

'The whole of South Lancashire was in mourning'

'On all sides there were bleeding hearts and broken homes'

BY PETER WALKER



Baptistery at St. David's Church, Haigh

These words were spoken by Dr Chavasse, Lord Bishop of Liverpool, in September 1916, at the dedication of the Baptistery in St David's Church, Haigh. The Wigan Observer reported that the Bishop praised the 'great citizen army' that had responded to Lord Kitchener's call for a million men.

'From their universities, old and new; from their public, secondary and elementary schools; from their cricket, football and running clubs; from their churches, choirs, Bible Class, Sunday Schools and congregations; from the offices in great cities, from the mines and docks, from their Colonies, and from every country where Englishmen were living they hastened to the call of their country to defend her in her hour of need. And amongst them the three gallant sons of their vicar, to whom that beautiful memorial had been dedicated that day'.

The day before this service the Wigan Observer reported that the Vicar's only remaining son, Henry, was missing in action. ⁱ

Reverend James came to Haigh around 1876 as curate and in 1882 married Emily, sister of Sir Edward Donner. In 1886 he became Vicar of Haigh where he served for forty years until 1918, becoming Rector of Epperstone, Nottinghamshire. Retiring in 1933 he moved to Southwell where he died in 1938 at the age of 91 years.

'To the last Mr. James's heart was in Haigh and Wigan. Nothing gave him more pleasure than that his friends from Lancashire should call upon him... He was especially interested in education, and for many years he was chairman of the Local Area Committee in Wigan. He spent a great deal of time in organising the Church Lads' Brigade, the Haigh Company being very successful during his period. He went to many annual camps, and on several occasions was Camp Chaplain'. ⁱⁱ

Set on the edge of the Haigh Estate, Haigh Vicarage must have seemed an idyllic location compared to the grime and smoke of industrial Wigan. In 1883, Emily gave birth to their first daughter, Madeleine, and a year later Charles Edward, the first of their four sons, followed by Francis Arthur, Henry, Phyllis and finally George Sidney in 1893. The Edwardian era saw each of the sons leaving home to start careers, until August 1914 when they were quick to respond to their country's call to arms. These four young men were each to be killed serving their country in the war.

Corporal Charles Edward James

He was in a business house in Paris followed by time with the Credit Lyonnaise in Valencia, Spain. Later he joined the Manchester shipping firm of Chamberlain, Donner & Co., becoming their representative in Brazil. Arriving back in England in September 1914 he enlisted in the 13th Middlesex

Regiment, declining a commission as he had no military experience. Fluent in French, Spanish, Portuguese and some German he went with the Brigade Intelligence Department to France arriving on 1 September 1915, where he was killed on 28 September; he was 31.ⁱⁱⁱ

Lieutenant George Sydney James

He joined Wigan Coal and Iron Company in 1908 as an apprentice mining engineer, joining the mine management department at their Haigh and Aspall Pits in January 1914. He took an active interest in Haigh Church Lads' brigade, becoming their commanding officer. In 1911 he joined the 5th Manchester Territorials as a 2nd Lieutenant, later promoted to Lieutenant. In September 1914 he went with the Battalion to Egypt and later to the Dardanelles. In March 1915 he wrote to his mother: ^{iv}

'The Turks fight hard but seem short of artillery, unless they are bluffing... Our chief trouble is with the snipers, who work their way right through our lines, and then amuse themselves with potting officers in the back. The brutes... dig themselves in to the neck, and paint their faces green, so we can not find them.'

Despite the horror of war Lt. James also wrote that: *'This country is exceptionally pretty and in some ways very like being close to the Yorkshire moors.'*

He was killed on 4 June 1915, aged 22.

Captain Francis Arthur James

He travelled to India where he was vice-principle of Colvin Talugdar's School in Lucknow. He was home on sick leave when war was declared and immediately volunteered for the 1st/5th Manchesters with a commission of 2nd Lieutenant, later gaining Lieutenant. With his brother, Sidney, he saw service in Egypt and then the Dardanelles where he was wounded in the right leg in July 1915^v. He was evacuated to hospital in Alexandria, Egypt, and whilst there was promoted to Captain. He died of his wounds on 18 September, aged 29.

Lance-Sergeant Henry James

Trained to be a solicitor he was working in Dover in 1911,^{vi} but by 1914 had become assistant solicitor to the Halifax Corporation. On 1 September 1914 he enlisted at Halifax into the Middlesex Regiment. He is described as, '5ft 7 $\frac{1}{5}$ inches tall, weight 133 pounds, fresh complexion with brown eyes and hair'. Slightly wounded in July 1916 he was soon back with his regiment and shortly after was reported missing, believed killed.^{vii} It would be June

1917 before confirmation was received that, *'for official purposes he should be regarded as having died on or since 18 August 1916'*, and in December 1917 that his grave had been found.^{viii} He was aged 28.

We can not imagine how it felt during that summer and autumn of 1915, as one telegram boy after another wheeled his bicycle down Copperas Lane. First one son killed, another wounded then died, a third missing then killed. When the people gathered in St David's Church, on that Wednesday evening in September 1916, to dedicate the new Baptistry in memory of three sons the fourth was already lying dead. A second memorial tablet, bearing Henry's name was added to the Baptistry in 1918.

- i *Wigan Observer 12 September 1916*
- ii *Newspaper obituary circa 1938 source unknown*
- iii *Wigan Examiner 2 November 1915 p3*
- iv *Wigan Observer 19 June 1915 p8, extracts from letter first published in Haigh Church Magazine June 1915*
- v *Wigan Examiner 21 August 1915, Wigan Observer 21 August 1915 p8, Wigan Observer 25 September 1915 p5*
- vi *1911 Census RG14PN4595 RG78PN193 RD65 SD2 ED5 SN381 FindMyPast.com © National Archives*
- vii *Wigan Observer July 1916, 12 September 1916, 21 October 1916*
- viii *BritishArmyWWIServiceRecords1914-1920 on Ancestry.com © National Archives*

Bibliography and sources

Ancestry.com web site <http://home.ancestry.com/> available free at the Museum of Wigan Life.
Commonwealth War Graves Commission web site <http://www.cwgc.org/> (Free access online)
De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914-1918 (available on Find My Past UK website by subscription)
Find My Past UK web site <http://www.findmypast.co.uk/> (Available by subscription)
Wigan Observer and Wigan Examiner extracts in World War One newspaper index at Museum of Wigan Life.

Memorial to Reverend James and his sons at St David's Church, Haigh

