

IN MEMORY OF CHARLES BIRD

DIED IN ACTION 2 APRIL 1917

Lived at Yew Trees, 19 Mill Street
NO PLAQUE

Charles's parents lived at Yew Trees, Mill Street, Harbury, where they raised six children. The children's parents were Ellen and William, who was a 'painter plumber and glazer'. Born on 31 May 1882, Charles first went to school on 1 June 1885. On 18 February 1889 he was transferred to a mixed school. Just two years later, at nine years old, he was already employed as a 'garden boy', a profession that had evolved into 'house painting' like his father by 1911.

His sister, Mabel, at age 16 was a 'monitor of the school' who by 1911 became a schoolteacher in Harbury, remaining in this post for many years to come, and living at the house now called Birds Cottage next to Yew Trees.

Her brother demonstrated the same enthusiasm for life as his sister. Throughout these years he was very involved in the village where he and his siblings had been born and never left, committed to the social life of Harbury, a member of the cricket club, the church choir and a bell ringer. This paints a picture of a young man of tremendous energy, prepared to work hard but also fill his time with social activities. In February 1912 he added to his list of skills a certificate in First Aid from St John's Ambulance Association. Not only could he be called enthusiastic, then, but also caring. This same year he married Florence Pratt of Chapel Street, Harbury. The couple had one child before Charles left for war.

Charles became a Private in the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light infantry, probably enlisting in 1916 along with some friends from the cricket club. He went from bell ringing and choir singing to the front line.

There's a first hand account of the 2nd-4th Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry advance to St

Quentins from March to April 1917, written by G.K. Rose, a member of that company. He describes the relief felt at the German retreat, as the shellfire eased off and the soldiers breathed freely, without fear, bursting into a rendition of 'Here we are again'. Rose describes the destruction left by the German retreat, as the army wrecked the landscape and villages to make it harder for the British to advance. Yet the frustrating, violent carnage of the following battles would have been as terrifying for the German soldiers as the British, as men fought in a dark world lit only by gunfire. Rose describes a kind of hell for both sides.

There is an image of some of the troops of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, on a front line trench near St Quentin. As Charles' battalion fought alongside these men, it is possible that he knew one of those hunched figures. In the grey photograph their uniforms and helmets seem to be made of the same stuff as the dust of the trench, and their heads are bowed, hidden in shadow. The photograph was taken on 20 April 1917. There's no possibility that Charles is among them. He had died 18 days earlier, aged 34, of wounds inflicted by the earlier battle.

He is buried in the Duisans British Cemetery of Etrun, with a calm grey headstone marked by a slender cross bearing his name. At the Harbury churchyard there's another stone - a squat square remembering the man who was so much a part of this village. Following the news of his death, the church bells broke into a muffled peal in his memory.

Charles is further remembered through the naming of Bird Walk off Bush Heath Lane.



Harbury World War 1 Memorial Trail

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

