

## **The tragedy of the Towner brothers**

### ***“In the face of such a heavy loss, words seem almost vain”***

It is hard to imagine living in a community where nearly all the sons, brothers, husbands, fathers, lovers, schoolmates, teammates, and co-workers had disappeared. They were loved, missed, worried over and prayed for. Some, ultimately, were mourned. The Towner family exemplifies this.

Patience and James Towner lived in Charing on the corner of Market Place and the High Street. They had three sons who all died in France and Belgium. Before the war, tragedy had already struck the family when Patience died in 1902.

### **“A willing, honest, straightforward lad”**

(John) Edgar Towner, the second son, was an early loss. A keen footballer, he had worked, like his father, as a groom before the war. One of the first to join up, he enlisted as a private with the 19<sup>th</sup> Hussars on 17 August 1914 and died on 20 November 1914 at Hooge, east of Ypres. Mr Darlington, the headmaster at Charing School, remembered him as a ‘willing honest straight-forward lad – one of the best’. While his comrades, according to a letter sent to his parents, “did [their] best to mark his grave” it was lost and he is commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial.

### **From Gardening to the Machine Gun Corps**

The final months of 1918 were to be a black period for the Towner family. The eldest son, Christopher Charles, after growing up in Charing and working as an errand boy in his teens, then worked as a gardener before the war in Betteshanger. He enlisted in March 1916 in the Leicester regiment and went to France in July before transferring to the Machine Gun Corps. A corporal, he was killed in action in September 1918 at the age of 32.

### **“Even after the armistice”**

While his father and brother both worked with horses, the youngest son, (Herbert) Norris, went for the newer forms of transport. In 1911 he worked in Charing as a cycle mechanic, but on enlistment in October 1914 he was working in Herne Hill, South London as a chauffeur, where he met Alice Lucy Beken, the girl he married in January 1918. He served almost throughout the war after enlisting in October 1914 and survived being gassed and wounded in 1916. But on 15 November, just four days after the armistice, he died of influenza and broncho-pneumonia in hospital in France.

The words of the parish magazine of December 1918 are poignant:

“Even after the armistice had been signed another blow was yet to fall. This time it descended with threefold malice on a house that had already suffered cruelly. Mr. James Towner had already given the lives of two heroic sons to the country, and now he is called to bear the loss of a third. Edgar Towner fell with the first in the dark days of 1914. Christopher Towner's loss was recorded in our last number, and with them now rests Herbert Norris Towner, of the Motor Transport Corps. He died in hospital in France of influenza and pneumonia on 14 November. The lad served through the whole war: for he went with the original army, and when the war was over he died. In the face of such a heavy loss, words seem almost vain.”

### **Some better news**

Fortunately there was better news for some of the Towner family. The brothers had two sisters, Ada and Mabel. Ada's sweetheart, Charles Heritage, also of Charing, survived the war and they were married in February 1919. After Patience's death in 1902, James Towner had remarried. He and his

new wife, Sophia, had two more sons, Thomas and Charles. Born in 1906 and 1909, they were too young to go to war.

*Thomas (Tom) Towner was interviewed in the 1980s as part of an oral history project by the History Society. His voice will be one of those you will be able to hear on the open days as oral history extracts will be played in Charing Parish Hall, Charing Church Barn and the Methodist Schoolroom.*



*Photo: Courtesy Chubby Carnegie*

The Towner family lived in Market Place to the right of the photo