I have often wondered what happened to the penny. I hope it didn't go in a house clearance or was sold in a second-hand shop for a few coppers; a man's life surely deserves better than that. Had I been older when Mrs Kelly died I would have suggested that it was placed in her coffin. Mother and son together forever. What ever its fate, I'm sure Mrs Kelly would be proud to see her son still remembered almost a hundred years after his death.

References:

- *Wigan Observer, 2 November 1918.*
- *Wigan Observer, 20 October 1917.*
- *Wigan & Leigh Archives Online <http://archives.wigan.gov.uk/entity/64617>.*