



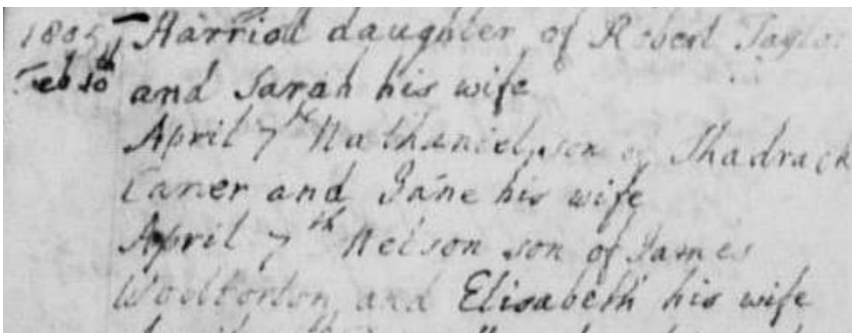
Ernest Robert Wooltorton

6792 Corporal, 2nd Battalion Norfolk Regiment

He was killed in action on 14th April 1915 at Mesopotamia (Iraq), aged 27

Ernest was buried at Basra War Cemetery, Iraq

Ernest Robert Wooltorton came from a prolific clan of that name based in Denton whose members, over the space of a hundred years or so, spanned the whole social gamut from prosperous farmer,



through skilled tradesmen down to scraping by in extreme poverty. Ernest's father George was one of the sons of a chap with the splendid name of Nelson Wooltorton. Nelson, agricultural labourer, was the son of Elizabeth and James Wooltorton, baptised on 7th April 1805 and so far as I can tell he had not been

previously married but was just slow to the Altar – beware of confusing our man with his nephew, another Nelson Wooltorton, also of Denton but 17 years the junior of George's father.

A small story now to give the lie to the idea of villagers all helping each other in bad times:

This younger Nelson, his wife Harriet and various of their progeny were forced into the local Workhouse a few days before Christmas Day 1854 – Christmas Day in the Workhouse indeed. Nelson carefully locked the doors of the house and when they finally returned some 3 months later, they were devastated to find the house broken into, all the candles and firewood were missing or

used as was a quantity of bedding and three nightgowns. It later transpired that the next-door neighbour's daughter Harriet Webb had pawned the bedding in Bungay although she had held on to the nightgowns. In her defence Harriet Webb claimed that a Henry Botwright had been living in the house and threatened her with murder if she did not pawn the items under a false name – she chose the name Calver, a good choice for any mischief in the area! The jury acquitted her on the charge of theft, but she still got 6 months with hard labour for handling stolen goods. Ouch!

Going back to our Nelson; in 1815 when he was 10 years of age his mother Mrs Elizabeth Wooltorton of Denton was accused of sending poisoned cake to an elderly uncle of hers,

Murder by Poison !!

THE TRIAL at LARGE

OF

ELIZ. WOOLVERTON,

FOR THE

WILFUL MURDER

OF

ROBERT SPARKES,

A CHILD SIX YEARS OLD,

Who partook of a Cake in which the Prisoner had mixed Arsenic, with intent to poison her Uncle, Tifford Clarke, aged 82.

Before the Rt. Hon. Chief Justice Gibbs,
At the Assizes held at Bury, July 29, 1815.

TAKEN IN SHORT HAND,

By THOMAS MIDDLEDITCH.

BURY ST. EDMUND'S:

PRINTED BY GRIDGE AND BARKER.

Mr Tifford Clarke, in Cove. This was a notorious case at the time; the contemporary trial transcript is available on line.¹

Mr Clarke was obviously a kind and generous old man (82) and shared the cake with various young relatives and four children of a neighbour. One child, Robert Sparkes, died after eating this cake; at the time the initial news report went to press, five others were still in danger. After the death of the child both the child's stomach and the remnants of the cake were analysed, Arsenic was found present in both. There was even some partly digested cake found in the child's stomach, the child having died before it could be digested. The evidence was unambiguous; it was even suggested this was the second time Elizabeth had tried to poison her uncle. Elizabeth had 8 children, owed her uncle £200 and was expecting to receive £500 on his death.

Elizabeth actually sent the poisoned cakes in a basket delivered by her daughter who was accompanied by her little brother Nelson! At this time there seems to have been a fair bit of money about; certainly, none came down to Nelson! Elizabeth was found guilty, sentenced to hang within the week and her body to be anatomised (publicly dissected). She was indeed hung, publicly, on the 25th of July 1815, one of only 4 women hung that year, although both of the people hung at Ipswich in 1815 were women. Maybe this incident tainted her son Nelson, who was very slow to enter the marital stakes!

And here is the testimony of Nelson, who would have been only 10 at the time.

Eventually, at the age of about 48 'our' Nelson snaffled himself a very young (18) and fertile bride, Hannah Sheldrake who was herself one of 16 children from the neighbouring village of Alburgh. In 17 years of matrimonial bliss Nelson and Hannah cracked out at least 7 children! Nelson appeared in 1861, aged 56, with Hannah his 26 years old wife and 4 children aged 8 and under; 10 years later and poor Hannah Wooltorton at age 35 was a widow with 3 more children added to the 4 she already had! Her husband, labourer Nelson had died in January 1870, aged 65.

Not too surprisingly with 7 children in the household, only one of whom was bringing in a wage, in this 1871 census Hannah was described as a pauper; George grew up in straitened circumstances.

THE TRIAL.

ELIZABETH WOOLTERTON (aged 49) late of Denton, in the county of Norfolk, was arraigned upon an Indictment which charged her in a variety of counts, and also upon the Coroner's Inquest, with the wilful Murder of Robert Sparkes, of North Cove, in the county of Suffolk, by mixing up, on the 2d day of July last, a certain quantity of arsenic with milk, flour, and plums, which she made into a cake, and sent to Tifford Clarke, of Kirby Kane, with intent to poison him; but which falling into the hands of the said Robert Sparkes, he ate thereof, and became sick and distempered in his body, and died.

NELSON WOOLTERTON,

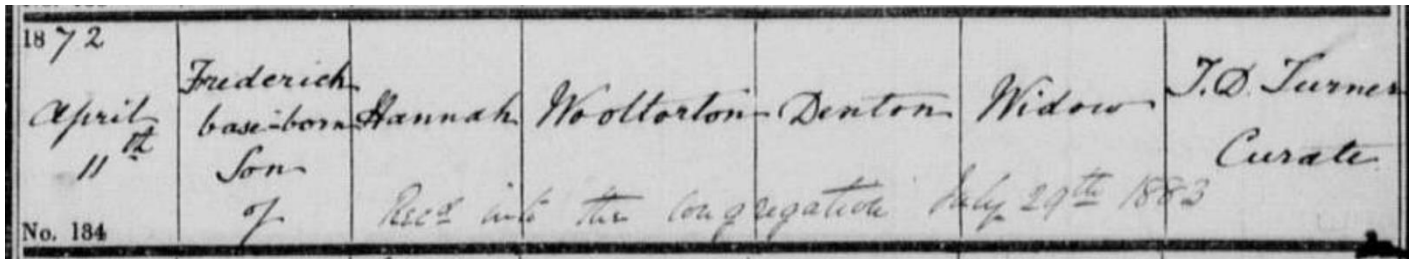
Examined by Mr. Serjeant Blosset.

- Q. You are the son of Elizabeth Woolterton?
A. Yes, Sir.
Q. You remember on Sunday morning, 2d of July, receiving a basket from your sister Amy?
A. Yes, Sir, I do.
Q. What did you do with it?
A. I took it to Mr. Clarke's.
Q. Where does he live?
A. At Kirby Kane.
Q. How far is that from where you live at Denton?
A. About 6 or 7 miles.
Q. Did you take the basket, as your sister delivered it to you, to Tifford Clarke?
A. I gave it to Mrs. Pleasance.
Q. Who is Mrs. Pleasance?
A. My uncle's housekeeper.
Q. Is Tifford Clarke the uncle of your mother?
A. Yes, Sir.
Q. Do you remember whether Tifford Clarke was by in the room when you gave Mrs. Pleasance the basket?
A. Yes, Sir.
Q. Did she open the basket while you were there?
A. Yes, Sir.
Q. What did she take out of it?
A. A pie, a little cake, and a piece of veal?
Q. Had you opened the basket?
A. No, Sir.

¹https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=zrNjAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

The 1881 census actually reveals the possible reason why Nelson and Hannah had married with such an age difference between them. Hannah's oldest son William, the lad who was bringing in the only family income in 1871, now appears under the name Sheldrake; it seems Hannah had been a single mother in need of support. George, aged 20, was the oldest Wooltorton son at home in this 1881 census; 4 years later he was in court for assaulting Herbert Whitehead. The Whiteheads, whilst not as bad as the Skinners, the Calvers, the Seamans or the Oakleys were reasonably well known in the Harleston courts and judging by the turn-out at the funeral of a Mrs Whitehead, which seemed to consist largely of Whiteheads and Wooltortons, this sounds like a family scrap that got out of hand. Our lad got off free, case dismissed!

Having lost her husband back in 1870, it seems Hannah had been finding some comfort and support elsewhere in the intervening years. After all, Hannah was a young woman in her early 30's when



Nelson died so perhaps it is not too surprising that after she became a widow, she added four more children to her clutch, making a total of 11 children. I do have my suspicions Hannah may have kept it in the family, as it were, as for many years unmarried Robert Wooltorton lived in solitary splendour next to Hannah, apparently moving when she did so. Hmmm. At the time there was a deal of controversy about whether it was a) legal, b) moral to marry your brother's widow or indeed your sister's widower. It was done but somewhat below the radar, the Shepherd family took a trip up to Norwich to complete their marriage!

In 1887, one of these post bereavement babies, Henry then aged 13, helped himself to the watch belonging to the Alburgh Blacksmith. An expensive item silver watch, valued at 30s, it was kept hanging on the wall of the blacksmith shop. Eventually confessing to the local constable, Henry got 6 strokes of the birch for his opportunistic theft.

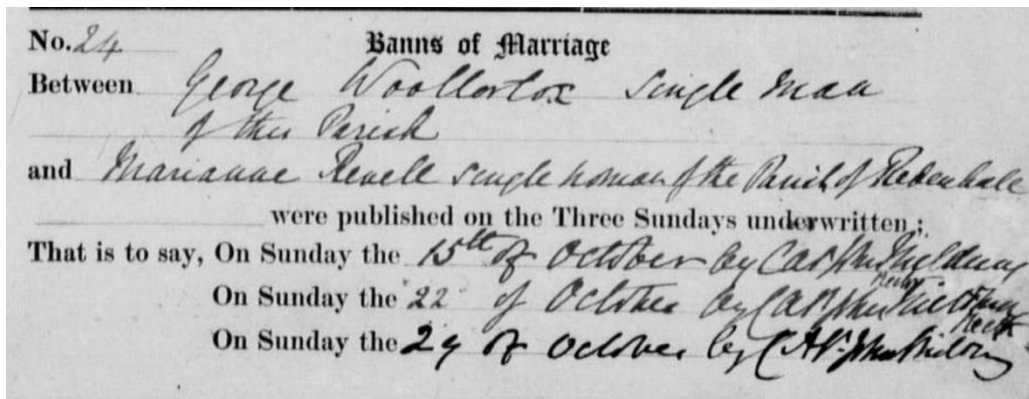
I hope Hannah had some fun and was not just exploited as, although I lost her in the 1891 census, by 1901, Hannah (having added a few years to her age and now stating herself to be 70) was described as suffering from Parkinson's Palsy. In spite of this, this very impressive lady won here self a nice cash prize of 7s 6d for having the second best garden in Denton in 1894!. Her son, William Sheldrake, still single, was still at home looking after his mother with the help of a housekeeper, Agnes Lightning, whilst her grandson, 12 years old Arthur Wooltorton was also in the household.

Hannah and Nelson Wooltorton's son George, stayed on in the area and worked, as was almost inevitable, on the land as his father had done before him.

*Lowestoft Journal Suffolk, England
10 Oct 1896*

DEATH ON A THRASHING MACHINE NEAR BUNGAY.

On Wednesday morning Charles Bugge, but better known as "Boxer Bugge," of Bungay, fell down dead on the drum of a thrashing machine at the Green Hill Farm, Earsham. Police-constable Royal, on being summoned, communicated with the Coroner, and in the afternoon Mr. H. E. Garrod held an inquest at the Queen, Earsham. Hannah Bugge, the widow, said her late husband left home at 5.45 in the morning to go to work with the steam thrashing machine. He had been afflicted for two years with dropsy, heart disease, and asthma, for which he had received medical treatment; he was 53 years of age. He had enjoyed better health during the last three weeks than previously. George Wooltorton, of Denton, machine feeder, said the deceased was with him on the drum, handing him the barley on the farm known as Green Hill Farm, belonging to Captain Meade, J.P. Deceased appeared as usual. About 7 o'clock he suddenly fell; he never spoke again. Witness lifted him up; he died in about six or seven minutes. Two men on the stack saw what happened. The Coroner, in summing up, said that there seemed to be no doubt but that the deceased died from natural causes, viz., from the failure of the heart's action. No blame was to be attached to anyone. A verdict was returned accordingly.



This son George married Mary Ann Revell of Redenhall (or Marianne according to their Banns) in early October 1881 (or possibly 1882 depending on the source). Mary Ann was born in Alburgh but her father was born in Denton; then as now

there was an awful lot of flow between the two villages. I am sure I am not the only one to think of the two villages linked under one title - 'Dentunarbrer'! At age 17 Mary Ann was a general servant working for a middling size farmer in Bedingham, although he too originated from Denton!

George and Mary Ann set up home near George's mother Mary, her suspected paramour and miscellaneous relatives and by 1891 they had three young children and Mary's teenaged younger brother in the household. George died really rather young, at the age of 41, leaving his wife Mary, in much the same situation his mother had been many years before, a widow in her early 30's. One of those sons, Ernest managed to appear twice in this census, once with his mother, once on the Farm where he was working as Yard Boy or Carter (depending on the entry). Unlike her mother-in-law, Mary does not seem to have added to her family after her bereavement!

Looking at the Parish Burial Registry pages covering the period when George died; there is a marked difference to what you would have seen only 20 years previously. Amongst the 16 entries there are the unsurprising burials of the locals, a sad burial of an 80-year-old who had died in the work house, just two burials of a child and 5 burials of those aged 80 or above (including the burial of a 90-year-old) indicating a general shift to greater longevity and less child mortality. What does startle is that a Metropolitan Policeman who had died at Guy's Hospital and a chap who had died at Pimlico both appeared – courtesy of Railways Transporting Coffins, as did another man who had died at the Norwich and Norfolk Hospital. 20 years previously very few people died in Hospitals, even more remarkable on just these two pages is the return of the cremated remains of another chap who had died in London and been cremated at Woking, this first crematorium in the country opened in 1873.

By 1911, Mary, Housekeeper, was living at Denton with three of her children whilst, aged 25, her son Ernest Woollorton was a Lance Cpl with the 2nd Norfolks out in India, Belgaum. He was one of 300 men (not including officers!) 15 wives and 32 children on the military census.

A few paragraphs above I stated

Hannah and Nelson Woollorton's son George, stayed on in the area and worked, as was almost inevitable, on the land as his father had done before him.

Actually, there was another option that had been chosen by generations of farm boys fed up with mud and the back view of a horse; The Army. Apparently General Carthew of Denton House had taken a particular interest in this large family of 8 boys and three girls who had all been educated in the village school. I suspect their rather older father, Nelson, would have been fairly notorious in this small village not only as the son of a murderess, but as one who had innocently been implicated in the murder, having helped his equally innocent sister to deliver the poisoned cakes.

Although Hannah raised her children in crashing poverty, she did so successfully with nothing but the most minor of transgressions from her large brood. Carthew seems to have made it his mission to be a one-man military recruitment drive amongst the Woollorton children.

I am afraid the brothers, James, George, Jeremiah and oldest brother Wm Sheldrake along with a friend James Websdale got themselves absolutely plastered on one occasion when Jeremiah was on leave from the Army

days.—James Woolterton, Wm. Sheldrake, Geo Woolterton, labourers, and Jeremiah Woolterton, soldier, all of Denton, and James Websdale, labourer, Alburgh, were charged with being drunk and disorderly at Bungay on Sunday. The case against George Woolterton was dismissed; the other defendants were each fined 10s. and costs 4s. 3d., or 14 days' imprisonment.

Ipswich Journal
27th Sep 1889

Unfortunately, Jeremiah, having been initially arrested, was promptly 'rescued' from the police by the rest of his party and was later heard swearing that it would need 40 men to take him! Dear old mother, widow Hannah Wooltorton, gave her son Jeremiah an alibi for the occasion, stating that at the time he was accused of carousing around Bungay with his wing men, he was actually with her 'In defence the prisoner (*Hannah Wooltorton*) said they were all against her, it was no good her saying anything she had no witnesses. The court decided she was to be sent to the next assizes. Shame on you boys!

In 1897, on the occasion of the baptism of one of the newest members of the family, the three sons who had stayed local, the three girls who had stayed local and the 5 lads who had joined the army and were still serving reunited in the village of Denton. A local Photographer, Ben Clark, from Bungay took a photo of the proud mother surrounded by her 5 uniformed sons and another surrounded by her entire family; and I am delighted to say that due to a descendent of the family having read Ernest's obituary, we are able to reproduce that photograph here!



The Wooltorton Family 1897 with the five sons serving in the Army, the three other sons, the three daughters and of course proud Matriarch Hannah. Photograph Courtesy Caroline Beardmore

The article tying in with this splendid photograph is reproduced in full below giving good histories not only of the military sons but also of Hannah's family, the Sheldrakes.

A NORFOLK FAMILY OF SOLDIERS.

A RECORD IN MILITARY SERVICE.

The village of Denton, in Norfolk, affords an extraordinary example of devotion to the military service, no fewer than five of the sons of Mrs. Nelson Wooltorton being at present in the Army. The family, comprising eight sons and three daughters, were bred and born in Denton. They were not born with silver spoons in their mouths. On the contrary, the widowed mother knew, from bitter experience, the truth of the Irish proverb that even if poverty be no disgrace it is "mighty inconvenient."

The children were educated at the village school. The late General Carthew, C.B., of Denton Lodge, took great interest in them, and they gladly paid the gallant gentleman a visit when on furlough. We give below a few particulars, which we believe will be interesting. Mrs. Nelson Wooltorton is the daughter of Mr. W. Sheldrake, who had a family of sixteen children, and resided for many years in the neighbouring village of Alburgh. Samuel Wooltorton (son), born March, 1865, enlisted in 1884 in 1st Norfolk Regiment. He was called off leave in 1885 to go out to Egypt, but his regiment only went as far as Gibraltar. He returned in 1886 to Aldershot, went to India in 1889, first to Madras (where he stayed two years), then to Burmah (three years), and then to Bengal. He went through the Chitral Expedition, and was with the 3rd Buffs in Chitral, and now ranks as sergeant. He has

three badges, and is entitled to one of the Chitral medals, which were not ready when the gallant sergeant left India for his furlough. He holds a medal for gallantry in connection with the Chitral campaign. His regiment is lying at Allahabad. As a lad Samuel was nicknamed "Dash." He returns to India in September next on the expiration of six months furlough. Jeremiah Wooltorton enlisted in 1865 in the Royal Artillery, and was promoted to the rank of corporal in 1889. He has three badges. It might be added that as a lad he entered Dr. Barnardo's Home for a short time. Jeremiah was born in 1867. Frederick Wooltorton, born 1872, enlisted in 1889 in the Royal Artillery, was promoted in 1892 to the rank of bombardier, and has two badges. Harry Wooltorton, born 1874, enlisted in 1892 in the Royal Artillery, and holds the badge and ranks as gunner. Charles Wooltorton, born 1877, enlisted in 1896 in the Royal Artillery, and ranks as driver, but has not been in the service long enough to be entitled to a G.C. badge at present. We might mention that a sister of Mrs. Wooltorton married a soldier named William Love, and her son, Charles, enlisted in the 1st Norfolk Regiment 1888, went to India 1890, returned home in 1896, and now belongs to the Army Reserve.

There is a curious incident that remains to be mentioned in connection with this family history. Mrs. Sampson (one of the sixteen children of Mr. W. Sheldrake), sister of Mrs. Nelson Wooltorton, died, leaving a family, who had to go into the workhouse. One son, Thomas, aged about nine years, longed for liberty, and he ran home to Alburgh, a distance of about six miles, across "hedge, ditch, and row" in a nude state, as he was informed that if he took away any clothes belonging to the Guardians he would be those who appreciated wearing them, and he reached Alburgh in safety.

A few days ago a photographer, Mr. Ben Clark of Bungay, came over to Denton, and photographed the family, first the mother and five soldiers in uniform, and then the whole family of mother, eight sons, and three daughters.

A Sunday or two ago the five soldiers were to be seen at the village church, Denton, all seated in one row, and during the service there were two children baptised, one the child of the soldiers' sister (Mrs. Catchpole), the other the child of Mrs. G. Wooltorton. Sergeant Wooltorton and Gunner Wooltorton were godfathers.

Norfolk News Norfolk,
31 Jul 1897

The sons had been all over the world: Samuel with the 1st Norfolk's had been to Aldershot, Gibraltar, Madras, Burmah, Bengal and Allahabad; four other sons had all joined the Royal Artillery. In spite of living with Parkinson's, Hannah survived until 1903 when she was buried age 70; I imagine that was also an impressive funeral.

Not too surprisingly, Ernest who was an impressionable, 10 years old, fatherless lad when all those glamorous uncles turned up and caused such a fuss, also decided to join the Army. Like his globe-trotting oldest uncle, Samuel, a colour Sgt by 1901, he joined the Norfolk's.

The second of the uncles (Robert) Jeremiah received a wound in his head during his long career which occasionally led to episodes of confusion. Still, he was a tough fellow and in 1934, at the age of 67 he cycled from Harleston to Diss, slipped on the steps outside the Star after having had a pint of beer and became very confused. This confusion lasted some hours to the extent one of his sons had to fetch him by car; unfortunately, a policeman came across the former soldier, smelt the beer, noted the disorientation and assumed he was drunk. Now, in his youth Jeremiah had been an occasional boozier (but I suspect no worse than most of his peers) but on this occasion, Supt. Fuller spoke up for him in court and he was discharged with a warning! Most unusual but the court case did reveal that Jeremiah and his 4 military brothers had all achieved the Rank of Regimental Sgt Major or Colour Sgt. I say he received a head wound in his long career – actually a mate accidentally shot him in the back of the head when he was an 18-year-old lad! He must have had an extra-ordinarily thick skull and I suppose if you are going to get shot at, you might as well enlist and get paid for it!

DENTON.

GUN ACCIDENT.—On Monday last an accident occurred on Mr. Waine's farm to a young man named Jeremiah Wooltorton. The gun was in the hands of a young man named Martin, who had just loaded it, when it went off, the charge lodging in the back of Wooltorton's head. Mr. Garney, surgeon, was quickly in attendance, and we believe the young man is progressing favourably.

Extraordinary as it may seem, Uncle (Robert) Jeremiah, in spite of his head wound, lived to a grand old age and, in 1954, he and his wife were able to celebrate 65 years of marriage! An extra-ordinary achievement, the couple had married when they

were 22 and 21 years old respectively and raised 5 children as they toured the world in 'Jerry's' 21 years of military service. After leaving the Army, the pensioner had a number of jobs although he remained local. He must have been extraordinary fit; when he was the landlord of The Buck Inn at Flixton, for a bet he undertook to swim the 1912 flood waters from the Norfolk side of the River Waveney over to his pub. This epic and extraordinarily dangerous swim took almost 3 ½ hours. He had been an Army Athlete, a licensed victualler, was known locally as the Strawberry King due to his success in growing and selling his produce and finally had been a professional destroyer of rabbits.

During his long service career, Mr. Wooltorton, in his first year, became champion runner of a garrison in the Eastern Counties, and was a miller of outstanding merit. "Jerry" as he is affectionately known to many in the district dryly commented, "Of course, my time for the mile was slightly more than Bannister's." He was afterwards champion runner of another garrison for three years and had never been beaten in obstacle races. At a military exhibition he won the obstacle race against all-comers from various regiments. Later he took up cycling, and, in 1892 became an Army cyclist champion. On his discharge from the army in June 1906 he held the rank of Company-Quartermaster-Sergt. He volunteered for service in the first world war and in addition to serving in France did much valuable training work at home.

For twelve years Mr. Wooltorton was employed as a warrener at Fulham Mary Hall and other local farms, and in one season alone accounted for more than 1,000 rabbits. He admitted that at that time he had no knowledge of the now prevalent myxomatosis disease.

When WW1 broke out, Jerry re-enlisted and both served abroad and trained many raw recruits giving them skills so they had some chance of surviving. I wonder if Ernest got some home leave between leaving India and being posted to the Persian Gulf and if so, if he had a chance to chat with any of his military uncles. This tough old soldier lasted just over another 2 years and died in 1957 aged 89.

Diss Express
24 Dec 1954

The war been raging for only just over half a year when Wooltorton died out in the Persian Gulf so in spite of his previous years' service, his family were only entitled to the minimum War Gratuity. However, he did have both back pay and a service gratuity meaning his mother and all but one of his siblings received almost £4 15s each whilst the mother received £4 3s 6d War Gratuity and his final sibling young Elizabeth, who appears married by

then, a mere 14s 6d.

The youngest of Ernest's military uncles, Charles Wooltorton, was in 1911 a 32 years old married Military Policeman based down in Devon. The Imperial Museum has an online half hour recording of the war time reminisces of his son Alfred Charles Wooltorton. Alfred was a late addition to the family, born in Denton in 1923, by which time his father had retired from the Military and become a post man. Alfred started off in the Home Guard –'there was nothing to guard' but then became a regular soldier. Well worth a listen to this much younger cousin of our Harleston Hero. Wooltorton describes the bombing of Bungay which resulted in some fatalities. Originally, he was expecting to join the Royal Engineers Printing Division, having previously worked for Clays, but he wound up in the infantry instead! ²

As well as Samuel, Robert (Jeremiah), Frederick, Harry and Charles we had various other of the Denton Wooltortons involved in the military and militia. George Sutton Wooltorton enlisted in the Dragoon Guards for a seven years term in 1882. Yet another Charles Wooltorton from Denton joined the militia in 1907, 18 and ½ years old it was his second attempt; he was too short first time he tried! John Wooltorton enlisted in 1896, a month shy of his 18th birthday; I wonder if he was the John Wooltorton who went on to join the regular army and, having achieved the rank of Lance Cpl, was discharged at the end of his twelve years' service in 1908 with a model record of no drunkenness, was quite a compact 5' 6", had grey hair and dark eyes and tattoos on his left arm 'Love', 'AJ'! Henry Wooltorton, a coachman from Denton, also joined the militia at the age of 18. Then we have Benjamin Christopher Wooltorton who aged 21 joined the militia in 1904

² <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80019721>.



Both Denton and Harleston are right to be proud of this member of a family that started with so little and gave so much to the service of their country.

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