



## Frederick William White

Driver 5<sup>th</sup> Heavy Battery – 1<sup>st</sup> Norfolk Royal Garrison Artillery (Volunteers)

Died on military duty in Harleston on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> March 1904, aged 18

For many centuries, the stalwart men of Harleston had joined Militia units as when their native soil was threatened. We have a record going back to 1638 stemming from the Harleston town drunk being charged with the somewhat all-encompassing crime of general drunkenness over last 8 or 9 years. A particular highlight in the evidence given was a description of him turning up to Captain Sir Thomas Gawdy Mustering and Quartering (*Militia or Military Reserve Parade and Practice*) at Redenhall in the summer of 1638, totally wasted but in charge of a drum which he merrily bashed about to the confusion of the exercising troops!

In 1779, not long after the loss of our American colonies, when the Spanish and French combined Navies were threatening our safety

HARLESTON Oct 23. twenty-six of the inhabitants of this town have formed themselves into a company, called the Harleston Volunteers, and have two serjeants to teach them their manual exercise. Tuesday was their field day, when they cut a respectable figure, everyone being dressed in his uniform, which is a scarlet coat, white waistcoat, breeches and stockings with his firelock and cartouch box. In the morning they paraded in the market place by beat of drum, the gentleman indiscriminately ranking with the mechanic; after which they marched to a field near the town, where they went through their exercise in a manner that did them credit; from thence they proceeded to the Pye, where a good old English dinner (roast beef and plumb puddings) was provided for them; nothing but beer was drunk and the greatest decorum was observed throughout the whole.

In Victorian times these slightly ad hoc units were replaced by Volunteer Units, far more similar to the T.A we are familiar with today. The men would be expected to tip up to regular drills and in return would be paid a retainer to have a quite jolly time with their peers. For the Government this meant they had a ready supply of trained men to enter the Army as a natural progression or, as in the case of the Boer and First World War, ready to step in and fill the gaps in the Regular Army Provision.

For many years in the 19<sup>th</sup> C, the Units met and drilled outdoors behind the Cap – although not between December and April due to the poor weather. A series of Drill Sgts, old soldiers all and including Suffolk's first VC winner, Alfred Ablett from Weybread were employed to put our men through their paces. Shooting and sword play competitions were also very much part of training at the time.

There were two Harleston Militia Units, one Infantry, the other an Artillery Unit with some serious kit at their disposal with fabulous new guns being allocated to the unit in 1887

HARLESTON. Igt V.B.E.D. Royal Auxillary.— During last week there was some little excitement in the Battery caused the arrival of the long-promised 64-pounder Armstrong gun on common standing carriage. It safely arrived at the Railway Station from Harwich<sup>1</sup>

A few days later, on a Saturday evening the 64-pounder was proudly drawn through the town to impress both the locals and any potential new recruits to the Corps. These serious pieces of munition really needed proper storage and in 1902 Harleston got its very own purpose-built Drill Hall, up behind the station and which some might remember as the PYE factory.

In a newspaper report covering the official opening, much was made of the skylight running most of the length of the large building, 40ft by 100ft and 36ft high at the ridge. Designed by Pell of Beccles and built by local builder Arthur Rayner, based in Anna Court off the Redenhall Road, there was also an Armoury, a residence for the Drill Instructor, a store and an Officers Room - most impressive.

*Harleston 'New' Drill Hall, opened 1902, (up behind the station), with two of the horse drawn gun carriages.<sup>2</sup>*



It was probably one of these very carriages pictured above that was involved two years later in the tragic death of 18 years old Driver Frederick William White.

We first find William, as he was normally known, living with his parents and a brother next to Denton Station in 1891 although by 1901 he was working as a 'cow boy'<sup>3</sup> on 'Chestnut Tree Farm' out in St Cross, South Elmham.

In charge of this full house hold were his elderly Uncle William Debenham, from Pulham, an aunt, 4 cousins and a lodger, a schoolmistress from Yarmouth! His mother was Mary Ann Debenham, also from Pulham, who had wound up working as a house maid in South Elmham where she met and married William White. Driver White was a young man who had farming on both sides of his family, going generations back.

*Chestnut Tree Farmhouse, later home and work place of Driver White.<sup>4</sup>*



On the day of the accident, the Artillery Unit was to 'parade in drill order, with guns and wagons fully horsed, to proceed to Weybread to drill'. There were large numbers of spectators gathered to view what would undoubtedly been an impressive spectacle, harnesses

<sup>1</sup> East Anglian Daily Times 27 Sep 1887

<sup>2</sup> Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century printed postcard

<sup>3</sup> 1901Suffolk Census, Cattle worker, born St Cross

<sup>4</sup> Chestnut Tree Farm house [cc-by-sa/2.0](https://www.geograph.org.uk/p/473621) - © Jonathan Billinger - [geograph.org.uk/p/473621](https://www.geograph.org.uk/p/473621)

jingling, the wagons rumbling, and the men turned out polished to the nines. As this contemporary photo shows, the horses were linked in pairs to a central pole with a driver riding the left-hand horse of each pair. Unfortunately, the horses, removed from the plough for the day, were not used to such crowds and although amiable enough whilst being harnessed, the team of four harnessed to the ammunition wagon 'showed signs of alarm at the unaccustomed noise.'



*Artillery Carriages going through Harleston c 1904*

19 years old John Downing was in charge of the lead pair, Driver White, on his first ride out, was in charge of the wheelers or back pair. Sgt Dineen gave the order to move on, White's horse set off with gusto – possibly bolting, Downing's balked, the two horses collided and Downing lost control of his offside horse. The team ran out of control and 'dashed away at furious rate, a large number of men women and children rushing in all directions for safety. Two of the children disappeared under the wagon but other than screaming with terror emerged unscathed. The team careered on down Station Road to the widely flared junction with Redenhall Road. just outside Haddiscoe Lodge.

At the time there was a lamppost and post-box in the middle of the junction as is just visible in this early photograph.



In this photograph from the late 1890s, the post-box and lamppost are on the far-right hand side of the photo with Mill House on the left, heavily covered in ivy.



As the equipage came down Station Road the two lead horses passed one side of the lamppost whilst the wheelers tried to go the other way. The impact of the collision brought the runaways to an abrupt halt and overturned the wagon although their momentum flattened both the lamppost and the post box with its supporting masonry. It also hurled White from his saddle into the bar of the lamp post, and then under the wagon. The terrified horses having been halted were now held steady and young White was 'drawn from beneath the wagon . . . his injuries were of the most terrible nature. One side of his face had been torn away, his jaw was smashed, and his neck broken'. Captain Robinson, who was in charge of the Battery at this Parade, had White taken to his Surgery (across the road at Candles) but White died within a minute or two of his removal and seven minutes of the accident, it later being stated both skull and jaw were fractured the latter in three places.

Capt. Robinson (local doctor) was himself to die following a riding accident at a volunteer camp in 1913, by which time he was a Major. His family put up the Robinson Memorial Nurses Home in his memory, opposite the junction of Wilderness Lane and London Road.

The inquest jury suggested that the horses (farm animals pressed into service), should be fitted with blinkers to lessen the likelihood of them being startled although Sgt Dineen reckoned the blinker free Government harnesses were perfectly adequate for a horse that had already done half a day's work. The horses had been previously and peaceably attached to a gun so it seems that at least part of the issue was the inexperience of the Drivers, White having only been with the battery a few months, the other Drover John Downing, at age 19 was hardly going to be very experienced either

Major Everson expressed the deepest sympathy and commented on this being 'the first time a man had been killed while actively engaged in the duties of the Brigade,'

Driver White was given an impressive send-off: -.

The tragic death of Driver White of the 5<sup>th</sup> Battery, 1<sup>st</sup> N.R.G.A (V) ... has evoked much sympathy in the district. ... It was determined that the funeral should take place with full military honours and that the public should see the respect felt by the whole volunteer force for a comrade who died doing his duty. The result was a solemn pageant such as was never before seen in the district<sup>5</sup>,

The funeral of Driver White ...took place at Homersfield ...The body awaited removal at the Railway Tavern in a polished oak coffin with brass furniture which was placed upon one of the 40-pounder guns belonging to the battery, to which was harnessed a team of six horses, the left-hand horse of each couple being ridden by a driver. The Union Jack was used as a pall and on the top were placed the deceased's helmet<sup>6</sup> and a couple of wreaths of choice flowers. Another driver led deceased's horse. First ... came a firing party of twelve men carrying carbines reversed. Then came the band of the 1<sup>st</sup> Heavy Battery Great Yarmouth with its complementary trumpet band and drums next the gun carriage... The procession mustered of all ranks probably some 250 persons. The cavalcade commenced ... to the strains of Beethoven's Funeral march which alternated along the long route with the Dead March ... After the service at the graveside the firing party fired three volleys and the trumpeters sounded the "Last Post".<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Norwich Mercury 6 Apr 1904

<sup>6</sup> Norwich Mercury 6 Apr 1904

<sup>7</sup> Norfolk News 9 Apr 1904

Another report is even more fulsome<sup>8</sup>, detailing how almost the entire 3 ½ mile route between Harleston and Homersfield was lined with crowds, that the coffin was made by the builder of the Drill Hall, Mr A Rayner, who also acted as undertaker. White's belt was also on the coffin which was followed by A Coy 4<sup>th</sup> VBNR, Garrison Coys from Lowestoft, Beccles, Yarmouth, Norwich, NCOs and men of the 5<sup>th</sup> Heavy Battery, detachments of officers from the 5th Heavy and other sections of the Auxiliary forces. The volunteers were drawn up in a rectangular formation around the grave as the 530-seat church could not accommodate all the mourners. There was an extensive list of all the great, the good and military who attended the parade, service and re-muster at Flixton. The return to Harleston was made to the accompaniment of Quicksteps and trumpet marches and finally the parade was dismissed in the Cap Yard for a Wake at the Inn which was then run by Sgt Major Bradley a former Artillery Instructor.

Had Driver White not died in this terrible accident, he would almost certainly have wound up in an Artillery Unit in WW1, only a decade away at the time of his death. The skills he learnt mustering with his pals in Harleston would have been needed in this first truly mechanised war. Driver White has no record on the Memorial in Broad Street, but it is right we still remember him, I certainly do, albeit it only briefly, if ever cross the road at this point where he died just over 100 years ago.



*Above, Drill Hall with home Guard during WW2,*

---

<sup>8</sup> Norwich Mercury 6 Apr 1904

Below left in the 60's as the PYE factory, below right in 1989 as a veterans' reunion venue, bottom wen being demolished in early 90s.

