



Thomas Edward Sayer

12731 Private, 7th Battalion Norfolk Regiment

He died as a Prisoner of War in Germany on 7th November 1918, aged 25

Thomas was buried at Hamburg Cemetery, Germany

Thomas Edward Sayer was living on Harleston Common in 1911, his family were in the smaller half of a double dwelling that stood on the corner of the Common and the foot path that used to go straight over to Gunshaw's until it was diverted in later years to hug the hedge line. The double dwelling has long since been demolished and the site is now covered by a modern house.

The Sayer's had roots deep in Norfolk soil, back in 1841 Thomas Edward's grandfather, Charles, was one of a number of Agricultural Labourers working for Nathaniel Parker at Pied Bridge Farm; the Parkers were a well to do local family with several brothers farming on a large scale. By 1851 Charles, having married Eliza Chatton in 1847, was living at up at one of the Gawdy Hall Lodges with two young children. Moving onto 1861 and Thomas' father, Edward Sayer was the youngest of the 5 children now living on Church Lane, Redenhall. In 1871 the family were at the same address but two younger sisters and an 83 years old Granny from Wortwell had been added to the mix!

By 1881, the family had moved a few hundred yards onto the Gawdy Hall road, Edward appeared then as a postman. Shortly after the 1881 census at least two of Edwards fledgling siblings were, in the way of the time, being kicked out of the nest to make their ways in the world. Edward's older brother, Samuel, was obviously very confident in his gardening skills, perhaps he had been working at Gawdy Hall, whilst older sister Emily was aiming for possibly one of the most basic domestic service jobs. A kitchen maid was really a skivvy or drudge who got landed with scrubbing vegetables, pots and pans!

GARDENER (HEAD), where help is given; understands Vines, Peaches, Melons, Cucumbers, Stove, and Greenhouse Plants, Flower and Kitchen Garden. Good character from present and previous employers. Age 26; single. Address P. Sayer, Redenhall, Harleston, Norfolk. (4583)

Lowestoft Journal
10 Jun 1882

WANTED, a Situation as GARDENER, by a Single Man, age 26; understands the full routine of Houses, Flower and Kitchen Garden; good character from present and previous employers.—Address, S. Sayer, Redenhall, Harleston, Norfolk.[1487]

Bury and Norwich Post
13 Jun 1882

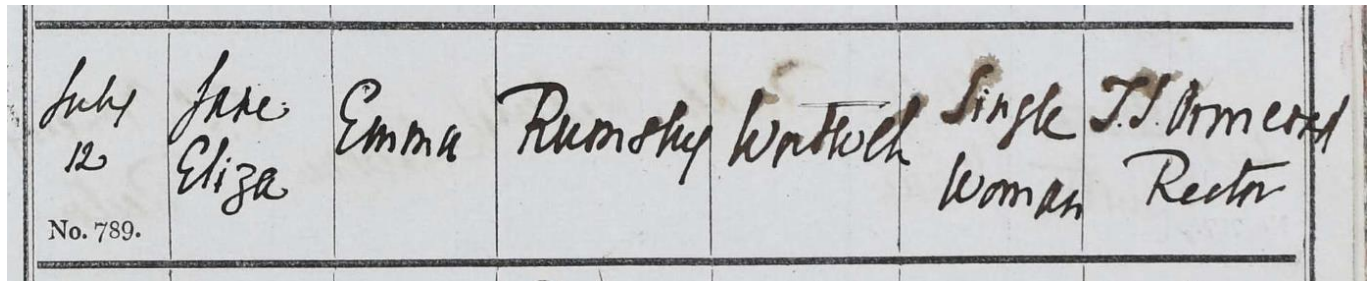
WANTED, a Situation as KITCHENMAID, in a Gentleman's family, age 18; one year's good character.—Apply to Emily Sayer, Church Lane, Redenhall, Harleston.

Norfolk Chronicle
1 Apr 1882

Edward also had ambitions beyond working on the land; although he was the son of an Agricultural Labourer and had started off his working life as such, he fairly rapidly decided that being a postman was the job for him. Perhaps the steady income from working for the Post Office gave him the

confidence to marry Jane Rumsby which he did in early 1885; he gave his job as postal messenger when his daughter Mary Elizabeth was baptised in 1887 and as a rural postman when Mary's sister Annie Eliza was baptised in 1888.

Jane was the illegitimate daughter of Emma Rumsby and by 1871 (when she was 8) she was living with her grandparents, the rather elderly William and Sophie. Although they were then living in Wortwell and had done so since 1841, William was from Cratfield and Sophie from Flixton! In 1841, Jane's mother Emma Rumsby was the middle of 7 children, in 1851 Emma was in domestic service much as her daughter Jane was 30 years on, in 1881, four years before she married Edward.



Edward features in an intriguing snippet – at the time the incoming mails were delivered by pony and trap from, for example, Diss Main Post Office for sorting and distributing from Harleston.

Edward Sayer postman of Harleston, for allowing his horse to stray, was fined 5s and costs 2s 6d. Pc Smith said he had three times taken the horse off the highway.

Theford & Watton Times and People's Weekly Journal, 11 Oct 1890

Some chaps would push the boundaries slightly and, in an effort to save on food, would let their beasts stray about the highway foraging on their own account, secure in the knowledge they would return to base.

In 1891 Edward and Jane's young family were out on the Bungy Road. 5 adjacent houses were headed by: Edward Sayer; Henry Goldsmith; a railway worker; Ambrose Frost and Jonathan Webb. All four named men were to lose at least one son in the war that was to follow. There must have been times in Harleston when sorrow sank like a blanket over the town. The Sayer family were to lose many other children; at the time of the 1911 census 5 of their 13 children had already died.

In 1901, the Sayers had moved in closer to town and were not far along the Redenhall Road, Edward's 15 years old son, (Charles) William, had also got a job with the Post Office, in his case as a Telegraph boy, delivering messages as they came hot off the wires. Less than a decade and a half later the sight of the Telegraph boy struck fear into any family with a man out fighting; all dreaded that the War office might be sending them bad news.

Mr Riches describes the job of a postman in the early 20th C thus...

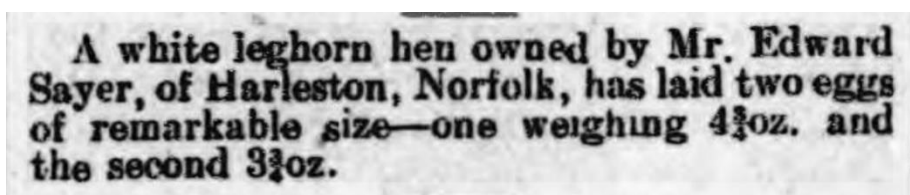
'It was said by many of the locals of fifty or sixty years ago that you could set your watch or clock the right time when you saw a postman or post woman, so regular on time were they. Many of the post rounds were done on foot, immense distances being walked. Many of the rounds were known to the postman as walking rounds, one of these used to be to Alburgh and Denton, quite a distance from Harleston where they operated from. The clothing used to be of very heavy cloth material and the postmen were usually issued with an oilskin cape. The standard dress for the legs was cloth putties. A few of them had old fashioned cycles and during darkness they were lit up by an oil lamp'

By 1911, the Sayers had moved to the other side of the town and it was then we find them up on the Common. Charles William was now a postman in his own right; in 1911, he got into a spot of trouble, like his father's trouble 20 years previously this was a matter of transport but mechanised rather than equine! The Diss Express of 28 Apr 1911 reports

William Sayer, of Harleston, postman, was charged with riding bicycle on the footpath at Harleston, and was fined 2/6 and costs 6/-.

I think we can be fairly certain that this was on the footpath that then, as now, leads up from Wilderness Lane to the foot of the Common, wonder if it was one of Post Office bikes he was riding! Never mind, Charles William married at the end of the year, to a Mabel Stone. She was one of the younger daughters of the Harleston Station Master – and one of 15 siblings of whom all but 4 survived for the 1911 census!

Edward Sayer retired shortly after the 1911 census but quietly carried on, keeping chickens which doubtless scratched around the fields and hedges bordering the family home much as mine did a century later, more or less in the same places. However, one of Edward's hens managed to lay eggs of a prodigious size, gaining international press coverage in the process!



A white leghorn hen owned by Mr. Edward Sayer, of Harleston, Norfolk, has laid two eggs of remarkable size—one weighing 4½oz. and the second 3½oz.

*Derry Journal, Northern Ireland
5 Sep 1913*

In the 1911 census our Harleston Hero, Thomas Edward Sayer, was described as a draper's errand boy; frankly he was a little old for such a job which normally would be done by a lad up to the age of about 16 or so but perhaps he was hoping to be taken on as either a van man in his own right. When aged 20, he enlisted in the Norfolks on the 30th of August 1914, he gave his job as 'porter'. Having enlisted up in Norwich barely a month after war was declared, he was posted the next day, doubtless off to basic training as this lad, unlike many of his peers, had not enlisted in the lively local militia up by the railway station so his military skills were zero. 9 months later, on the last day of May 1915, Thomas arrived in France to fight side by side with his comrades. 15 months later in August 1916, Thomas disappeared in the chaos of the Western Front. His parents would not have known what had happened to him when they were told he had gone missing but one can only imagine the relief when, in mid-November 1916, they were told he had been captured and was being held as a prisoner of war.

This was to all intents and purposes the end of the war for Thomas. In many ways he had a lucky war, he did not wind up with the Norfolks in the massacres of Gallipoli or Gaza and he had not been maimed nor drowned in a shell hole. If he had been captured earlier in the war, when the German's had more prisoners than they knew what to do with, he may have met an early death due to exposure or one of the outbreaks of typhus that ravaged the camps with nothing but the most basic of sewerage facilities. Unfortunately, both sides were guilty of using prisoners as enforced labour in dangerous positions near the front lines, treating them badly and forcing them to live in miserable conditions. However, ethnicity had a lot to do with how well you were treated and as a British Prisoner of the Germans, Thomas Sayer's treatment would have been fairly decent and humane. Fortunately, the harvest in 1918 was a good one but nonetheless as the war drew to an end, food, clothing, all supplies were becoming scarce for the entire German nation. Years of privation, over cramped conditions, poor food and general stress would have served to debilitate all the prisoners, it is not too surprising that this young man, only in his mid-20s, died of

Pulmonary Tuberculosis. He was buried out in Germany; tragically his death occurred only a few days before the end of the war. Could he have survived if he had been repatriated and shipped home? Several other of our Harleston Heroes died of illness rather than wounds but all should be remembered for their willingness to risk all for their country.

Until the war had finished we have no evidence of the family being anything other than decent respectable hard working types; I don't know if it was the effect of living on The Common, which it

HARLESTON.
POSTMAN CHARGED.—At a special Petty Sessions on Saturday, before Mr H. J. Yallop, a charge was preferred against Charles William Sayer, a Harleston postman, who had been arrested on Friday on a charge of stealing a postal order value 6/8, the property of the Postmaster-General on or about 19th Jan. Mr Alexander Macnair Kay, of the Investigation Department, G.P.O., London, said in consequence of complaints of losses of letters posted through the Harleston Post Office he made inquiries. He saw accused on Friday and after cautioning him questioned him on certain matters. At witness's request accused showed him the contents of his pockets and produced a postal order for 6/8, the subject of the charge. Accused admitted stealing it from the post. Witness reported the matter to headquarters who instructed him to give accused into custody.—Sergeant H. Hazlewood gave formal evidence of arrest and said accused made no reply to the charge.—A remand was granted until the next sitting of the Harleston justices to-day (Friday).—Accused made no application for bail.

has to be said had more than its fair share of ne'er do wells and the types easily distracted by a pub, but in 1925 Charles William Sayer really let the side down in a way that must have been horribly embarrassing for his father.

Norfolk Journal, 6 Feb 1925

HARLESTON. Postman Charged —At a special Petty Sessions on Saturday, before Mr H. J. Yallop, charge was preferred against Charles William Sayer, a Harleston postman, who had been arrested on Friday on charge of stealing a postal order value 6/8.

It seems that Sayer had been pinching for a while, suspicions were aroused an investigator, was sent down from London and caught him red-handed. Charles would have been 39 at the time and, like his father, must have clocked up about quarter of a century working for the post office before he gave way to foolish temptation. He was also the father of at least two sons, Charles Jnr and Harold who would have been teenagers when this all happened. Whatever other repercussions may have arisen, this was the end of Charles' Post Office Career and by the 1939 census, when the family were living out on the Needham Rd, Charles was a Labourer, Road Work.

I am afraid that whilst Edward Sayer may have been a respected local character, his youngest son, Victor Sayer, was far worse than his older brother Charles William Sayer and appears to have been a light-fingered layabout! (Apologies to any family who may read this but read the evidence and please get back to me with anything you may wish to add!)

A remand, in custody, for a week, was granted in a case in which Victor George Sayer, a farm labourer of the Common, Harleston, was charged with breaking and entering the house of Mr. G. A. Gibbs at Starston. *Diss Express 26 Jul 1929*

George Alfred Gibbs from Starston had gone on holiday on the 26th June. Having locked all doors and windows, he trotted off believing it was safe to leave his locked Post Office Savings Box in the house. Gibbs reckoned it contained about £2 – various silver coins and, most notably, a 1906 golden half sovereign. Returning on the 15th July, he found two panes of glass broken in the scullery window and after looking round the house discovered the moneybox was not where it was usually kept. He later found the box on the windowsill of the living room, forced open and with contents missing. The very next day, PC Amies showed him a half sovereign, presumably spent by Sayers, which he identified as the one that had been stolen. A young labourer would be unlikely to own such a coin; presumably, the passing of the gold coin had been noticed and given away Sayers. P.C. Amies found dry mud footmarks on the living room floor and concluded someone had entered on Thursday July 4th, the day on which there was a heavy storm. Top notch deductive reasoning almost worthy of Mr Holmes! Sayer admitted to taking 17/6 from the box but had only spent some 12s.

Whilst he was remanded in custody, the police were getting busy following up another case as reported in the Diss Express on 2nd August 1929. The companion to the rector's wife had gone to empty the St Mary's offertory box, which looked as if it had been tampered with and contained only miscellaneous coinage. However, this was rather less than was expected; the Rev Dr. Oliver Dogdy (Not Dodgy!) Inskip had previously witnessed a friend put a 10s note in the box. PC Amies had already arrested Sayer on the charge of burglary on the 16th July and by the 18th July, no doubt with some 'gentle persuasion', Sayers had also admitted to breaking open the collection box.

Reluctant to hand over his ill-gotten gains, he then claimed to have hidden the 10s note in a 'plantation' near his house – his house was at the top corner of the Common and I suspect the 'plantation' would be the small copse at the edge of the footpath across the fields. He was taken to the spot; surprise, surprise no money! Possibly his plan was to claim that he, the robber, had been robbed but he finally admitted he had put it in a cash box at his home. Back they went to the house, checked out the cash box, and found it empty.

By this time PC Amies was losing patience at the run around and was wondering if all the money had been spent. Sayer himself must have also been more than a little confused until his mother confessed that she had, in all innocence (!?), taken 10/- from a moneybox belonging to her lodger, Mr Barnard, and used it to pay the milk and butter bill! At this point Sayer made a full confession. When the cases got to court it was reported that

When asked if he was guilty or not guilty, Sayer, who seemed to be very vague as to the seriousness of his position, said he did not know what they (the magistrates) meant.

His mother was called on to give evidence about the use of the 10s note and was described as

Mrs Jane Sayer, mother of the prisoner, a pathetic figure in black

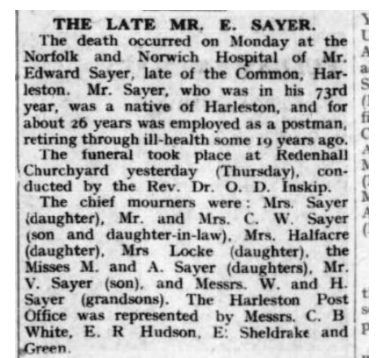
Sayer confirmed his confession in court adding that he was hungry. However, Supt. Fuller said that

Sayer lived with his parents. He had a good home and plenty of food whenever he liked to go after it. Occasionally accused took it into his head not to go to work.

I must admit that on first reading the court reports, I had assumed that the culprit was a slightly dappy teenager but no, Victor George Sayer was actually 28; he was sent to prison for four months with hard labour on the two theft charges and was warned not to get himself in trouble again. In spite of his troublesome sons, Edward Sayer's obituary reveals him to have been a respected member of the community.

Norfolk and Norwich Hospital of Mr. Edward Sayer, late the Common, Harleston. Mr. Sayer, who was in his 73rd year, was a native of Harleston, and for about 26 years, was employed a postman, retiring through ill health some years ago.

Diss Express
15 May 1931



THE LATE MR. E. SAYER.
The death occurred on Monday at the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital of Mr. Edward Sayer, late of the Common, Harleston. Mr. Sayer, who was in his 73rd year, was a native of Harleston, and for about 26 years was employed as a postman, retiring through ill-health some 19 years ago. The funeral took place at Redenhall Churchyard yesterday (Thursday), conducted by the Rev. Dr. O. D. Inskip. The chief mourners were: Mrs. Sayer (daughter), Mr. and Mrs. C. W. Sayer (son and daughter-in-law), Mrs. Halfacre (daughter), Mrs. Locke (daughter), the Misses M. and A. Sayer (daughters), Mr. V. Sayer (son), and Messrs. W. and H. Sayer (grandsons). The Harleston Post Office was represented by Messrs. C. B. White, E. R. Hudson, E. Sheldrake and Green.

I am afraid to say that Victor seems to have been a bit of a magnet for trouble and a few years later Victor was back in court when Bessie Buckingham, married woman, charged him with assault. (Diss Express 14th June 1935) She claimed that Sayer struck her with his fist and said, "Take that" when she was coming home from her garden and that she had been in fear of him since she had him up at court last year. That episode, reported on 29th June 1934, probably did not go quite as she expected

as both Victor and Bessie were bound over to keep the peace for 12 months. Sayer counterclaimed that Bessie had put her fingers to her nose, which she in turn denied. He also claimed that Buckingham had once aimed a big bread knife at him. Victor's sister Annie said they were going home when they bumped into Mrs Buckingham and there was nothing to it. The case was dismissed and when Mr Buckingham applied for police protection for his wife, whilst he was working away in Attleborough, he was told he should take his wife with him! Wonder if Bessie was married to a descendent of the 'Battling Buckenhams' who had been such a feature of The Common from the mid-19th century onwards!

Doreen Whur nee Brown who grew up in the Council houses at the foot of the Common during the 1930's shared her pre and post war memories with me:-

On the other side of the path leading across the fields were some tiny cottages in them lived a family of two sisters, Minnie and Annie Sayer, and their brother Victor.

Shortly before the war in 1938, 'The funeral took place on Friday at Redenhall, of Miss Annie Elizabeth Sayer, of The Common, who died suddenly on the previous Tuesday, at the age of 49. Although Doreen had forgotten the mother Jane, the 1839 census logs Victor, Minnie and their mother in this house.

I gather they may have been a short family as Doreen Brown also said 'they were like dwarves'; Doreen is a delightful lady from before the times of political correctness! During a visit to Redenhall churchyard I came across a stone 'Minnie Sayer/ Victor Sayer - reunited 22nd Aug. 1991'. This does tie in with the approximate remembered time of Victor's death, but one wonders where Annie's final resting place is.

Unfortunately, Doreen's dog, normally a very amiable creature took a great exception to Victor and would bark loudly every time it saw him.

Their mother, Jane, survived her daughter some 8 years, dying in Mar 1946, her obituary describing her as the widow of Edward Sayer, former well-known local postman.

Would Thomas Edward have been one of the steady Sayer men like his father; would he have been a bit of a sort like Victor or maybe a mix of both like his brother William Charles? Sadly, we will never know.