



## Percy George Brett

Seaman, Trinity House Service on SS Argus (London)

He died at sea on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1940, aged 41

Percy is commemorated on the Tower Hill Memorial, Trinity Square, London

One of the things that has become apparent with the development of this project, exploring the lives and times of our Harleston Heroes, is the sheer variety of the contributions made by residents of our town. We have had aviation pioneers, risking their lives at the dawn of airborne technology, a man who perished in a submarine, men who died of infection, men who were taken prisoner, men who risked their lives in planes travelling hundreds of miles over foreign territory and soldiers: infantry; mechanised and support.

Percy George Brett was a man who served in one war as a boy sailor and perished in a second whilst protecting mariners around the complex coasts and estuaries of the United Kingdom. However, so far as I can tell there was absolutely no links between his family and the ocean; whilst the North Sea is not so very far from Harleston (in Percy's time it would probably take less time to reach the coast by train than it does by road today) this part of the Waveney Valley is hardly maritime.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century one generally followed the trade pursued by one's father, or at least an allied one, your sons did the same and so on and so on. The Brett's did not seem so inclined, not only did they change their trades (generally rather successfully) but those trades would not necessarily have any link to those of their fathers.

Way back in 1823, in the bustling village of Brockdish, a tanner, James Brett, and his wife Mary baptised their first child, Jane in the church of St Peter and St Paul. A tanner is what James remained and for the succeeding births of Lettice and Simon but come 1837 and the baptism of young George, father James was now a labourer. Labourer he may have been but by 1841 he had become a farmer. The 1851 census reveals his farm to be 44 acres, a small spread from which to support a wife and 6 children; the older two had left the nest. This would explain why he had added being a carter to his workload, as the years went on this became more specifically a coal carter. The poor old fella still gave this as his trade as late as 1881 when he too was '81'. I hope he had a younger lad to help lug the sacks of coal about. When James did finally die, in 1883, his years of bell ringing service were marked by the ringing of a muffled peal by his fellow campanologists

**ON SUNDAY LAST** ringers from Brockdish, Pulham Market, and Wingfield companies, rang a muffled peal, in respect of the memory of James Brett, for many years a ringer in this parish. The ringers express sympathy for the widow and bereaved family.

*Thetford & Watton Times*  
21 Apr 1883

Henry was the youngest son of James Brett, tanner turned labourer, turned farmer, turned carter, turned coal merchant; in 1861, when he was 18, Henry gave his trade as a Cord Spinner. Surprisingly in this land of woolly backed sheep and fields of flax, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, Syleham

Mills was producing drabnet, a fabric with a linen weft and a cotton warp. In 1840, the mill had only partially switched from grinding corn to cloth production, but by 1849 the grinding stones had been removed and fabric manufacture was in full swing. By the 1851 census the light sprinkling of workers in the cloth trade had increased to a goodly proportion of the villagers; Henry's work as a Cord Spinner in 1861 was allied to this trade. Henry's other siblings were, at that point, pursuing shoe making, bonnet making, and glazing.

James Jnr, one of Henry's brothers lost a son, Albert, to mumps in 1869. 12 years later, Henry was to give this name of Albert to one of his own sons, 60 years later Henry's son was to name his only son Albert.

### BROCKDISH.

**INQUEST.**—An inquest was held in this parish on Tuesday, before John Muskett, Esq., coroner, on the body of Albert Brett, aged ten years.—James Brett, the father of the deceased, said his son had been with him at work between seven and eight o'clock on Saturday evening last. Deceased said his back ached, and he would go to bed. On Sunday morning he got up, and his mother washed him, when he said he could not go to school, as he was not well enough. At dinner time on Monday, he ask deceased whether he would have his dinner. He turned deceased on his back, but he never spoke. His lips were black. He called assistance, and when he examined him he was quite dead. He had been suffering from the mumps, but had been to school all the week.—Adeline Brett, deceased's mother, said the child had always been healthy until within the last fortnight, during which time he had suffered from the mumps. All her children and her husband had had the mumps, and they had all got better, and she thought deceased had recovered. He complained of pain in his back when he had the mumps.—Verdict: "Died from natural causes."

*The Suffolk Chronicle*  
24 Jul 1869

I am not sure 'cord winding' suited Henry's natural skills; the village (on good clay) also had a thriving brickmaking industry. In 1866 Henry married, to Ellen Sparrow from Syleham and by 1871, Henry had moved down the road to Syleham itself and was now a bricklayer; although their 3 year old Elizabeth Brett had been born in Brockdish, 1 years old Alfred was a Syleham lad. Syleham really did not offer enough for an ambitious young man and so, by 1881, Henry had moved to Harleston; to the outskirts of Harleston, if truth be told, but still to a bustling town, on the up and with a railway station.

His address was then given as 'Stone Mason's and Carpenter's Yard' and was out on the Redenhall Road. Since bricklayer Henry was heading the only family in the yard, I think we can assume he was already diversifying and employing other specialists as sub-contractors. Little Alfred, who appeared in 1871, was now flying under his middle name of Oscar whilst his big sister, Elizabeth Mary, aged 13, was already out at work. Elizabeth had a tough gig, living in as the sole servant for a farmer employing four men and two boys, his wife and 3 children all of whom were under the age of 5! There was a bit of a gap in Henry's family between 10 years old Oscar and the next children, Alice and Albert aged 4 and 3 respectively, possibly a child between had died young.

Ellen Brett nee Sparrow died in 1890, just as her husband's business was taking off. In Victorian times there was a lot of money spent on Church improvements (don't get me started on the subject of the demolition of the ancient St John's Chapel in the centre of Harleston), and Brett seems to have developed quite a name for himself. Although a bricklayer by trade, he must have had access to skilled craftsmen; in 1889 he refurbished the carved oak roof of the Grundisburgh Church including replacing the wings and heads bashed off angels by the puritans some 300 years earlier!

Union.

### GRUNDISBURGH.

**THE CHURCH.**—The roof of the church, which is of oak, beautifully carved, has for some months past been under repair, and is now completed. All decayed portions have been removed and replaced by new, while many beautiful carved figures representing angels, which were disfigured by the heads and wings being broken off in Puritan times, have been restored to their original beauty. The covering, which is of lead, has been taken off, re-cast, and re-laid. The entire restoration, which has cost about £400, has been successfully carried out by Mr. Brett, of Harleston.

IF A TEL. BICCH

*The Ipswich Journal Suffolk, England*  
27 Sep 1889

An example of an Angel repaired by Henry Brett's men.



Depwade Union Chapel



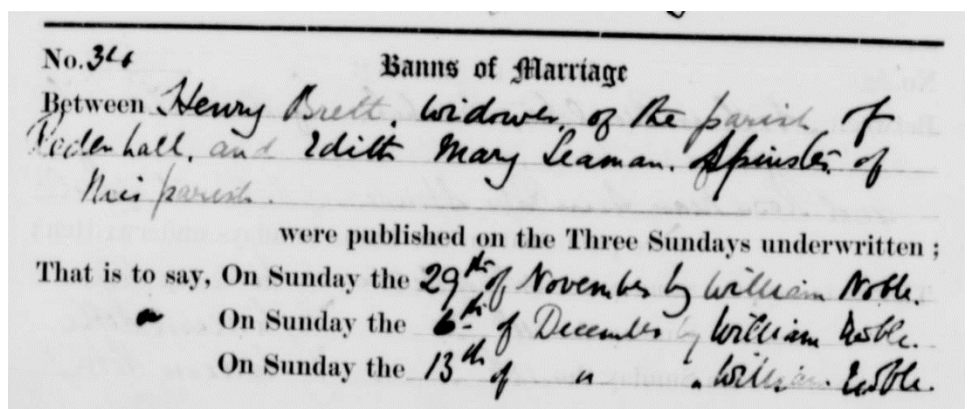
Rather more locally, Brett built the solid red brick chapel up at the Pulham Union Workhouse, a familiar sight to anyone taking the road from Diss to Norwich. This chapel had first been mooted back in 1874, to replace the dingy hall then used for worship. Unfortunately, a squabble amongst the Guardians had put paid to the project until the idea was resurrected in 1888. Even more unfortunately the Chaplain and driving force behind the chapel then got accidentally bashed on the head with an Iron Bar whilst visiting the Workhouse inmates; the chaplain did survive but was knocked silly for a considerable period and once again it looked as if the ill-fated chapel would never get off the ground. Fortunately, the good and the great of the locality stepped in and for a sum of about £400 the chapel was erected by Henry Brett from designs 'by the eminent Architect Mr W Brassett Smith of London', featuring a handsome East Window.

postponed a second time, but this was averted by the Rev. G. France, rector of Brockdish, and an old friend of Mr. Fellows, who came to the rescue, and by his indefatigable exertions carried the affair to a successful issue. Nor must thanks be forgotten to the anonymous donor of £200, a subscription which arrived most opportunely, and enabled the chapel to be dedicated free of debt and of that "exuberance of faith and deficiency of funds," which so often mars such undertakings. The service on Tuesday was a very bright and helpful one, the chapel being tastefully decorated by the inmates under the direction of the Governor, Mr. H. Smith, with the beautiful dahlias, for which the Union gardens are famous. The inmates were, of course, first accommodated, as the chapel is only built for their use; only a few seats for friends were available. The surpliced choir of the mother church led the singing, and the organ was played by F. Bates, Esq., Mus. Doc., organist of Norwich Cathedral. The service was taken (in the absence of the Chaplain, who is with his invalided son in Switzerland) by the Rev. T. Leonard Jenkins, M.A., the lessons being read by Rev. C. R. Manning, M.A., rector of Diss, and Rural Dean, and the Venerable Archdeacon Perowne, B.D., rector of Redenhall. The Lord Bishop gave an address based upon the three first verses of the 41st Psalm. The hymn "The King of Love my Shepherd is" was then sung, and the service concluded with the Bishop's Benediction.—The building and fitting of the chapel cost about £600, which sum includes a handsome east window by Heaton and Butler, representing the dedication subject, i.e., the Good Shepherd in the centre light, supported by guardian angels in the side lights. This handsome offering was presented by Mr. Justice Kay in memory of the late Lady Kay. The chapel was built by Mr. Brett, of Harleston, from designs by the eminent architect, Mr. W. Brassett Smith, of London. During the day the bells of the parish church were repeatedly rung in welcome to the Bishop and in recognition of the occasion.

Diss Express Norfolk, England  
31 Oct 1890

Following the death of Ellen, the 1891 census reveals that Henry's oldest daughter Elizabeth (the one who 10 years earlier had been working as 13 years old live-in general servant) had been hauled back to do the housekeeping for her widowed father. Henry was busy, he had children barely in their teens and he was probably lonely; in 1891 he rather promptly remarried, to Edith May Seaman of Burston

Henry's new wife Edith was only two years older than Elizabeth, the daughter who had been called back to look after her father and younger siblings. I wonder how that panned out!



was postponed for their attendance.

**NEEDHAM BRIDGE.**

A letter was received from the Clerk to the East Suffolk County Council, enclosing tenders which had been received for the erection of Needham Bridge, for which Norfolk and East Suffolk were jointly responsible. The tenders were two in number—viz, Henry Brett, of Harleston, £453, and John Chaudler, Fressingfield, £455. East Suffolk recommended the acceptance of Mr Brett's tender provided the County Surveyor was satisfied as to the ability of Mr. Brett to carry out the work.

The tender of Mr. Brett was accepted.

*Norwich Mercury Norfolk, England*

22 Apr 1899

More prosaically, in June 1899, Henry's company was awarded the contract to rebuild the Needham and Weybread bridge. Assuming he actually completed the work, this may have been the last big project Henry was ever involved in.

One October day, Henry Brett had travelled out to Pulham Mary to check out some work he had been doing on the Baptist Chapel there and had then gone onto Syleham, home of his first wife, to meet his former brother in law. He had taken his younger son, Albert Edward with him. Coming home from Syleham, his horse tripped, and Henry was pitched out of the trap landing on his head. Passing locals did their best to assist and Brett was carried home in his trap; although he was vocal at one point, Brett never really regained consciousness.

All of a sudden Edith Brett nee Seaman was no longer the young wife of a successful and respected businessman, instead she became a 32 years old widow with 3 young sons of her own as well as her adult stepchildren to care for. The youngest of these children was our Harleston Hero, Percy, who was barely 9 months old when Henry died; he could have had no memories of his father at all.

wards was mentioned as a possibility.

## HARLESTON.

FATAL ACCIDENT.—On Saturday evening Mr. A. Brett, builder, of Harleston, was driving home, and when going down a hill at Syleham the horse fell, and he was thrown out of the cart and struck his head violently on the road. He was conveyed home, but never regained consciousness, and expired at three o'clock on Monday afternoon. He leaves a widow and four little children, and great sympathy is felt for them in their sad bereavement. An inquest on the body was held on Tuesday by Mr. H. E. Garrod, of Diss, Coroner. Albert Edward Brett said that his father left home on Saturday to see after some work at Pulham St. Mary Baptist Chapel. He proceeded from there in the afternoon to go to Syleham. William Barber, labourer, Syleham, said that on Saturday night about 5:45 he met deceased and bade him good night. Shortly afterwards he heard a noise, and witness's son told him a horse had fallen down. He went and offered assistance, and helped to put deceased into the cart. Deceased appeared to be quite sober, but was unconscious. Jessie Jane Ebbage, Needham, said she was cycling from Hoxne on Saturday evening and saw the deceased lying on the road. She directly pulled his head from under his arm and helped to move him to the side of the road. Ephraim Sparrow, miller, Syleham, brother-in-law of the deceased, said he saw him at the White Hart. About half-an-hour later he heard of the accident. He helped with others to put deceased into the cart and drive him home. The deceased tried to speak but witness could not understand what he said. Dr. Robinson said he was called to see the deceased and found him in a state of insensibility, evidently suffering from symptoms of cerebral irritation arising from laceration of the brain. He attributed death to the result of the fall. The jury returned a verdict of "Accidentally killed by a fall from a trap."

At least Edith had no financial worries for a few years, when the estate was settled and the yard and contents were auctioned off in 1900, the scale of the enterprise and the breadth of the work Brett undertook becomes apparent. Brett had the materials for drainage, plumbing, roofing, well-sinking, brick laying, carpentry, glazing, scaffolding and all sorts of miscellaneous other items. Also included was a Pony and Trap, presumably the pair which had caused his death.

More cheerily, in 1901 the long-suffering Elizabeth, sent out to work at age 13 and called back to care for her widowed father and orphaned siblings in 1891, married a Trap Proprietor in Inglethorpe; the marriage was witnessed by her sister, Alice Agnes.

*Eastern Daily Press*  
19 Mar 1900

At the time of the 1911 census, Edith's older boys were a carpenter and coach painter respectively, 12 years old Percy was still at school, Edith's youngest step son, Albert (who had previously declared himself too be a Carter/Bricklayer) was focussing on bricklaying; shortly after this census, Percy went off to HMS Ganges. See Allen Denny's biography for more information about this concrete training ship.

When Percy enlisted in the Navy as a 16 years old boy, an uneasy peace still existed in Europe, by the time Percy finished his training in January 1915, war had broken out and the young lad was at just as much risk as his adult comrades.

Percy sailed in 8 ships between leaving MHS Ganges as a boy first class in 1915 and his retirement from the Royal Navy in 1929, returning to the Chatham depot between each deployment. He may not have been the sharpest sailor on board, but he was certainly a Naval man all the way through. His ability was generally described as satisfactory with one below par and 2 above par whilst his attitude was, with only one exception, Very Good, and since the exception was 'Good' this was hardly an issue.

I then got a little confused with the various records, but I believe when Brett left the Navy he signed up for the Reserve, at some point. He also joined the Lighthouse Service / Pilot Service, at some point.

However, his day job was that of a labourer, he married Florence M Rignell in 1933 and the couple settled down together. Florence was the daughter of a Lithographic printer whose job seems to have

taken him all over the country. Florence and her siblings were born in Kennington, Walworth, Hull, Belfast and Liverpool, where they appeared in the 1911 census. I wonder if Florence went back south looking for work and met her sailor boy in London? The happy couple were blessed with a baby boy, Albert G, in 1934; this marriage was to be painfully short. Having lost his father before he was old enough to really be aware of him, Percy lost his son, little

**TO BUILDERS, CONTRACTORS, AND OTHERS.**  
**REDENHALL ROAD, HARLESTON,**  
Within a short distance from the Railway Station.  
**GEO. DURRANT & SONS** are instructed by the Executors of the late Mr. Henry Brett to Sell by Auction, on **THURSDAY, MARCH 29TH, 1900,** the Entire Extensive and Valuable  
**STOCK-IN-TRADE,**  
consisting of about 600 **DOULTON WARE JUNCTIONS,** Draining Pipes, Bends, Cyphons, Channel and Bottle Pips, Trap Doors, Gulleys, Sinks, Ornamental, Square-headed, Barrel, and other Pipes, upwards of 9000 Glazed Roof, Pan, Ridge and Flat Gutter, Staffordshire, and Broseley Tiles, Staffordshire Paving, Bricks, Squants, Bull Nose, Dweep, Coping, Cossey Ware Chimney Stack, White, Red, and Blue Floor, Air, Floor, Arch, Lump, Paving, and other Bricks, all the excellent scaffolding, including 80 Poles various lengths, 140 Boards, 60 Patons, 3 pairs Hanging Trestles, Screw Chimney and Well Tackling, Cradle for Outside Church Work, with Rope, Pulleys, Crab, &c., complete, the Queen Saw Bench by Reynolds & Co., Southwark, Lathe, 8 Cramps, Pit and other Saws, 7 Carpenters' Benches, 24 Ladders, large Grindstone, Name boards, Nest of 48 Nail Drawers, 40 sheets Corrugated Iron Roofing, Tilts, Sieves, Brick Hods, Mortar Boards, Levels, Trestles, Bankers and Square, several Thousand Feet of Oak Planking, Pitch-pine Match Boarding, Feather-edge Boards, a large Quantity of Pile Driving Boards (nearly all shod), Pantle Splines, 12 Deal Balks, Slate, Slate Battens, 40 Pitch-pine Church Seat Heads, Glazed Window Frames, Doors, large Oak Timber, a quantity of New Ironmongery, White and Red Lead, Paint Kettles, Oils, Colours, Brushes, &c., 2 Hand Carts, 8 Wheelbarrows, Tumbrel, light spring Cart, 3 Sets Harness and Stable Requisites, useful Roan Cob, a large quantity of firewood, and numerous other Effects.  
Sale will Commence at Ten o'clock punctually in consequence of the number and value of the Lots (nearly 700).



Albert G who died, shortly after birth alongside his mother Florrie, barely a year after their marriage and aged only 30.

*SS Argus painted 1918*

In 1939 Percy Brett was lodging at No1 Alexandra Street in Harwich, with a married couple, their child and another married couple. Widowed Percy, already working for Trinity House, had been described as 'D' grade fitness so not surprisingly he was sent not to the Navy but to the Light House / Pilot Service. He was then living at 1, Trinity House Cottage, Bathside, Harwich. In 1940 he was on the very elderly SS Argus; this steel hulled steam tender had been built in 1909 and was manoeuvring in the Thames Estuary, running supplies, when she hit a mine on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 1940. The boat sank north east of the Isle of Sheppey. Percy's body was never found so it is not known if he died in the explosion or drowned afterwards in the icy swirling tidal waters of the Thames. Only one man survived, an 18 years old Quartermaster (storekeeper) Archie Smith.

Percy's medals were sent to his widowed mother at 1 Redenhall Terrace, her home since she had married Percy's father Henry and taken on him and his children. Percy had died without a will; as he was a childless widower, by default, his mother inherited his estate. I do feel the fates were cruel to Percy; raised without a father, although I am sure his adult half siblings did their best to help his mother, he showed the enterprising spirit of his father when he set off to sea as a young lad whilst WW1 was in full swing. He survived this war although I have no doubts that he had many fearful moments. He settled down to married life on land only to lose both his wife and his child, leaving him once again alone. During WW2 he must have known the perils he was facing, not only from the risk of mines but also from German planes overhead and the odd U-boat sneaking up the estuary. At 40 years of age he would no longer have shared the illusion of immortality that would have cushioned him as a youth.