

**Guardsman William Peate:
A Shropshire man commemorated in Lye Cemetery**

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In the far left hand corner of Lye Cemetery is a large cross mounted on a three-stepped plinth which stands out from all the other headstones in that particular section. It is a memorial to Private William Peate killed on the Somme in September of 1916. William Peate wasn't a local man, he was born at Leaton, near Shrewsbury in 1881, one of the two sons of Joseph and Ann Peate who later lived at Bomere Heath. William joined the army at an early age and served in the South African War, receiving the Queen's South Africa Medal awarded to military personnel who served in the Boer War between 11th October 1899 and 31st May 1902.

A few years later William returned to South Africa and was most probably the 'Mr. W. Peate, a Miner aged 25', aboard the '*RMS Briton*', a Union Castle Mail Ship which embarked from Southampton on the 2nd of February 1907, bound for the Cape. Little is known of his years spent in South Africa except that he worked in the gold mining industry as an Amalgamator. Amalgamation, a process involving mercury, was the principal recovery method for gold and had been used in the South African mines from the early 19th century.

Towards the end of 1915 William Peate, then aged thirty-four, left South Africa and returned to England. He embarked from Durban aboard the '*S.S. Gaika*', arriving at the Port of London on the 8th of October. Ten days later, on the 18th of October, William married 32-year old Matilda Perry by special license at the Mount Sion Congregational Church in High Street, Lye. (now the Ghausia Welfare Association). Matilda was the daughter of Richard and Sarah Ann Perry of No. 34, Attwood Street, Lye. At the time of her marriage to William both of her parents were dead, her father

in 1912 and her mother in 1914, and both were buried in Lye cemetery. The short amount of time that elapsed between William Peate's arrival back in England and his marriage to Matilda strongly suggests that they must have known each other previously. If so, when and how had they met? The only conclusion is that their two families were somehow connected but apart from the fact that William's mother, Ann, was born in Edgbaston, intense research has so far failed to reveal what this connection might be. How William and Matilda might have known each other remains a mystery yet to be solved.

On the 20th of October, two days after his marriage to Matilda, William Peate made his last Will and Testament, witnessed by two people in Llandudno, perhaps while the couple were on a brief honeymoon in the seaside town. William appointed Matilda and his father, Joseph Peate, as Executors and Trustees of his Will and bequeathed the income from his real and personal estate to Matilda. After his death it was valued at just over £1000, a considerable sum in 1916.

William had arrived back in England on the 8th of October, married Matilda ten days later on the 18th and made his Will on the 20th. This was a man in a hurry, and his haste was due to the fact that William intended to join up and serve his country once again. Following his arrival back in England, he had returned to his home at Bomere Heath and at some stage had enlisted at Shrewsbury possibly before marrying Matilda. By the 6th of November, William Peate had re-joined his old regiment, the Grenadier Guards, this time in the 4th Battalion formed at the outbreak of the Great War.

On the 15th of September 1916 the 4th Battalion, as part of the 3rd Guards Brigade, were involved in the Battle of Fleurs-Courcelette which continued until the 22nd. Three days later on Monday the 25th of September, on a fine clear day with a temperature

of 73 degrees, the Battle of Morval began just after mid-day. Having secured their positions the troops, including the 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards, advanced to take the village of Lesboeuufs held by the Germans. The 4th Battalion were on the left of their Brigade but were held up by a German trench not dealt with by the artillery. A fierce fight took place and the Guards stormed through. By 2 o'clock the village was captured, but there were many casualties, among them Pte. William Peate, killed during the attack.

Men who were killed in the fighting area, like William Peate, would most probably have been buried where they lay - close to the front line. Once the fighting had moved away, if at all possible, their bodies would be buried in one of the many thousands of small burial plots created on or very close to the battlefields. These plots were often destroyed as the fighting continued and their locations became uncertain. Matilda would have received notification that her husband had been killed in action and, indeed, the *Country Express* of the 14th October 1916 reported that '*Mrs Matilda Peate had received official notification that her husband Pte William Peate of the Guards was killed on the 25th September*'. However, she would not have known where he was buried.

The Register of Soldiers Effects 1901-1929 shows that William Peate was credited with a sum of £3.2s.4d. In October 1917, just over a year after his death authorisation was given for Matilda to receive this payment. The epitaph on the memorial cross which she had erected in the cemetery bears the words, '*In loving memory of a Grenadier Guard, William Peate, the dearly beloved husband of Matilda Peate who met his death at the Battle of the Somme on September 25th 1916, aged 36 years*'. Also

inscribed on the memorial are the names of Matilda's parents and that of her brother John Perry who died in 1918 at the age of fifty-two.

After the war, a massive clearance of the battlefields was undertaken and certain areas were taped into grids and searched at least six times. The search parties looked for clues that indicated where a body or bodies might be buried: rifles or stakes protruding from the ground, pieces of equipment that had come to the surface or discolouration of the grass or water were all signs of this. Once a grid had been searched and the locations had been marked the task of exhumation, identification and re-burial could begin. Shreds of uniform, badges or buttons provided clues to a soldier's regiment. Identification discs and personal effects, sometimes even knives, forks and spoons which men had placed down their puttees carried the man's name, initials or number. The men's remains were then taken to one of the cemeteries that had been opened for burial, and those that could not be identified were buried as an unknown soldier. This post-war clearance work continued well into the 1920s on a large scale.

In June of 1928 a group of seven bodies was discovered on the Somme battlefield. Their regiments were identified from uniforms and buttons and two of those found were Grenadier Guards. Certain effects found with these bodies were returned to base and one was identified from the service number on his spoon, it was 24267 Pte. William Peate of the 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards. The other guardsman, was Pte. C. Marcer, killed on the same day as William, who was identified from his knife, fork, spoon and shaving brush. Four of the men remained unidentified but all seven were re-buried in Serre Road Cemetery No. 2 at Beaumont-Hamel, Departement de la Somme, Picardy with the two Grenadiers being buried side by side. Matilda was

notified that her husband's body had been found and was asked to provide a personal inscription for William's headstone. The words chosen by Matilda were, *'Until the day dawns and the shadows flee away. Reunion my abiding hope'*

Private William Peate is commemorated on the Lye and Wollescote War Memorial which stands outside Christ Church in the High Street, where his surname is shown as 'Pete', and on the memorial windows inside the Church. His name also appears on the War Memorial at his birthplace of Leaton, near Shrewsbury where it seems almost to have been squeezed onto the panel.

Matilda Peate never re-married and lived at No. 86 Balds Lane, Wollescote for the rest of her life. In 1958, more than forty years after William was killed, Matilda died at the age of seventy-five. In her last Will and Testament, made three years earlier, she left very precise instructions with regard to the disposal of her considerable assets amounting to something in excess of £7000, a sizeable sum in 1958. As well as family and friends, Matilda also left legacies to hospitals and various institutions, among them Corbett Hospital, St. Dunstons Homes for the Blind and the Sunshine Homes for Blind Babies.

Though she actually owned the grave plot in Lye Cemetery, Matilda's name does not appear on the cross that bears her husband's name and those of her parents and brother. The final instruction in her Will states, *'It is my express wish that on my death my body shall be cremated'*. Her last wish was carried out and she was cremated at Lodge Hill Cemetery, Northfield, Birmingham, on the 6th of February 1958. A brief announcement of her death in the *County Express* ends with the words, *'No flowers by request'*.



Guardsman William Peate remembered by Matilda on the family grave