



Philip Smith

405077 Private, Labour Corps. Formerly 19353, 7th Battalion Norfolk Regiment

He died on 27th October 1917 in France, aged 42

Philip was buried at Les Baraques Military Cemetery, Sangatte, France.



Philip Smith

Way back in 1851, young Harriet Brundish aged 3, was the youngest child of 5 in a poor household, headed by a pauper labourer in Fressingfield; an older sibling, making at least 6 children, was working as a servant for a nearby farmer. 10 years later Harriet was still at home, but the families' fortunes had improved; the family may still have been poor, but they were now standing on their own feet and not receiving parish relief!!

Harriet married her slightly older husband, George Smith in 1870, bringing a 4 years old illegitimate son into the marriage but also offering her new husband, 33 years old to her 22, a home; in 1871 the couple and Harriet's son Noah Brundish (Loah in this census but in all other records Noah) were living with Harriet's parents and one of her younger siblings. George Smith, described as a labourer in this census, may well have been a former soldier explaining why, although a local lad, he had taken so long to getting around to marrying. He was described as a pensioner in 1881 (for a man of his background, almost certainly an Army Pensioner) by which time the couple had two children, very well-spaced especially bearing in mind a 5-year gap between their marriage and the oldest child in this census.

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
By Mr. BLOMFIELD,
At the Swan Inn, Harleston, Norfolk, on Wednesday, the
10th of August next, at Six o'clock in the Evening, by
order of the Executors of Mr. W. MOTTS, late of Fres-
singfield, in Suffolk, dec.,
FIRST,
THE Vested Remainder in Fee, expectant on
the decease of a lady aged 74 years, of and in a
FREEHOLD MESSUAGE, in Two Tenements, with the
out-buildings, gardens, and appurtenances thereto belong-
ing, pleasantly situated in the Village of Fressingfield, and
now in the occupation of Phillip Smith and Isaac Wollage,
at yearly rents amounting to 8*l.*

George appears to have named his oldest son after his own father, Phillip Smith Snr who in 1841 was the local sexton (grave digger and caretaker of the church and graveyard), George also had an older brother of the same name. In 1851, George's mother, Harriet, was living by herself, still married and declaring herself to be the Sexton's wife. I suspect she was gathering her dignity around herself as in the 1851 census Phillip Smith Snr was a Pauper inmate of the Suffolk Lunatic

Asylum, one of 269 inhabitants, and was then described as being a postman, he died in the asylum in 1852.

George was a good son and in 1881, no longer living with his in-laws but in his own household in Fressingfield, he had his then very elderly mother (90!) living next door but one to him. In his mother's household was also her 88 years old widowed sister, Maria Catling, (good genes on the distaff side) and a granddaughter, doubtless press ganged into keeping a careful eye on the elderly pair. I am sure Susannah enjoyed seeing her grandson and husband's namesake, Phillip Smith Jnr, playing between the two houses. The old duck carried on for another 3 years, before being finally dying and presumably being buried in the graveyard formerly in the care of her long dead husband.

SMITH.—17th inst., Susanna, widow of the late Philip Smith, of Fressingfield, aged 94.

Bury and Norwich Post
23 Dec 1884

I am not sure where, George Smith was in 1891, but his wife Harriet (married not widowed so he must have been about somewhere) was working as a charwoman, raising two sons and two daughters; although Phillip was then 16, he gave no employment.

A lovely thing about this family was, that although they must have always been struggling to make ends meet: Susan(nah) was left to raise her children alone; her son George had his army pension but he never rose above being an Agricultural labourer; the Brundishes had been on parish relief, they all took care of their own. When Phillip appeared, as a married Agricultural labourer in 1901, the elderly Mark Rayner, was in the house. Not his grandfather nor even his father in law but actually his wife, Louisa's grandfather!

Hopping back 20 years to 1881 and there are 5 years old Louisa Vincent and her slightly older sister, Pamela Vincent living with grandparents Mark and Elizabeth Rayner. The two little girls were the daughters of Mary Ann Rayner and Henry Vincent who had married in 1872 (around or slightly after the birth of Pamela). Henry had named his older daughter after his little sister, his younger daughter after his mother!

Pamelia and Louisa's mother Mary Ann died, aged only 23, in 1876; it seems the birth of young Louisa had brought about the death of her mother leading to the maternal grandparents taking on the burden of the two children. What happened to the father is all a bit vague and with too many contradictions in the data available – I ma just going to leave that loose end hanging!

By 1891, widowed Mark Rayner had moved to the Old Workhouse (domestic dwellings by then) in Fressingfield, where his younger granddaughter was his housekeeper; his other granddaughter,

Pamelia, was now a married woman and was also in the household along with her new husband! Louisa married her husband, Phillip Smith in 1893, both of them would have been barely 18.

In 1901, when, as mentioned above, Grandpa Mark Rayner was also in the household, the young couple had a 5-year-old and a 3 year, Phillip was then an agricultural labourer. In 1911, the family had moved across the border and were living up at Clintergate in a 5-room house, Susan and little Harry (only 1 years old) had been added to the family whilst the oldest child, Florence was working at the Alburgh Rectory, for a clergyman's family, said Clergyman going by the surname Pagan!

The 1911 census also reveals that as well as Florence, George Smith Jnr, Susan and Harry, there had been 2 other children born during their 17-year marriage who had not survived. Louisa herself died on 25th February 1915, aged only 40, leaving her husband with four children to raise and a war going on. Then living in Wortwell, Phillip attested in May 1915; being a widower with dependent children he was not obliged to do so.; When Phillipe enlisted George would have been 17 but Susan would have only been 13 and little Harry (Mark – bearing his great grand father's name) just 5 ½ years of age. His oldest daughter, Florence, had married Charles Collet in the summer of 1913, barely 18.

These were terrible years for the Smiths, the arrival of Phillip's wife Louisa in the world had brought about the death of her mother, Mary Ann Vincent nee Rayner; Louisa's daughter Florence's death was similar to that of Louisa's mother. On the 8th of April 1917 Charles and Florence's 6-day old baby was buried at Redenhall, no religious service, 8 days later Florence was also buried. Florence had been appointed guardian of Phillip's younger children but following his death the children's grandmother Harriet Smith was appointed in her stead.

Although he need not have enlisted, Phillip initially joined the 3rd Norfolk Regiment. However, he was nearly 40, pretty short (only just over 5ft 4"), skinny, weighing only 9 ¼ st. but with a 37" chest I imagine he was all muscle. His teeth were so bad that even the Army medical board, who were far from fussy, sent him off for dental treatment.

After attesting in May, on the 23rd of July 1915, Phillip was sent off to Felixstowe where he probably received his training. Obviously not a natural soldier by disposition as well as by physical limitations, he was in trouble for arriving dirty on parade on the 6th of August and exactly 3 weeks later he was in even more trouble for being drunk in camp! Training complete Smith was sent off to France to join the 7th Norfolks on the 16th of December, not an ideal Christmas gift for him or his family.

His Military record seems to feature a lot of chopping and changing; having been sent off on the 16th December to France, he seems to have spent a bit of time being shunted about between the Norfolk depots doing tasks more suited to a chap who was less than totally fighting fit. He was sent on 10 days leave from the 15th of March 1917. He was also verging on the short sighted and so, not being ideal warrior material, on his return from leave on the 26th he was sent off to the 5th Labour Btn, home for various elderly waifs and strays or those with other incapacities. This was not necessarily a cushy job; even if the members of the corps were not expected to go into battle, they were still at risk of being shelled. Today the job of the Labour Corps is done by the Army Logistical Corps but during the WW1 their role was downplayed; those who fell were commemorated under the name of their original regiment. Smith was then sent back to his own unit to act as camp guard and proceeded to be shunted about between rear line tasks and the 7th Norfolks until the 8th of October 1917 by which time he would have been 40.

Phillip should really have been pretty safe at this point especially when he was sent to help guard the GHQ of the 3rd Echelon in Calais. However, there had been a number of sporadic air raids that took place in the area, a few months previously a hospital had been damaged during air attacks resulting in the death of not only serving soldiers but also a number of nurses and female civilians.

At about 1 am on the morning of the 27th October, 2 German Aircraft were heard approaching the Zeneghom Ammunition Depot, they then proceeded to drop 5 bombs in the area. The Alarm went off but there was insufficient time for the men to be able to take shelter in a sand bagged area. One survivor of the raid reported how a bomb exploded near the Guard Hut, the waves from which blew over the sentry box in which he was standing. After blowing his whistle the slightly shocked guard, having had his rifle blown out of his hands, went to the Guard Hut to find all the occupants beyond help. Leaving them on the floor the sentry took himself off to hospital. The efforts of the men were largely focussed on extinguishing fires which had broken out by the ammunition dump – quite reasonably too!

Some boxes did explode injuring more men in the process, but the fires were contained, and disaster averted. However, three of the men from various Regiments who were working as Garrison Guards died in the raid, including our Harleston Hero Phillip Smith. It seems that although Phillip was not officially pronounced dead until 3 ½ hours after the raid when his body was taken to the hospital, Phillip died on the scene from wounds received. Even three years earlier, planes had been used only for reconnaissance work, it was only as war proceeded that this technology, still in it's infancy became armoured with guns and bombs, Phillip was an early victim of one of the greatest changes in warfare since the invention of gunpowder.

Phillips war medals were nominated to be sent to his son Harry Mark, no mention of his older son George, and to be held for him until he came of age. A total of £17 was sent to be shared by the children by late 1919, Susan was of an age to receive her half of the money, young Harry's money was managed by grandmother, Harriet Smith who, upon Florence's death, had replaced his older sister Florence Collet nee Smith as Harry's guardian.

An unlikely hero, elderly, of diminutive stature and with bad teeth and poor eyesight, this man left his home and orphaned children to do his bit for his country when he could have applied for an exemption. He may have not spent much time on the front line but his presence in the arena of war freed up those younger and fitter than himself to take part in active combat whilst he himself was at very real risk. Not even a really local man, his roots were across the border in Fressingfield, we should be proud to have his name remembered on our Town Memorial as one of our Harleston Heroes.