



## Herbert William Samson

23604 Gunner, 20<sup>th</sup> Battery Royal Field Artillery

He died on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1900 Near Hopetown, South Africa

Herbert was buried in the military cemetery at Orange River Station, South Africa



*The unveiling of the South African War memorial in Norwich on November 17, 1904, commemorating 300 men from the city and county who lost their lives. Photo: Archant Library - Credit: Archant.*

(Herbert) William Samson was born in early 1881, appearing as a 6-day-old baby in the census of that year although his parents did not actually get around to baptising him until about 18 months later!

A local lad, his mother was born in Needham and, although his father had come up from the West Country, William was born and raised on the Common. At the time the Common was one of the more disreputable corners of Harleston but it was very handy for the Ironworks on London Rd where William started his working life.



In this 1881 census (Herbert) William's father, the Devon born John Samson was claiming to be a farmer and dealer which may have been slightly overstating the matter as at the time they were living in a double cottage that had recently been converted to a single dwelling at the entrance to Harleston Common. Only three years earlier, John Samson had been described as a land owner

**T**o Let, at Michaelmas next, **WHEELWRIGHT'S** and **BLACKSMITH'S SHOP**, with farmhouse and premises, and 10 acres good land; situate at Rushall, Norfolk.—For particulars, apply to **John Samson, Harleston.**

and farmer in the Harrods Directory, if he had any land by 1881, I suspected it would have been rented land although I could be wrong as in 1901 Samson was

associated with the lease of business premises in Rushall, with 10 acres of land attached. Whether he was the outgoing tenant / sub tenant, or the owner is difficult to determine.

The double cottage where (Herbert) William was born, was demolished, in the 1960's, but we are lucky to have a picture of it from the collection of Miss Olive Puttock, a well-known former mid-wife whose grandparents lived in the cottage after the Samsons.



Right up to her death in her 90's, Olive was still resentful of what she described as a good solid house having been knocked down as it was alleged to be 'unsafe'. Miss Puttock described two big front rooms either side of a central chimney stack, a kitchen to the rear on the right-hand side, whilst the rear room to the left-hand side housed a large larder and the staircase.

Samson, who started off life as a cabinet maker's apprentice in Mastock Devon, slightly surprisingly, seems to have married Mary Ann Burgess, native of Alburgh, in Devon in late 1870 but they worked their way back up to Norfolk in time for their oldest surviving child, 7 years old Elizabeth, to be born in Bergh Apton. Including 6 days old (Herbert) William, by 1881, the parents had 5 children aged 7 or under.

However, this was now one of the more substantial cottages on the Common and ideal for John, his wife, the five children and the widowed 'nurse in attendance. A nurse in this context does not mean a person with any formal training but a local woman with experience in delivering and caring for new-born babies and their recently confined mothers. This was not so much a profession as a way for a woman to make some extra money.

This nurse, the widowed Elizabeth Sparrow nee Tuff, had left her daughter, Maria (19), in charge of her Needham household consisting of Maria and her 4 younger sisters, and both her maternal and paternal grandmothers aged 84 and 78 respectively! Elizabeth's husband, Jonathan Sparrow, died at the early age of 43 on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1871, with one of Elizabeth's daughters being born, not quite a week before her father's death. Unfortunately, Elizabeth's youngest child Mary was born 8 years after the death of Elizabeth's husband – no father's name given in the baptism records. Elizabeth was doing well to keep herself and her four girls out of the workhouse. An interesting light on literacy at the time; when Elizabeth had married Jonathan Sparrow at Dickleburgh in 1853, both she and her mother appear to have written their names whilst Jonathan and his father, William both marked a cross. Surprisingly, female rural working-class literacy tended to be higher than of their male counterparts. Elizabeth Sparrow ended her days back in Needham, appearing there in 1911 with her daughter acting as her nurse, and boarding a child from the Pulham Workhouse. Of 79 years old Elizabeth's 9 declared children, only 5 were then still living.

Samson bounced back by diversifying, variously listed in subsequent directories as Farmer, Cattle dealer and Ham Curer. By 1891 the family had moved to the detached dwelling with substantial lands on the centre of the Common, the most likely site of their smoke house, although the Kelly's 1892 Directory listed John as a Bacon Curer on London Road indicating that it was very shortly after that census that the family had moved to Gothic Cottage where they appeared in 1901, with six of their children and his wife, now the Bacon Curer. Samson was also keeping rabbits at this point – all good for the pot no doubt. This we know as he attempted to claim damages from Perfitt, the stonemason on the corner of Wilderness Lane, whose dog managed to get in their hutch and kill seven of them.

When a couple of peddlers, having had far too much fun at The Cherry Tree, lost their way and got stranded overnight on the Allotments opposite, during a ferocious storm, Samson came out with bread, bacon and tea for them when they were discovered the next morning – one with a broken leg. Must have fortified them before they headed for the workhouse!

A flyer in which 'John Samson Bacon and Ham Curer', thanked his customers for '39 years of custom' and offered 'Hams, breasts, tongues and sides, smoked with Pure Oak, one penny per pound, offer commencing October 1st, ending May 1<sup>st</sup>' is in the care of the Harleston Museum.

Their family finally expanded to 12 children; the 6-day-old baby of 1881, (Herbert) William, grew up to join the army becoming Trooper Samson. Samson joined the militia in 1897, only about 16, when he gave his trade as an Engineer at the Farm Machinery Works on the London Road. It seems as if he may have falsified his age in order to join up, adding a neat 2 years to his age and it is this age that has followed him through his military records. Only a few months after he joined the militia he was in the Royal Artillery when he gave his trade as a mere labourer. About this time Samson Snr had a run in with one of the lads from the Common whose father promptly threatened to punch Samson on the nose – one of the rougher corners of the town!

**Gunner H. W. Samson, 20th R.F.A., Orange River, Harleston.**

A surviving blockhouse from the Orange River Military Station. <https://www.militaryimages.net/media/boer-war-blockhouse-at-orange-river-station.23503/>



Not many of our troops died in combat out in South Africa, our 18 year old was one of the many who died of infectious diseases, in his case enteric fever at Orange River during the Boer War. The death certificate describing his death claims him to be 21 years old, in fact on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1900 when he actually died, he was still only 18, a few weeks short of his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. He died at the Orange River Military Station Hospital, 6 days after he was admitted, a horrid and extended illness. Samson was originally buried at the Military Station but, along with his comrades he was disinterred and reburied at the West End Cemetery Kimberley.

[B. & D. 2. **R**]

**FORM OF INFORMATION OF A DEATH: ACT No. 7 OF 1894.**

WARNING.—The penalties for false statements wilfully made are the same as those for perjury. Anyone who loses a COMPLETED registration form is liable to a penalty not exceeding 2s.

**DECEASED—**

1. Christian Names and Surname H. W. Samson

2. Sex male

3. Usual place of Residence in active service

4. Age twenty-one years

5. Race (a) European

6. Whether Single, Married, Divorced or Widowed (b)

7. Occupation Gunner Royal Field Artillery 2350th

8. Date of Death sixth February 1900

9. Place of Death Military Hospital Orange River

10. Intended Place of Burial Military Orange River Station

11. Causes of Death Bubonic fever

11A. Duration of last Illness four days

12. Medical Man's Name Surgeon Major G. H. Barton

**INFORMANT—**

13. Original Signature (or Mark) E. Edson

14. Qualification Sergeant G. H. H. Edson

15. Residence Military Hospital Orange River Station

Signed in my presence on this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 1900

Witness (c)

(This space intended for Rural Area reports.)

The following spaces are reserved for the use of Assistants for Urban Areas, and of the Deputy Registrar. No one else should fill them up.

When Registered \_\_\_\_\_ 1900. Sub-district of \_\_\_\_\_

(Signature) \_\_\_\_\_ Assist. to Deputy Registrar (Urban Areas).

When Registered eleventh August 1900 District of \_\_\_\_\_

(Signature) John de Vries Deputy Registrar. No. of Entry 124.

N.B.—If the Certificate is a duplicate of the original, the causes of Death and duration of Illness must be recorded in the Registration Book by the Deputy Registrar and Assistant to the Deputy Registrar (Urban Areas) as stated in such Certificate, which is to be attached to the form.

(1) If born outside Cape Colony, enter on this line in addition to the Name, the name of the Country, State or Colony where born, if known.

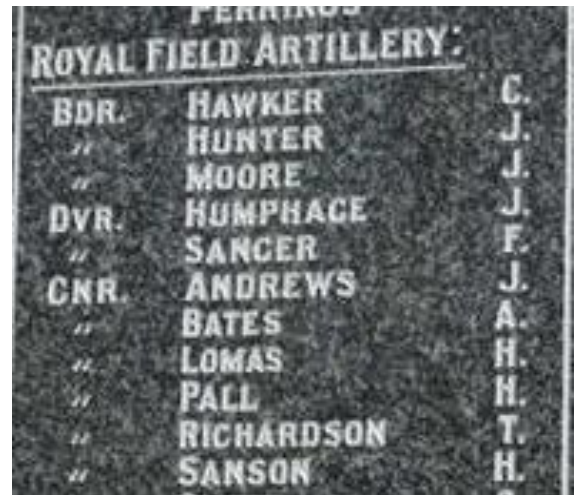
(2) If married, divorced or widowed, state on this line \_\_\_\_\_ the total number of children deceased has had.

(3) When a Rural Assistant, Field-cornet or Police Officer writes out form for Informant, he should add the words "Form written out by me" and sign as "Rural Assistant," "Field-cornet" or "Police Officer," as the case may be.

NOTE.—If Informants in Municipalities, V. M. Boards and Special Urban Areas, do not appear personally before D. R. or A. D. R., their Declaration must be completed and attached hereto. In Rural Areas, Informants may report in three ways—once being under Declaration. Medical Certificates essential in Urban Areas.

A memorial to the dead of the Boer War stands amongst the graves of casualties from both WW1 and WW2; most of the WW1 casualties were due to flu in the 1918 pandemic.

Date: 04 Dec 2010  
Contributed by: Alta Griffiths



Unfortunately, Samson's name has been mis-spelt on this South African Memorial, a mistake replicated on the very splendid Royal Artillery Memorial in London.



*Royal Artillery Boer War Memorial, London, Wikipedia.*

At least they got the lad's name right on the Norwich Memorial although even that was originally misspelt, with a redundant 'p' though. Luckily it seems that someone must have seen the list of names when it was published in the local papers and the error was corrected

The mother, Mary Ann Samson died aged 55, in mid-1905, her widowed husband did not hang about, he re-married in early 1906. Although the marriage took place locally, his new wife, Jane Elizabeth nee Booth came from Littlebourne Kent. Further investigation finds that in 1901, 35-year-old single mother Jane Elizabeth Booth was living with her 10-month-old baby, Nellie, in the house of her uncle, William Booth in Islington. As the Verger at St Matthews church, I wonder how William felt about his niece's fall from grace; I also wonder where and how John and Jane met and whether Nellie's father actually was John Samson or if he just informally adopted the child? Either way, he claimed her as his own, even if he did not give her his name.

By 1911 most of his family had flown the nest whilst John Samson, market gardener/bacon curer remained at Gothic Cottage with his second wife, Jane Elizabeth Samson and their son, Charles Henry. He had been produced in fairly short order after the marriage, but in early 1907, well within the bounds of respectability. Also in the house were his youngest daughter from his first marriage; and Nellie Booth also described as his daughter. Sale details of the time list Gothic Cottage as having a Parlour, sitting room, kitchen and four bedrooms. The 1911 census reveals that of Henry Samson's 12 children, 10 still survived, one of the deaths was the adult William in South Africa, the Samson parents had done a good job!

Young Charles Henry, the half-brother that (Herbert) William never knew, grew up to be a much-respected man locally renowned for his intelligence and strong opinions, being quite prepared to fire off a letter to the Queen if he felt the situation required it. It has been reported that at one point he had a Tailors shop in Harleston but after this well-dressed gentleman was disappointed in love in his early years, he never really recovered and sadly in the early 1970s hung himself from an apple tree in his garden.

Kelly's 1912 Directory lists John Samson as a Ham Curer, of The Common - probably just the site of his curing house whilst he continued to live at Gothic Cottage. Albert Bush (Needham Notes) describes how at the end of Tumbri Lane in Needham

'the boundary post is opposite the new house which was built after Mr Sampson's father and mother lived there for some years and Mr Sampson used to cure bacon and hams the same way as herring were smoked – the fire made of (oak) sawdust'.

Describing herring smoking on the previous page Albert Bush says

'The shed on the end of the house, where they were smoked anyone who didn't know would have thought the house was on fire'.

(Herbert) William was not the only footloose one in the family, at least five other siblings dispersed to America and Australia and a sixth spent 28 years in the Navy demonstrating how horizons had widened during Victorian times!

Herbert William Samson may have been a trailblazer with his military excursion to South Africa, unfortunately he was to be one of over 300 Norfolk men who never returned, nearly all due (like William) to infectious disease. We have no commemoration in our town for those who died in the Boer War so it is time we acknowledge this son of our town and, unlike the memorials in South Africa and London, get the poor lad's name right!