



Robert James Smith

10077 Private, 17th Company Lincolnshire Regiment

Formerly 21360 Yorkshire Regiment, and 35141 Lincolnshire Regiment

He was killed in action on 26th September 1917 in Flanders, aged 28

Robert is buried at Railway Chateau Cemetery, Ypres, West Vlaandered, Belgium

Pte Robert James Smith's family had a slightly unusual mix of backgrounds and enjoyed a slightly unusual upbringing. Robert's father, Albert, was the son of James Smith, a butler originally from Aldeburgh who had married Eliza Calver from Wortwell. The Calvers were a family who livened up life in Wortwell during the mid to late 19th century. There were a lot of them, so many that when Eliza's daughter Alice Snr, then a 16 years old schoolteacher was visiting a friend, (once you had skipped past the intervening 4 tiny cottages with a single widowed resident in each) the next 6 households were all Calvers, 26 people in total; there were more Calvers elsewhere in the neighbourhood! Essentially, numbers of the Calvers spent much of their time up in court for drunkenness, violence, petty theft and minor breaches of the law, a slightly unusual background for the wife of a butler!

Back to the Smiths. Robert James appears to have been named after his paternal uncle whom we shall call Robert James Snr. During the first 20 years of their married life, James Smith, father of bote Albert and Robert James Snr, is largely conspicuous by his absence. In 1861, the year James and Eliza nee Calver married, very shortly before the birth of their first son (Alfred in this census, Albert in all subsequent ones) Eliza and her new born son were living in Wortwell with her elderly parents, Robert and Maria, both in their mid-60's. It proved very tricky to track down James Smith in 1861. The best bet is the James Smith who was working for Thomas Rant at Chediiston Hall in 1861, not quite a butler at this point, just a footman. Two years later when they finally get around to baptising young Albert, James then gave his status as Butler; in 1861 Smith was the only manservant at the Hall and, although then still a young man of only 22, perhaps he was promoted to this prestigious position. A daughter, Alice followed, then, in 1867 when Robert James Snr was baptised, his father just gave his trade as a servant. In 1871, James was yet again living away, working as a butler at a very grand establishment, 7 Hyde Park Terrace (Also known as Hyde Park Gardens) in a household headed by 73 years old Louisa Reid, a spinster lady who gave her profession as 'Lady'. 10 years earlier, Louisa's sister (her senior by 3 years) was the head of the household. In 1871, this 'lady' had five servants to care for her, quite reduced from the 10 or 11 the house boasted in earlier years but more appropriate for a single lady of an advanced age, mind you she quite likely employed a coachman and/or some gardeners lurking at the mews to the rear of the property.

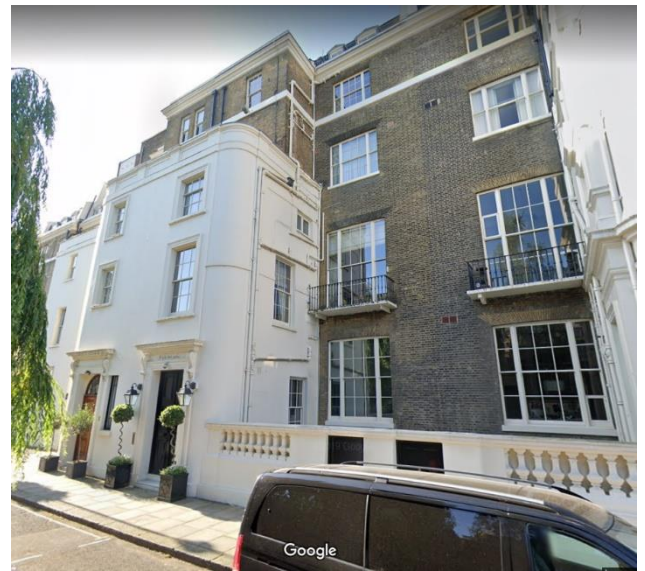


The Eastern Corner of Hyde Park Terrace

Hyde Park Terrace is rather unusual in so far as whilst the fronts look out to Hyde Park, separated from the park by the Bayswater Road which in turn is shielded by high hedges and long private gardens, the main practical access is from the back. Whilst the front is all royal icing stucco, pediments, quoins and lintels, the back is a rather more prosaic mix of stuck on semi smart entrances, London bricks and drainpipes.

The effect of the rather more formal rear entrance that has been added to the rear of Nos 7 and 9 is somewhat undermined by the causal view of the back of the neighbours properties

The rear view of 7&9 Hyde Park Terrace, a bit less formal than the front!



Modern day access is via the mews road, with low brick buildings on the opposite side of the street to the slightly rag tag back view of the grand building fronts. The Mews are themselves are also a double-sided Jekyll and Hyde affair with spartan, frankly unattractive brown brick fronts facing the Terrace and a much cosier aspect to the rear, accessed through an archway. This intimate side of the mews, still retaining the cobbled surface along which the coaches would have clattered, has the feel of a village street sheltered within the bustle of London.



The rear of Hyde Park Terrace Mews, contrasting with the rather grim 'front' aspect opposite the entrances to the 'grand' houses.



James would have had his own quarters in the basement of the main house, near the pantry, the silver and the housekeeper's lair, whilst the rest of the staff would have been banished to the attics and the coachman and his

family to the mews. I say the coachman and his family, safely distant from the house his children would have played in the cobbled way down the middle of the mews, James' children certainly would not have been permitted to cross the threshold of the main house assuming they ever made it to London at all!

10 years later and James was still in residence, there were still 5 servants, but one of those was a nurse employed to take care of Miss Reid. Louisa died shortly after this census was taken, passing away on the 5th of April 1881.

This could have been a disaster, having your employer die on you might well mean unemployment and poverty, but Louisa Reid was an exceedingly wealthy woman and had left 'considerations' for her servants in her will. She bequeathed 'all my wearing apparel to my beloved servant Frances Croxford', her Lady's Maid from Oxfordshire, who was 57 when her employer died. Frances had never married, had started her career at Shirburn Castle, the seat of the Earl of Macclesfield, as a Nursemaid and was the only servant, other than James the Butler, who appeared in both the 1871 and 1881 censuses with Miss Reid. I am delighted to say that the old duck was still going strong in 1911. Living by herself in Gerards Cross, she survived until the age of 88, dying in 1913.

Being given a wardrobe of old lady's clothes may seem a little bit of a slap in the face but this was not so in Victorian times. Clothes were expensive, and there was a very lucrative trade in second-hand clothes. Expensive garments, such as those owned by Miss Reid were made to last and would have been hand stitched from voluminous amounts of expensive fabric; huge amounts of fabrics in those billowing skirts and intrusive crinolines. Garments discarded by their wealthy owners would be recycled via a dealer to the aspiring middle classes and made middling fashionable with a few tweaks from one of the many dressmakers striving to make a living in an overcrowded market. When the second owners had wearied of the clothes, the garments would, again via a dealer, drop down another level. Valuable trim such as jet beads, lace, gold frogging or pearl embellishments would be removed and sold separately, fabric filched, and the less full gown reassembled and sold to the respectable working class. A fourth level would be at the street markets where women barely getting by would invest in a 'best frock' which would eventually wear out beyond respectability, to be either cut down for children, flogged off to the rag and bone man or wind up on a stall in one of the poorest stews of the city. Good quality second-hand clothes were a valuable commodity with an excellent resale value!

As well as Frances Croxford being given her mistress's wardrobe, the executors had a lump sum of £800 to distribute amongst the servants as they saw fit. It would be reasonable to assume the Nurse would have received not much more than a token, the other four servants, would have received a sum proportional to their seniority and length of service. At the time of her death, Miss Reid was employing two servants other than Frances Croxford and James Smith. In Frances' case as an intimate of her employer, in James' case as the male protector of her domestic interests, in both cases as retainers of 10 years or more they would have expected to have received the lion share of that £800. Perhaps, in those patriarchal times, the fact that James was a man with a family tucked away in Norfolk would have further tilted the scales in his favour; it would not be unrealistic to expect him to have garnered a sum in the region of £500 or more from his employer. The interest from that amount would have given him a decent income until such time as he felt the money could be invested elsewhere.

So, for 20 years, minimum, James Smith worked in a grand house somewhere, earning the money whilst his wife remained in her home village embedded with her neighbours, many of whom were her relatives, raising their three sons and one daughter. Presumably he would turn up every now and again, maybe between employment, maybe on an annual holiday and then return to the world so different from hers – I wonder if Eliza tried on airs and graces amongst the other folks in Wortwell?

In 1881, shortly before the death of the woman who had employed James for the previous 10 years or more, it was just Eliza and her two younger sons, Robert James Snr and Henry, at home in Wortwell. As mentioned above Alice was visiting an elderly neighbour whilst Albert had started off his career in the milling trade and was boarding in London. This is a good point at which to highlight the increasing mobility of the Victorian working and artisan classes. Albert, Corn Millers Man, from Norfolk, along with another Corn Miller's Man from Farnham Surrey, was lodging in the London home of a mill foreman, a gentleman with the unusual name of Passant, who originally hailed from Lancashire with a wife from Ireland and his four children, the oldest and youngest of whom were born in Ireland whilst the middle two were born in Southwark!

1891 sees the first appearance of James Smith in Wortwell when the now retired Butler was living with his wife and youngest son, Henry, a 20 years old schoolteacher. This ties in neatly with Henry's older sister having been a schoolteacher in the census 10 years earlier. Education for the working classes was booming at this time and affording bright, but poor, children opportunities never before available. Also in the house was young Alice Smith Jnr, aged only 4, this grandchild had been born in Bermondsey.

Let's go through a process of elimination to establish the provenance of young Alice; Henry was still at home and aged only 20, Robert James Snr never married, later evidence shows that Albert named his son, born in Peckham, after his younger brother so why not name his daughter, born in Bermondsey, after his sister?

The 1891 census shows Albert and his Dublin born wife, Jane, living in somewhat cramped accommodation, a single room in a shared household, along with (Robert) James, then only 2. There may have been another child on the way, hence Alice's stay with the grandparents, and it may have been this child's arrival that led to the death of its mother, Jane Smith (yup, a cracking combination of names to follow up) and the eventual return of the remnants of the family to Wortwell. And then a penny dropped with an almighty clonk; in 1881 when Albert was lodging with the Passant family, the oldest child at home, was Jane Passant, born in Ireland. Ta dah – the couple married in St Saviour, Southwark in spring 1885. Unfortunately, Jane's father, Isaac Passant died in 1889, Albert's job may have died with his father-in-law hence the painfully reduced circumstances the couple were enduring in 1891

So, whilst youngest brother Henry was at home, and Albert up in London, the other brother, Robert James Smith Snr, in the cheery way of the time, appeared in the 1891 census under his middle name of James, locating his birthplace to the bigger town of Harleston rather than modest little Wortwell and was busy learning the mill trade at the Worlington Mill, Mildenhall

By 1901, things were on the up. James Smith was no longer moping around being a retired butler, instead the family had taken over the Limbourne (Wortwell) Water Mill. Bearing in mind that Robert James Smith Snr bought the mill, outright, in 1910 for £500 I suspect that James would have had enough money available from his inheritance to finance buying the lease of the mill. According to Norfolk Mills,

'Wortwell Mill was usually and correctly known as Limbourne Mill and at the time of Domesday a fifth part of the mill was held by Bury Abbey, the whole being worth 10s. The manor of Limbourne in Homersfield was owned by the Benedictine Nunnery of Bungay around 1100. Later there was mention of Limber Lands and Limber Mill within the parish. Many years later these were bought by Alexander Adair of Flixton Hall along with Downs Farm. A conveyance of 1364 included two mills called Lymburghmilles but it is probable that it was the one building with two pairs of stones.'

This was a mill with a long tradition, the mill the Smith's took over dated back 100s of years. Norfolk Mills also states that it was Robert John Snr who first became a tenant at the mill in 1900, buying it

in 1910 at auction and continuing to work it until 1933 when a Brian Marriage took it over. The mill stopped work in 1948 when it was sold by Stanley Clifford Smith, Artist.

Anyway, regardless of Robert James Snr being the actual miller, in 1901 his father James Smith was the head of the household, appearing for the first time in their 40-year marriage with his entire family, wife, three sons and daughter. The two older sons, Albert and Robert J Snr, were the millers and the youngest son, Henry was a School Teacher. Alice, Snr, a home governess normally working aways, was visting home with a friend, also a home governess, 23 years old German Fanny Ludwig. Albert's 12 years old son, Robert James Jnr is also at home – no sign of 14 years old Alice jnr – what a change from the single room of 10 years previously. There was also a random 10-year-old from Berkshire – perhaps one of the Governess' charges enjoying some country air. In 1902, Robert J snr and sister Alice were busy on the Wortwell committee planning the celebrations for the new king's Coronation, an event that was postponed due to his ill health.

The milling obviously goes well, in 1911 (although Robert James Snr had bought the mill) it was actually Albert who was in residence with his 22 years old son Robert James Jnr working it with him. Albert had finally remarried, to Eleanor Brown from Peasenhall, her brother was also in residence.

Meanwhile Robert James Snr was living in a very nice house indeed, the 10 roomed Middleton Hall. Might have been rattling around a bit as there was just him, his sister, the still unmarried Alice Smith Snr, and a 27 years old widow, Beatrice White, in the house. In later years Smith moved to Says Farm from where he continued his business. Robert James Snr may have been well-off, but when a local stole a hen from him – no mercy! Mind you the chap who stole the chicken was a habitual offender so perhaps he deserved the 21 days hard labour he was given.

THEFT OF A HEN.

Frederick Rivett of Wortwell, fish. hawker, was charged by Robert James Smith of Wortwell, farmer, with stealing a hen, value 2s. 6d. Prosecutor stated that on the 3rd inst. he missed a hen. The hen was subsequently found on Rivett's premises. Last Sunday Rivett came to his house and said he was very sorry he took the hen, and asked prosecutor to be lenient with him for the sake of his wife and three little children. Prisoner pleaded guilty, and the Chairman read a list of previous convictions, some of which were for theft. The Chairman said as apparently the previous sentences had not had the effect of deterring prisoner from crime, he would now be committed for twenty-one days' hard labour.

The youngest of the brothers, Henry Percy, had by the time of this census given up teaching and gone into farming, still unmarried he had his widowed mother living with him in the middle of Wortwell, whilst also in the household was a maiden aunt, Sarah Calver, sister of his mother.

Norfolk News
21 May 1910

It seems surprising that raised in a close-knit village, knee deep in various relatives with a deeply rooted mother, of James and Eliza's four children, only one ever married and that in London to a girl born in Ireland. Sadly, this marriage ended prematurely with just Robert Jnr and Alice Jnr as issue. I will confess to not having tracked Alice Jnr down; it is a fairly common name, but she may have been the Alice Smith who died in 1971 in Depwade at the fine age of 83. If so, this would indicate she never married, we know her brother never married, none of her Aunts or Uncles ever married so in effect this entire branch of the family would have died out.

James and Eliza's children's upbringing may have been unusual but, except they knew their father was safe, matched that of the children of sailors in so far as the father was away for long periods returning for occasional short visits. Perhaps the reason they did not marry came down to them thinking themselves a cut above their neighbours. They could have aped social graces from their father, they certainly focussed on education, maybe their mother was a crashing snob? For whatever reason the siblings did not really take to marriage!

This is particularly ironic as the previous owner of the Wortwell Mill, Phillip Goulder, having married relatively late, had with his heroic wife, produced 16 children only one of whom had died by 1911, practically a child a year for the first 15 years of their marriage.

Dog Not Under Control.

Robin James Smith, Says Farm, Wortwell, was summoned for failing to keep a dog under control between sunset and sunrise at 8.30 p.m. on April 14th and with allowing a dog to be on the highway without a collar with the owner's name inscribed, on the Harleston-Bungay road, Redenhall, on April 14th.

P.c. H. Haverson said that at 8.30 p.m. on April 14th, he received a complaint about a dog, and when near to the Pear Tree Farm he saw a white-haired dog on the road. He was informed that it belonged to defendant and later took it to Wortwell. When asked for an explanation Smith admitted being the owner, but said that the dog had been missing for two days. It was normally allowed out in the day-time, but only in a nearby field in the evening.

A fine of 2s 6d was imposed in each case.

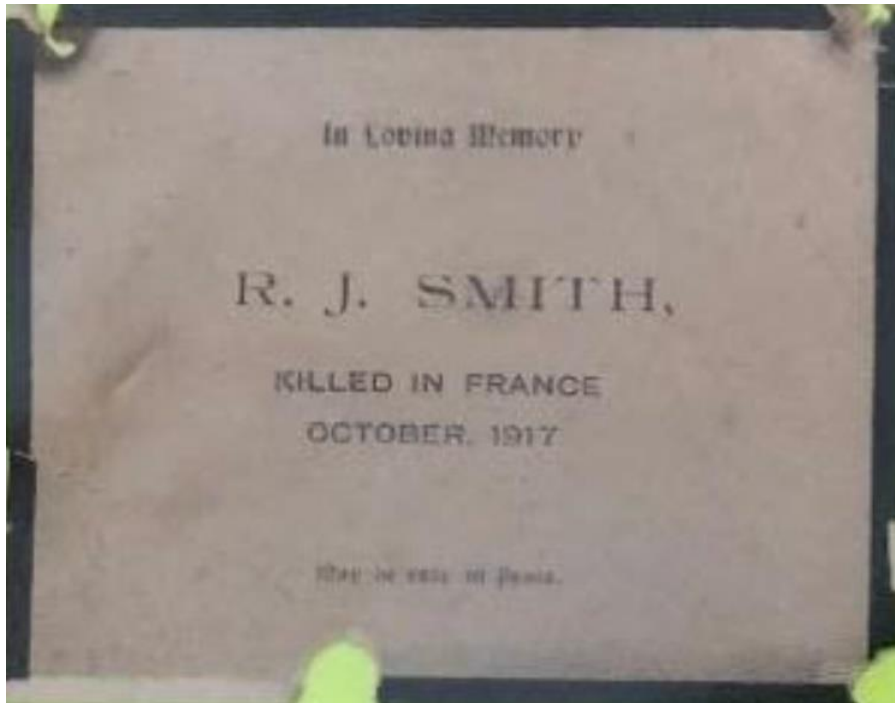
Diss Express

6 May 1938

James Smith and Eliza had, by modern standards, an unusual marriage. He worked away for long periods of time in an environment remote (culturally even more than geographically) from his family. We cannot tell know if that was a choice that suited both the parents very nicely, thank you very much, involved sacrifices on one or both sides of the partnership or was just a pragmatic acceptance of the way things were at the time. At the

end of the day, Eliza did a good job of raising the children and James a good job of supporting his family – hats off to the pair of them. James was lucky enough to inherit what was once described as 'a tidy sum of money'; not all employers were so considerate and the family were nicely set up to launch themselves into the 20th century albeit with a poor turn out of marriage and grandchildren to form the next generation.

What happened to Alice Smith (born 1887) remains, for now, a mystery what Robert James Jnr might have achieved, had he survived the war, will never be known. Would he too have shied away from marriage and romantic entanglements? Would he have continued as a miller in a time when local mills were slowly closing down to be replaced by large industrial sized concerns or would he have focussed on farming? Perhaps he would have transferred the mechanical skills learnt as a miller to a 'modern' trade associated with machinery. We can only ever speculate, Robert James Smith Jnr, the only grandson of hardworking, aspirational James and Eliza, like so many of his generation lost his future, and that of the family, in the pain, fear and squalor of Belgian warfare.



A memorial card was printed to mark the passing of this young man, most likely at the time of his death. We are fortunate that this card was preserved along with a number of others although lost for some time in Wortwell Hall. Unlike the other young men of the village, his name was listed using his formal but rather anonymous initials rather than his given name no rank was given and the card is dated merely October 1917, presumably as this was the month when the family heard of young Robert's death. The effect, in spite of the sentiments expressed, is of rather a bleakly spartan card.