

IN MEMORY OF ERNEST EDWARD GURDEN

DIED IN ACTION 13 MAY 1917

Lived at West End Cottage, Mill Street
PLAQUE No. 12

Ernest was born in Harbury in 1895, his family probably living at 37 Mill Street, where they resided in the 1901 census. This census shows a large family, with the oldest brother 16 and the youngest, Ernest, only 5. Their parents, Thomas and Sarah, had seven children in total, and two grandchildren living with them, as well.

Thomas conducted a carter business, and ran Hillside Farm/Market. He would later run Bull Ring Farm. Ernest may have travelled to Banbury Market every Thursday with his father, most likely in a horse drawn cart, the trip to Banbury taking four hours. It would have taken a whole day, perhaps feeling like a small holiday; an adventure to the hustle and noise of a bustling market town.

When he was young, Ernest seems to have been interested in plants, winning first prize for his flower display in the Harbury Agricultural Society Annual Show, displaying an artistic bent, and an eye for colour and arrangement. He would have first gone to the Wagstaffe School for infants, and later the Wight School, until he had to leave to help on his father's farm.

He had spent what seems a happy childhood, going to Sunday school (his family attending the Methodist Chapel) and belonging to the boy scouts. Like his father, he grew up to work on a farm, and was a sociable and well-meaning man, a member of St Johns Ambulance Brigade. He passed his First Aid examination on 8 February 1913, balancing his work with this clear effort to educate himself further.

A birthday card, with the rather twee refrain of 'just to say, I'm thinking of you, with affection deep and true' written on it, is a clue towards his private life. The woman who sent it, Miss Hilda Morris, was Ernest's fiancée, sending him 'love and best wishes'. Though this flush of love would have borne sweetness in it, Ernest's Harbury life would have been tarnished by the death of his sister and the loss of his father, in 1915.

In 1916 Ernest was conscripted into the army, and joined the 16th Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment as a Private, signaller and gun-target spotter. His brother was also conscripted - though he, along with Ernest's nephew, Reginald, survived.

On 13 May 1917, Ernest died of his wounds, aged only 22, and is interred in Aubigny Communal Cemetery Extension, among 2,771 graves.

Friendly, compassionate and brave, we have one image of him. In uniform, he poses with his mother, a woman soberly dressed in black, seated before her standing son. Mother and son seem to have been very close, Sarah travelling to Ernest's camp on the Isle of Wight in a desperate attempt to see him one last time, before he left for the front. Yellowed with age, the portrait of them is of that antique grey and black, a photo of another age. But the eyes of the mother and son, wary, almost distracted, possess an eloquence still.



Harbury World War 1 Memorial Trail

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

