



Thomas James Johnson

876027 Lance Bombardier, 411th Battery, 126th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery

He was killed in action on 4th April 1918 in France, aged 34

Thomas was buried at Maroc British Cemetery, Grenay, Pas de Calais, France

Thomas James Johnson was, unusually in a family rooted in agricultural or building trades, working as a shop assistant in 1911. Then aged 24 he was still living with his parents and 3 of the 9 other siblings still surviving of the 12 that his parents had brought into the world. The family were living in a decently sized 5 room-house in Redenhall and whilst the majority of Thomas' siblings were, like him, born in Pulham, the two youngest had been born in Shelton.

<i>Robert Johnson</i>	of <i>this</i>	Parish
and <i>Elizabeth Copeman</i>	of <i>this</i>	Parish
<i>both single persons</i>		
were married in this <i>church</i>	by <i>curate</i>	with Consent of
	this <i>seventh</i>	Day of
<i>November</i>	in the Year One thousand eight hundred and <i>twenty two</i>	
	By me, <i>John Holmes-Curate</i>	
This Marriage was solemnized between us	{ <i>Robert Johnson his</i> (/) <i>mark</i>	
	{ <i>Elizabeth Copeman her</i> } <i>mark</i>	
In the Presence of	{ <i>Benjamin Self his</i> x <i>mark</i>	
	{ <i>Charles Johnson his</i> + <i>mark</i>	
No. 140.	<i>Elizabeth Self</i>	

Going all the way back to 1841, we find (living in Wortwell) Robert Johnson Snr and his wife Elizabeth nee Copeman originally from Starston. Having married at Redenhall on the 7th Nov 1822, neither Robert Snr nor Elizabeth could sign their names, neither could witnesses Benjamin Self and Charles Johnson Snr but

the final witness, Elizabeth Self had a lovely clear signature. Now, I initially assumed that witness Charles Johnson Snr was Robert Snr's father; no, Robert Snr and Charles Johnson Snr were twins! Twins born to James Johnson Snr and Elizabeth nee Gower, baptised on the turn of the 18th C into the 19th C, April 4th 1800 to be precise.

Johnson Robert & Charles Twin Sons of James & Elizabeth his Wife (née Gower Spinster) born & privately baptised April 4. rec^d into the Church Sep^r 15

I suspect it was the then widowed Elizabeth Johnson nee Gower who had some timber stolen from her in 1830, had she not been widowed then it would be from her husband the timber would have been stolen. The miscreants were given 2 months with hard labour, twice that of James Smith who appeared on the same bill sheet. To modern eyes it seems odd that a magistrate could send a man

to prison for being idle and disorderly!

Norwich Mercury
27 Feb 1830

By 1841 Robert Snr and Elizabeth had least 7 children, the oldest being Charles Jnr, named for his father's twin brother. Twin brother Charles

obtaining by force from Ellingham, a tin boiler and other articles. — By the Rev. John Oldershaw, Clk. Samuel Websdale (alias Meadows) and John Swan, convicted of stealing a quantity of wood from Elizabeth Johnson, of Wortwell, to be imprisoned 2 calendar months and hard labour. — By John Kerrich, Esq. James Smith, convicted as an idle and disorderly person, to be imprisoned one calendar month and hard labour.

Snr returned the compliment, baptising his oldest son Robert Jnr in 1824.

Back in Robert Snr's household of 1841; James Johnson Jnr was the 5th of the seven children who appeared in this census, presumably named for his grandfather. Going by the baptism records, sometime between 1829 and 1831 Robert's status dropped from husbandman (tilling his own small patch of land) to labourer indicating he was then dispossessed of what land he had held and was now working for someone rather than for himself.

As a side note, in 1861, Robert's twin, Charles Johnson Snr was then a carpenter, his son Robert Jnr was a carpenter and an 84 years old Robert Johnson (widower) lodging in the household was also a carpenter. I would like to think this was the gentleman of the same name for whom 98 years were claimed when he died in 1868 – ages could be a little on the vague side for this generation of working rural men. If so it appears he had one heck of an accent on him, so much so that when a milk pail was stolen from him in 1866, comment was made of the 'deaf old man who caused much laughter with his brogue (and) curious style of giving evidence'. Now bearing in mind these courts had a fair number of boys from the back hinterlands of the county travel through their doors this must have been a most extreme example of an accent from a different age; after all he would have been born about 1770! I wonder if many listeners today would have been able to fathom his speech.

It maybe that Uncle Charles Johnson snr gave his nephew James Jnr, an entrée into the building trade via brick making as by 1851 that is precisely the trade 15 years old James Jnr was following!



Back in those days, with the exception of some manufactory on the outskirts of Norwich and other major towns, brick making in this region was generally done on a small scale. Clay would be dug out of a pit and processed in a yard adjacent to where the raw materials had been excavated. The bricks would be shaped and also fired on site with the dry bricks, much easier to shift than the raw clay, then distributed on to who ever wanted to purchase them. This was work both skilled and tough.

Brickworks at Sprowston
<https://sprowston.net/st-cuthberts-guide/>

In June 1857 James Johnson Jnr wed Elizabeth Langley. I can only guess how they met as Hillingdon born Elizabeth Langley had been a servant 6 years earlier, one of 6 (including a gardener) looking after Justice of the Peace, Mr Muskett of Intwood Hall. Elizabeth's father was an agricultural labourer so she had a similar background to her husband James. Their 1857 union was followed in May 1858 by the baptism of their oldest son, Herbert James, in the old Harleston St John's Chapel. It could be that in 1861, James and his family were living out in one of these small industrial kiln complexes which may have been overlooked by the census taker as I can find no trace of them in that census.

In 1871 James Johnson, (grandfather of our Harleston Hero Thomas James) was then claiming to be a tile maker; this would have referred to unglazed tiles such as those used for roofs or possibly floor paments. The technology and materials are much the same as for bricks, just a slightly different set of skills. It is not surprising therefore that the Johnsons were one of three families living at the Brick Kilns in Rushall; the other two families were the brick-makers. Today the triple cottages still stand on the Pulham Road, what must have once been the industrial brickyard now seems to be some sort of glorified junk yard / vehicle depot whilst to the other side of the track is the Smurfitt Kappa Box Factory – Industrial site then, industrial site now! When they moved from Wortwell to Rushall can be guessed at as, in this 1871 census, James and Elizabeth Johnson nee Langley had four children, the three oldest born in Wortwell, the youngest (5 years old) born in Rushall.

James and Elizabeth's oldest son, Herbert James, married Hannah Elizabeth nee Palmer from Pulham Mkt back in late 1880. The pair set up home on North Green Road, Pulham Herbert having turned away from clay work to agriculture. Barely a few months after the marriage and in the 1881 census, James Johnson, although apparently still living next to brick works in Pulham Mary was also claiming to be an Agricultural Labourer, his wife did not appear in this census. Although Herbert had, like his grandfather, become an agricultural labourer his wife's father was allied to the building trade. So, Hannah's father, Thomas Palmer, was a carpenter and Herbert James' father, James Johnson was, at the time of the marriage if not much longer after, a Brick Maker; a marriage within building trade families.

Herbert's writing may not have been as fluent as his bride's but both parties were able to crack out a decent and legible signature.

1880. Marriage solemnized at the Parish Church in the Parish of Pulham St John in the County of Norfolk

No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the Time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
220	25	Herbert James Johnson Hannah Elizabeth Palmer	22 24	Bachelor Spinster	Laborer —	Pulham St. Mary Magdalen Pulham St. Mary Magdalen	James Johnson Thomas Palmer	Brick Maker Carpenter

Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church, after Reading by us, James Sillings

This Marriage was solemnized between us, Herbert James Johnson in the Presence of us, Thos Palmer Wm. Copton
Hannah Elizabeth Palmer Frank Springall

Come 1891 and Herbert and his wife had a good-sized family of 6 children, not bad in just over 10 years; Thomas our Harleston Hero was the third child and second son. The family were still settled in Pulham and Herbert's father James was still an agricultural labourer.

Judging by the birth places given by the children in the 1901 census, Herbert and Hannah had stayed in Pulham until at least 1895 and then wound up at Church Farm, St Cross only a few months before the 1901 census having made a brief detour via Shelton.

In this family of Cattlemen and school children, and one of a long line of manual workers, even by 1901, Thomas already stood out as a draper's assistant. 10 years later on and whilst most of his siblings had scattered, some into service between Lowestoft and London, one as a tram conductor, also in London, others just quietly getting on with their lives much as their ancestors had, Thomas was in Wortwell, where his family had originally come from some 50 years or so earlier. Herbert James was now a Horseman, the other son at home was a Farm Labourer, the two daughters were still at school and Thomas was more specifically working as a clothier, or seller of readymade garments.



Herbert Johnson, I would guess towards the end of the 19th Century

Two years on and our hero Thomas James Johnson married Gertrude Alice Singleton in her home town of Ipswich; I suspect they met on the job as in 1911 Gertrude was a 'drapers' clerk' and living at home with a younger sister and her parents, father a Grocer.

Gertrude Singleton's family were decidedly urban. Going all the way back to 1861, we find Edward Turner (an iron founder employing 110 men and 30 boys) living next door to Henry Singleton, a 'pattern maker'. I think this is no co-incidence; the pattern maker was the skilled man who made the original precise timber models from which the castings would be produced. There is some incredible footage of the Turner foundry available from the East Anglian Film Archive <http://www.eafa.org.uk/catalogue/819> which, although it dates from the 1930's gives a good idea of the work of this company that had been founded in 1837.

Singleton had started off as a carpenter, he must have had an incredible natural talent to become a pattern maker for such an important employer. In 1861, Henry Singleton had 8 children, two died in infancy, his eleventh and final child, Hamilton Henry, was born 7 years later. It was this youngest son who set up his grocers shop in Ipswich and whose daughter went on to marry Thomas Johnson. Thomas Johnson, son and sibling of manual workers made a good match here to one of the only two daughters of a fairly prosperous grocer, involved in the Ipswich City politics.

The couple appear to have returned to the Harleston area; a son Eric H Johnson being born in Depwade in late 1914. Little Eric's father Thomas died on the 4th of April 1918 leaving his wife back pay and a War Gratuity that was calculated and awarded about a year after the declaration of peace. Calculating from the amount left, £12 10s, Thomas Johnson had been enlisted for about 27 months before meeting his end in France meaning he would have joined in late 1915 which is the time a major drive was made for more volunteers, shortly before conscription was introduced in 1916.

Three years after her husband's death, widow Gertrude remarried to William Dennis, a policeman who appeared in the 1911 census as a 28 years old PC lodging in Hunstanton. Still a Constable in Long Stratton in 1915, press reports from Magistrates Court Proceedings reveal he was stationed in Harleston in 1919; the young widow with a small son must have caught the eye of Acting Sgt William Dennis.

Gertrude Dennis nee Singleton late Johnson died in 1932, not quite sixty years of age by which time William had been promoted to superintendent and the couple were living in Downham Market.

On the eve of WW2, Supt Dennis was involved in a murder case that hit the national headlines and had Scotland Yard detectives involved. Basically a 30 years old labourer, Lewis Sandford, died suddenly in January; initially it was assumed of tetanus introduced via a cut to his foot. After his burial, the village rumour mill started grinding, exceedingly fine. This led a few months later to police investigations and searches whilst the widow protested of the happiness of her marriage. In early April Sandford's body was exhumed, samples of the sandy soil of Pentney churchyard where he had been interred were taken, Sandford's body was removed to Kings Lynn Hospital where it was examined, and internal organs removed to be sent to London. Supt William Dennis attended the exhumation and the reburial which took place on the same day under strictly controlled conditions.

Following the Forensic investigations, on Friday 13th of May 1939, the Police took widow Rose Sandford from the house where she and her sister were working as servants, she made a statement in the presence of her solicitor and was then arrested for the murder of her husband by strychnine. The dose was judged to have been 10 times what would be required to kill a man. During the initial arrest and remand hearing she was still dressed in her black maid's uniform with white apron. When a police car collected Rose Sandford to take her to Holloway, she had gained a black coat with a fur collar; hundreds had gathered to see her leave which she did with her head covered in a rug.

Rose Emma Sandford returned from Holloway to Norwich where she remained between her court appearances in Downham Magistrates Court whilst it was decided whether she had a case to answer. Village scuttlebutt had it she had been carrying on with a neighbour, Aldrich Charles 'Billy' Barker; there was no proof of this beyond Billy wearing a jumper that Rose had originally claimed was to be a Christmas present for her husband and as, at the time, there was no way of proving the child she was carrying belonged to Billy, not her husband, this was discounted due to lack of evidence. Since her husband's family testified that to the best of their knowledge it had been a happy marriage, in spite of Rose not wanting any children beyond the 8-year-old son she already had, the police were left without a leg to stand on. It is worth point out that Rose Ellen Dye married Lewis Sandford in early 1930, their son Leonard R Sandford was born at more or less the same time; this may have been a marriage of necessity rather than love. As was common with many working-class people at the time, Rose's husband Lewis, aged only 30, already had denture and although he was described as a big man, he was also a martyr to digestion and suffered from corns; not quite love's young dream. 'Friends' or possibly more accurately, co-workers and neighbours, said that Rose had claimed in November that she was no longer sleeping with her husband. Rose was a very attractive young woman; some of the locals certainly believed, rightly or wrongly, she was looking for some affection elsewhere.



Although she was only two years younger than her husband, perhaps Rose resented the field work she, like the grandmother who was living with her family quarter of a century earlier, was having to undertake. It would be understandable for her to much more enjoy working as a maid, like her younger sister, as the death of her husband freed her to do. All this ignoring the potential arrival of another, reportedly, unwanted, possibly illegitimate child who actually turned out to be a little girl, Margaret R Sandford born in the autumn of 1939.

Rose Sandford leaving the police station on the day she was arrested. Spot the maid's apron peeking out from under the coat

A green glass bottle was found in the communal cess pit shared by the row of three houses in which the Sandford, Barker and another family lived in. This bottle was found to contain strychnine but since it could not be tied in any way to Rose in spite of exhaustive enquiries in the area, it could not be proven that Rose had administered a massive dose of Strychnine to her husband. Strychnine is a poison both exceeding bitter and hard to dissolve and the defending lawyer's contention was that Rose could not have dosed her husband's breakfast of eggs and tea without him being aware of it.



Billy Baker, the man rumour held to be Rose's lover.

So, although no conclusion was come to as who administered the poison and the possibility of suicide was neither determined nor discounted, the pregnant widow was not committed to a full

murder trial, it being decided there was no case to answer. There was a certain amount of muttering that if the Sandford's son had been allowed to give evidence matters might have been different but as it is, the precise circumstances surrounding the death of Lewis Sandford may never be revealed.

And in spite of all the above, who's to know if Rose was guilty or not guilty (and most of the case against her was rumour and whispers), if Lewis had decided to have do away with himself to spite his wife, if he could not face a child who might be a cuckoo in the nest, if it was all a hideous accident or even if Lewis had some dark secrets of his own?

Not quite a high-profile case for William Dennis to retire on I am afraid!