



Arthur Thomas

50077 Private, 1st Battalion Suffolk Regiment

He died on 1st October 1918 in Salonika, Greece

Arthur is buried at the Kirechkoi-Hortakoi Military Cemetery, Greece

Arthur Thomas was not very typical of our Harleston heroes; neither from a family of tradesmen nor an agricultural worker both of which reflected the life blood of Harleston; Commerce and Agriculture. Instead, his father was a bank cashier from Pembrokeshire although his mother was somewhat more local, coming from East Carlton.

Although the 1911 census states that the parents had been married 23 years and had produced 9

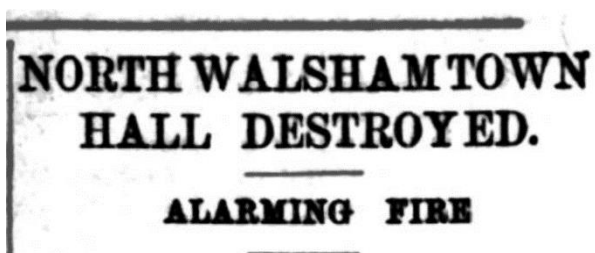


children, 8 still surviving it is a little tricky to make full sense of this. In 1891, when the couple were still only 3 years married, we have Arthur aged 3, Walter aged 2 and Martha, just 3 months and all born in Harleston, the parents had got a shift on!

The Thomas Family Home in 1891.

As befitted Thomas M Thomas' status as a white-collar bank clerk, he was living in The Firs on the corner of the path up to the Wilderness, now the Recreation Grounds. He also had a general servant living in, and with three children under the age of four to manage, I am sure his wife greatly appreciated the help.

By the time of the next census, 1901, only one extra child appeared in the census, young Llewellyn Thomas, born in North Walsham and aged only 1. Normally when there is such a gap, 9 years, between two children it is because of a mother dying and being replaced but no, Thomas M Thomas was still married to Mary from East Carlton. The now 45 years old Mr Thomas had progressed to the dizzy heights of being a Bank Manager, and the family were living in North Walsham Market Place with both a cook and a general servant to look after their needs.



In 1899 Thomas M Thomas along with many others, worked side by side with the local fire brigade as they tackled a disastrous fire at North Walsham Town Hall.

The Alarm was raised, the brigade swung in to action, numbers of local farmers sent water trucks, up to 23 in total, to ferry water up from the canal, but the fire was well established, fuelled by a quantity of timber stored in the basement, and when the flames burst through the roof it seemed as

if both a local pub and a row of houses opposite were also in peril. Luckily the wind swung in the opposite direction as horses were frantically moved from the pub to safer accommodation.

A neighbouring house was emptied of all its contents within 10 minutes, being removed to a local gym and, although a fair bit of damage was caused in the removal, it did mean the brigade could fully exert themselves to save the building and, in spite of one end being severely damaged with a wall in parlous state, the house still stood. On the other side a carpet warehouse was also stripped of its contents and the roof removed to prevent the spread of the fire.

During the five-hour fight with the fire, one fireman had a narrow escape when the wall he was standing on partially collapsed but fortunately he clung onto his fire hose and was rescued. At another stage one of the engine pump pistons failed and the battle had to be paused whilst it was repaired.

Thomas M Thomas was one of a group of professional men, including representatives of the three banks in the town (all named) and 'artisans and members of the labouring classes' (none named) who pulled down sheds and workshops behind the hall to prevent fire spreading in that direction.

Whilst £1500 or more of damage was caused to the hall, including to the Court, and this was not fully covered by the insurance at least the efforts of Thomas M Thomas and many other residents of the town had prevented a far worse outcome.

By 1911 and the family, well the parents and the younger members at any rate, had moved on to Halesworth where for the first time Mr Thomas reveals he was working for the London Provincial Bank and once again they had a single general servant living in to help although I suspect a daily

NURSEMAID and GENERAL WANTED by
September 14th, ages about 18.—
Mrs. THOMAS, Bank House, Halesworth.

cook and cleaner may well have also been part of the staff looking after the 8 room house the family were living in.

Certainly, in August 1905, Mrs Thomas of the Bank House was advertising for a Nursemaid and General, presumably to look after Gladys and Claud, who would have been two and three years of age at the time; as a side issue their birth dates and places of birth reveal that the family had moved to Halesworth sometime between 1902 and 1903. Doing a bit of maths gives a total now, of children in the census of 6, two short of the 8 plus another child who died young.

A bit more digging around actually reveals that two of the Thomas children, (Edward) Morgan (7) and his sister Francis (6) were visiting their grandparents, Elizabeth and Walter Shibley, proprietors of the Magpie in Harleston Market Place! So, the fact that Mary Thomas had been born in East Carlton was all a bit of a Red Herring and she actually was Mary nee Shibley, and the daughter of the landlord of the Magpie and his blind wife, also called Elizabeth who had died when Mary was 31 and been replaced by another Elizabeth two years later in 1894! Mary had spent at least from 1871 onwards at the pub, working as a barmaid once she was old enough. Mind you, the Magpie was more of a Posting House / Hotel than an actual pub and perhaps the landlord's daughter was deemed a good match for this ambitious banker from Wales in need of a wife. Or alternatively, by the time of her marriage in 1888, Mary was aged 27 and getting a little long in the tooth, the couple only just married in time to legitimise their oldest son, Arthur! I wonder how many meals Thomas ate at the Magpie before plucking up his courage to court Mary, or alternatively, gave in to her pursuit!

Going back into Thomas' own early history and it turns out he was from really quite a comfortable back ground. His parents, Edward and Jane M M Thomas seem to only have had just two boys, Thomas being the younger. Both natives of Pembrokeshire, the couple raised their family in Jane's hometown of Haverfordwest with Edward giving his profession as an owner of houses and land – essentially what we would know as a property developer and landlord. I suspect Edward Thomas

may have inherited wealth from his family as, even in 1851, when he was only 24, this was his given profession.

This 1851 census also reveals (because Edward Thomas' father-in-law was also in the household) that Jane's father was a widowed retired seaman by the name of Benjamin Morgan, a surname that doubled as a first name and was to crop up in subsequent generations.

Thomas M Thomas makes his first appearance in 1861, aged 6; 10 years later (in 1871) Thomas' brother, at 20, 4 years his senior, was an articled clerk to a solicitor whilst 16 years old Thomas was still in full time education. 10 years down the line, in 1881 and older brother (Morgan) Mathias Thomas (a family who enjoyed using their middle names) was now a solicitor in his own right and head of his own house hold, shared with younger brother, aged 26, Thomas M Thomas, articled clerk to a solicitor and their widowed father who was living off income from his lands etc.

One can't but wonder what inspired Thomas M Thomas, who had quite a cosy niche with a career in the law underway, to leave Wales and cross to the other side of the country, starting all over again as a lowly bank clerk. A falling out with his brother maybe, a slight whiff of scandal over the accounts

HARLESTON.

WEDDING.—On Thursday morning a marriage took place between Miss Shibley, second daughter of Mr. W. Shibley, of the Magpie Hotel, and Mr. T. M. Thomas, of the London and Provincial Bank of this town. The ceremony took place at Redenhall Church early in the morning, the Rev. H. C. Fitch officiating. The bride was given away by her father, Miss C. Shibley and Miss Hunting acted as bridesmaids, and Mr. W. O. Brock as best man. After the ceremony and breakfast the happy pair left by the 11 a.m. train *en route* for Wales, where they will spend their honeymoon. The presents were numerous and valuable.

perhaps? It has to be said that, on paper at any rate, Mary Shibley from the Magpie had married a little above her station, but it does seem that her new husband was happy to take her to Wales to meet the family.

Diss Express
30 Nov 1888

The whole Magpie Hotel thing was very much a family affair for many years. We know Walter

Shibley was there from at least 1871, with his first wife, the blind Elizabeth nee Mickleburgh. Following her death in 1892 he married Elizabeth nee King. Walter Shibley himself died in 1903 and his widow, Elizabeth Shibley nee King went on to marry Henry Hudson, scion of the wealthy mill and maltings owners of Harleston. After four years of marriage, Henry Hudson got his name on the deeds as the Landlord of the Magpie but he lasted only three years more before he passed away leaving Elizabeth Hudson late Shibley nee King back as the landlady! Elizabeth's niece came in to take over from the now rather elderly Elizabeth, holding the license between 1916 and 1922 when she married Arthur Bush, the legendary landlord and supporter of painter Alfred Munnings for the next 40 years!

I would imagine that after either the death of Walter Shibley or the remarriage of his second wife, the Thomas family probably lost their final links with Harleston with only one step grandparent left in the town.

(Edward) Morgan was the first of the Thomas children to be born in North Walsham so we can deduce the family had left Harleston for North Walsham somewhere between 1891 and 1894, sometime before our Harleston Hero Arthur was 7 years of age.

A slight Red Herring was the Morris Thomas who appears in 1911, aged 21 as a lodger with the Minns family at Temple Bar Farm in Earsham. Who is this young man? Well, he was born in Harleston Norfolk (and Harleston born Thomases are almost as rare as hens' teeth) and he is a Bank Clerk employed by the London and Provincial Bank. It transpires that this is actually Walter M Thomas, travelling under his middle name and indeed checking out the birth registry, yes Walter Morris Thomas!

Meanwhile Edward Morgan Thomas who, as a 17 years old lad, was working as an engineer fitter at the Leiston Engineering works; one of four lads of the same employment lodging with the mother of one. Leiston Engineering Works was an extraordinary enterprise that was founded in 1778 and continued to trade until 1981, employing over 2000 people at it's peak. As one might expect, Leiston produced steam engines and in later years diesel engines but also a century ahead of its time, electric vehicles in 1912!

Edward was, like many of his peer group, encouraged by his employers to join the Territorials which he did in 1911. The territorials were hugely popular at the time providing both comradeship, a little bit of cash and, in the eyes of employers, discipline and character building. Being part of the Territorials meant Edward Morgan was part of one of the first tranches of soldiers sent to France, after 3 months of training, arriving in November 1914.

In 1911, Edward Morgan's sister, Frances Lilly, who had also been away with the grand-parents in 1901, was a 16-year-old boarder at a very small school in Ipswich, presumably being polished off around the edges.

Arthur was also lodging in Ipswich, in his case in a substantial 9 room house at 187 St Helen's Street and like his father he was following a career in finance, in his case as an insurance clerk. According to the Halesworth Museum, Arthur, aged thirteen years, attended Beccles College, while attending the privately-run school he gained a reputation as a fine all-round athlete, also a favourite with his classmates.

Oldest Sister Martha, was still at home as were her 3 youngest siblings

So, 8 children, 4 still at home, one away receiving a select education (although the quality of

WEDDING.

SIMKIN—THOMAS.

An exceedingly pretty wedding was solemnized at St. Mary's Church, Halesworth, this (Tuesday) afternoon, the contracting parties being 2nd Lieut. Rowland Ive Simkin, Royal Flying Corps, youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. W. R. Simkin, of Colchester, and Miss Martha Elizabeth (Pearl) Thomas, oldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. T. Morris Thomas, of the London and Provincial Bank House, Halesworth. There was a large assemblage of relatives and friends, testifying to the esteem in which the bride and her family are held. Whilst the congregation and guests were assembling, the organist, Mr. E. F. Sewter, Mus. Bac., played Lemaire's Andante in D flat, and Batiste's Andante in E minor.

education in some of these small schools may not have been the most rigorous) and the three oldest boys set up in decent white-collar careers, possibly not Edward Morgan depending on how hands on his training was.

Even as the war approached it's third year, life continued for the Thomas family with oldest daughter, the Martha (Elizabeth Pearl) who was at home in 1911, having a splendid wedding in November 1917 with wonderful outfits and more silver presents than you could shake a stick at. The groom, Rowland Ive Simkin was one of the lucky men from the RFC (later to become the RAF) who, unlike many of his peers, survived the conflict.

The list of gifts (in which Gladys appears with her proper Welsh spelling as Gwladys) features not only gifts from the Tenby Thomases but also reveals that oldest brother Pte. Arthur Thomas was already in Salonika, next brother Lt. (Walter) Morris Thomas was in Egypt, at this stage I was not sure about the fate of Edward; Llewellyn and Claude were still too young to be involved in the conflict.

The Halesworth Times
20 Nov 1917

About the same time as the wedding, Claude, the youngest male member of the family, having completed his education at the local Grammar School was also set to follow his father into the Bank, his parents must have been praying for a cessation to hostilities.

We are pleased to note that Mr. C. Thomas, youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. T. M. Thomas, the London and Provincial Bank Ltd. Halesworth, has passed his entrance examination into this Bank. Mr. Thomas commenced his education at the Halesworth Boy's School, and afterwards attended the Sir John Leman School at Beccles. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas have also four sons on active service.

Claude was obviously a bright lad, winning a local essay prize as a teenager. He must have also had a degree of confidence unusual in lads in their teens as in September 1917 he was chosen to make a farewell and thank you speech to a local curate who was relocating elsewhere after a short (9 months) but apparently very effective tenure in Halesworth.

We are pleased to note that W. Morris Thomas, second son of Mr. and Mrs. T. M. Thomas, Bank House, Halesworth, has passed his examination for 2nd Lieut. in the A.S.C. and was gazetted last month. Lieut. Thomas has been connected with the A.S.C. since the commencement of the war, has served for about two years in Egypt.

The Halesworth Times
22 May 1917

Like Edward, another brother, Morris Thomas, only a year younger than Arthur, had joined up at the outbreak of war, in his case with the Army service corps. Two months after this announcement his rank was

confirmed in the local paper when he was described as being in Palestine. Considering his background it is surprising that Arthur had not, like his younger brother applied for a commission; mind you the life expectancy for a young officer, expected to lead from the front with only a revolver for a weapon was even more limited than that of a rank and file soldier so perhaps our Insurance Agent, Arthur was happy to remain as he was.

Less than a year after this joyous celebration of a marriage in the family, a more sombre notice was being posted in the local paper. Pte Arthur Thomas had died of an infectious disease, a constant and potentially devastating hazard when armies were dug in or otherwise in static positions. In his case it was influenza, contracted out in Salonika, that led to his death 5 ½ weeks before the cessation of hostilities.

WHILST ON SERVICE.

THOMAS.—On Oct. 1st, from pneumonia and influenza, in Hospital at Salonika, Pte. Arthur Thomas (1st Suffolk Regt.) eldest and dearly loved son of Mr. and Mrs. T. M. Thomas, Bank House, Halesworth.

The Halesworth Times and East Suffolk Advertiser Suffolk, England
15 Oct 1918

Halesworth Museum provides more interesting background on Arthur's reluctant Military Career which reveals that Edward, the former fitter in the Engineering works, had died at Neuve Chappell in March 1915, one of 217 men from his unit to die that day.

At the commencement of the Great War in 1914 Arthur continued to work and live in Ipswich with regular well-paid employment. Also, after hearing of the loss of his younger brother Edward, killed in action during the battle of Neuve Chapelle in March 1915, he did not volunteer to serve in the armed forces. Eventually, after the introduction of conscription in January 1916, Arthur was called to serve in the army. In July 1916 he enlisted to serve as a Private Soldier in the Suffolk Regiment with the service number of 23517. He then spent the next three months receiving his basic training at the large military garrison at Colchester in Essex. In October 1916, now considered to be a trained soldier, he received a new regimental number of 50077 and a posting to join the 1st Battalion, Suffolk Regiment. He then joined a large draft of reinforcements being transported to Macedonia in the Balkans. From there he would have been despatched to join the 1st Suffolks who at that time were engaged in the Salonika campaign in the north of Greece. . . .

N.B According to his medical records, when he spent 8 days, from 4th September 1918 to 12th September in Hospital with chronic Diarrhoea, Arthur had already served 2 years and 11 months, 1 year and 11 months of this being in the field – slight inconsistency here, especially as conscription was introduced in 1915..

At that time (*Armistice*) the manpower strength of the 1st Suffolks had been reduced to a little above a third of their war establishment of eight to nine hundred Officers and men. The regimental history of the Suffolk Regiment during World War One published in 1928 shows that two thirds of the 1st Suffolk's manpower were suffering from influenza, which had now been classified as a pandemic, or malaria. Arthur was one of those. He finally passed away the day after the cessation of hostilities on 1st October 1918 in one of the three British field hospitals that had been set up to treat soldiers suffering from both wounds and illness near the 16th Corps headquarters in Salonika. After his death he was laid to rest with another five hundred and eighty-eight of his comrades in the Kirechkoi–Hortakoi, British Military Cemetery, Greece. So ended another life of one of those men associated with Halesworth who had given his all during the Great War, not by any enemy shot or shell but by a pandemic that would kill millions of people worldwide.

I suspect the earlier illness suffered by Arthur Thomas would have so debilitated him that he had little or no defence against the influenza that finally killed him.

By the end of the war, Llewellyn, who would then have been just 18, was training as a Cadet in the RAF, perhaps emulating his brother-in-law. The other brother, Morris Thomas, had completed 3 years in Egypt with the service Corps

Arthur probably only spent the first 4 or 5 years of his life in Harleston and with the death of his grandfather, his links to Harleston would have frayed as he and the rest of his busy family got on with their lives and aspirations, making plans that did not include a World War. However reluctant a soldier Arthur may or may not have been, and in all honesty, who could blame him having already lost one brother, he did serve in possibly one of the worst arenas of war with extreme cold, extreme heat, malaria and dysentery to deal with, not to mention the hardened Turkish Troops.

Tenuous the links may have become but it is good to mark with respect this son of Harleston whose sacrifice along with that of his brother is marked on the Halesworth Memorial.