IN MEMORY OF
EDMUND ASTELL
DIED IN ACTION 31 DECEMBER 1917

Lived in the house now known as Phoenix House, High Street
PLAQUE No. 1

Edmund was born on 25 July, 1890 in Radway, near Kineton, to 29-year-old Arthur, a carter, and Eliza Astell. He spent his childhood in Radway, where his family were from, surrounded by six sisters and three brothers. However, only four of his siblings lived past the age of ten.

In 1908 Edmund's father died, at age 47, and in the next two years Edmund moved to Phoenix House to become a butcher. At the time Phoenix House was G T Alcock Butchers, run by George Alcock, a 33-year-old widower and sometime chairman of the Parish Council. The shop supplied the village with various kinds of meat, and had a slaughterhouse attached, where George would kill many of the animals himself.

A photograph of Phoenix House at that time shows the butchery open, carcasses hanging in the window. A delivery van in the left hand side of the picture has the blurry figure of a man in a striped apron standing beside it. One hand rests proudly on the van, as he looks towards the shop window. This smudged figure, a ghost of light and shadow, could perhaps be twenty-year-old Edmund, pictured outside his work. In 1911 he was living with Alcock and his six-year-old son, Sidney.

Living and working in Harbury, Edmund joined the cricket team, organised by George Alcock, and played with the Harbury team alongside many other men listed on the war memorial. He was an athletic and enthusiastic player, with the Leamington Courier on 12 August 1910 noting specifically his bowling, and mentioning his 'six wickets for 19 runs in Harbury vs. Lighthorne'. On 2 June 1911, Edmund was awarded 'Best bowling performance', and he surfaces again in the Courier's pages as a member of the Cricket Club committee. This paints a picture of a sociable, friendly man, involved in village life.

However, on 2 March 1916, he signed up to be an army reservist. By 13 October 1917 he was a Royal Navy Volunteer of the Drake Battalion, British Expeditionary Force. He left the village behind, and reached the base depot at Calais on 23 November 1917.

He would go on to fight, notably, in the battle of 'Welsh Ridge'. Fought in late December, his Battalion was surprised by heavy shelling on 30 December, in freezing weather with the landscape covered by snow. German troops dressed in white camouflage suits attacked, and the battalion lost 57 men.

A picture painted that day by a member of the Artists Battalion, which was there, was called 'over the top' and shows the trenches lying like great bloody gashes in the red earth, corpses clogged at the bottom. Their friends clamber over them to fight. The men charging to their deaths are hunched, with hunted, burned eyes.

It was on this day that Edmund's family received word he was missing. It wasn't until 22 July 1918 that his death was officially accepted. His family had waited eight months for the news.

Though it was eventually established that Edmund had died on 31 December 1917, his body was never found. He is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme.

Harbury World War 1 Memorial Trail

Remembering the men of Harbury parish who fell during the first world war in service of their country.

HARBURY PARISH COUNCIL
HARBURY WORLD WAR I MEMORIAL TRAIL
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