



## Brothers Percy Frank Sillett & Leonard Albert Sillett

### Percy Frank Sillett

20073 Private, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Suffolk Regiment

He was killed in action on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1916 in Flanders, aged 20

Percy is remembered with honour at the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, Belgium



### Leonard Albert Sillett

G/3199 Private, 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Buffs (East Kent Regiment)

He was killed in action on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 in France, aged 22

Leonard is remembered with honour at the Thiepval Memorial, Somme, France

These brothers, Percy and Leonard, grew up as close companions; the brothers had less than two years in age between them and were junior members of a large group of siblings. James Frederick Sillett, the father of many children including our two lads, came from across the border in Suffolk, but only by a matter of a few miles, having been born in the small village of St Cross, South Elmham.

James was the son of Job Sillet who, back in 1861, was a Journeyman Miller i.e. a skilled man but one who was only employed on day rate as and when work arose. Job had named his son after his own father, an Agricultural Labourer, but milling was to be the chosen trade of both himself and his son, James Frederick Sillett. When Job first appears, in the 1841 Census, as a nine-year-old lad more or less in the middle of 6 siblings, his family were living next to Cox family, the Cox father being a Journeyman Miller himself and it is in the Cox household that we find Job Sillett lodging in 1851. By this stage John Cox Snr was a Master Miller employing one man, this one man being his apprentice, Job Sillett.

10 years on and fully qualified Job had moved out of the Cox's household and, now supporting a wife and three children including oldest son (Frederick) James, is once again living next door to his employers, the Cox's. The lad had ambitions and, within 4 years, Job and wife Amy had moved to Wortwell where, as a miller in his own right, he appears in the 1871 census; only aged 15, Job's oldest son (Frederick) James was also already describing himself as a Miller. Job trained at least two more of his sons in the Milling Trade – a good sound business to follow in the days when most villages of any size had a mill, and many towns had several. The skills of wood and timber mechanics also stood many mill wrights in good stead as the 19<sup>th</sup> century inexorably rolled into the 20<sup>th</sup> and mechanism of all sorts spread through the countryside.

Job and Amy moved to Homersfield sometime between 1883 and 1891 and there they stayed; the 1911 census (in which Job describes himself as a retired Miller) reveals that in their 55 years marriage they had brought 7 children into the world of whom 2 had died.

Meanwhile, oldest son James Frederick had found himself a wife, marrying Eliza Wisken in late 1878. The Wiskens were a fairly prolific, and one of the more chaotic well established Harleston Families. Eliza's parents, Robert and Martha, (who unlike many others of their family seemed largely to stay out of trouble) lived most of their married life out on the Bungay Road, half way between one group of Wiskens who orbited the town centre and a satellite group out in Lush Bush!

Between 1878 and 1892, James and Eliza Sillett nee Whisken baptised an impressive 11 children at Redenhall, sadly young Arthur William was born, baptised and buried within 3 days having lived only 36 hours. Two more children were born and baptised after 1892, but in 1911 James and his wife Eliza claimed to have borne and raised 11 children, no casualties. I suspect a spot of confusion had arisen as to what the Census taker was attempting to record and the truth was that they had delivered at least 13 children, two of whom did not survive.

1883 2 <sup>nd</sup> June Born 2 <sup>nd</sup> June 1883. No. 486	Arthur William	James Frederick & Eliza	Sillett	Harleston	Miller	F.W. Galpin Curate.
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Arthur William Sillett	Harleston	5 <sup>th</sup> June	36 hours
No. 102.			

James busily got on with life, in 1881, when the family lived in the Mill Cottages up off Station Road, by the Allotments (these I am fairly sure are the cottages still standing at the town end of Miller's Green) they had only the one child, 2 years old Florence Eliza. By 1891, the family seem to be in much the same place but 6 more children had appeared, this excluding both the oldest child Florence Eliza and of course baby Arthur William.

James Frederick Sillett had been a very busy man in the Harleston community getting involved in, amongst other things, the 4<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Battalion, Norfolk Regiment; a good shot, he won prizes at Volunteer competitions, a passable singer and decent musician he was part of the Volunteer Band and joined in Concert Parties on various occasions.

He also played for the Cricket team – busy fellow!

Come 1901 and all change; James Frederick and wife Eliza nee Whisken had moved back James' home county of Suffolk, Sudbury to be precise and 4 more children were now added to the family; (Leonard) Albert and Percy Frank, our Harleston born Heroes were amongst these four younger children. Their youngest child, two years old Horace was also Harleston born so this must have been a recent move back across the border to Suffolk.

By 1911 this close knit family was still largely together with seven children and a grandchild all living together in their Sudbury home; 10 of them in a 5 room home. 17 years old Percy was working as a farmhand, the rest of the children were variously in the building trade, working in a silk factory and working as a fishmonger.

By one of those strange throw away lines in a newspaper report, we happen to know that Horace, the lad who became a fishmonger had a birthmark on his face. He worked, in Sudbury, for a Mr King, a pleasant sounding chap, whose rival across the road was a Mr Leftley; both Mr Leftley and one of his sons, George, seem to be most unpleasant fellows. Leftly Snr launched an unprovoked and premeditated attack on Mr King, a gentleman rather older than himself, and was given quite a swingeing sentence for so doing. Leftly decided to appeal and in the general muck slinging that arose accused Sillett, employee of King, of attacking his son. As it transpired this attack was provoked by Leftley jnr telling Sillett he would 'knock the birthmark of his face onto the otherside'. Leftly jnr wound up with black eyes and although Sillett's employer advised Sillett not to be provoked again, the general feeling, shared by the court, was that Leftley jnr got what was coming to him!

In 1911 23 years old Alice Sillett was described as being 'at home' – perhaps she was the mother of the 19 month old granddaughter Eva Maud who was also in the house? Our other hero, 18 years old Leonard Albert Sillett, was also being trained up in the building trade but was serving his apprenticeship with a rather older brother in law, Joseph Wellham, aged 34 and married to the oldest of the children Florence Eliza who was then aged 32. In contrast to the voluminous family she came from, Florence Wellham nee Sillett produced one, three years old child in her 10 years of marriage. Joseph and Florence Wellham nee Sillett's Barnes home, like that of her parents, had 5 rooms but, unlike her parents', housed just the 3 adults and the 3 years old little girl.

*Suffolk and Essex Free Press*  
13 Dec 1923

By 1911, father Frederick James had finally moved away from being a miller and was instead an engine driver in the local Sudbury brewery. Having left the relatively small pond of Harleston for the slightly bigger waters of Sudbury, Frederick James once again got involved in town life, becoming secretary of the Sudbury Town Band! This was a job he held for at least 10 years, appearing in the paper in this role between 1913 and 1923, and possibly for many years either side.

**APPRECIATION.**—Mr. J. F. Sillett, secretary to the Sudbury Town Band, writes us that the members greatly appreciate the kind support given them in the town and neighbourhood in connection with their fund for new uniforms and thank all subscribers for their generosity.

**FOR UNEMPLOYED EX-SERVICE MEN.**—The attention of unemployed ex-Service men is called to the advt. appearing elsewhere asking those resident in the borough of Sudbury to communicate with the Sudbury Branch of the British Legion at once. The branch is arranging to provide them and their families with Christmas fare out of the funds which they have at their disposal.

Sudbury Band 1923



Percy and Leonard were two of three Sillett brothers who served during the war, only one returned but the two who did not are both remembered on the Sudbury War Memorial and the Sudbury Roll of Honour; the following has been taken from the Sudbury Museum Trust Virtual Roll of Honour.

(Percy) first served in France on 7 December 1915. In October 1915 the Battalion had been transferred from 8th Brigade and formed part of 76th Brigade, 3rd Division. In February 1916 the battalion had intensive training with the 3rd Division for a frontal assault to recapture 'The Bluff'. This was a mound alongside the Ypres-Comines Canal created when the canal was excavated. Whoever held this mound had the advantage of observation over the battlefield.

The weather was extremely cold, and snowfalls delayed the plans until 1 March when the battalion was part of the leading infantry when the attack was launched at 4.15am. The Division recaptured the Bluff and other objectives but suffered 1,622 British casualties. Percy served alongside another Sudbury man Harry Barber who with Percy was one of these casualties.

Percy was killed in action on 2 March 1916 aged 20. There is no known grave, and he is remembered on the Menin Gate, Ypres, Belgium. A Cross of Remembrance was laid at the Menin Gate, Ypres in April 2006, April 2009 and October 2012.

Percy was awarded the 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal.

Four months later his older brother Leonard lost his life on 1 July 1916 serving with the Buffs (East Kent Regiment) and is also remembered on the Sudbury War Memorial.

. . . . . Leonard enlisted in Fulham and first served in France on 28 July 1915. He had two brothers also serving with the army in France. His younger brother Percy lost his life serving with the Suffolk Regiment and is also remembered on the Sudbury War Memorial.

Leonard's battalion formed part of 55th Brigade, 18th (Eastern) Division which was formed in September 1914; the early days were somewhat chaotic as the new volunteers had very few trained officers and NCOs to command them. They had no organised billets or equipment. Initially they were billeted around the Colchester area but in May 1915 they were moved to Salisbury Plain where King George V inspected them on 24 June. The Division began embarking for France on 24 July and was billeted at Flesselles. Their first significant action was in the opening phase of the Battle of the Somme at the Battle of Albert (1 – 13 July 1916). Leonard served alongside another Sudbury man George Durrant who would also lose his life during this battle.

A letter received by his father from Captain Victor Allen describes Leonard as 'a good a soldier as I had in my company, very hard working, always cheerful, and willing to do anything asked of him and always ready to do his duty'.

Leonard was killed in action on 1 July 1916, only four months after his brother Percy was killed. There is no known grave and he is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial, Somme, France. He was awarded the 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal.

The Sillett brothers are rightly commemorated in Sudbury; we also acknowledge the sacrifice made by these sons of Harleston.