

JOHN BURGOINE 1895 - 1968

These notes supplement what was included in the family history book. They also try to give a fuller picture of his life. He died before my sons knew him (Pete was 3 and Mike less than a year old), and Mary only knew him for a few years.

General

My Dad was not a great talker – there was none of “back in my day”, so as a result he didn’t give us much information about his past life. This is now a great regret, since there are many things about his life that I would like to know, but now never will.

He must have had a tough life – much tougher than his sons! He lived through two world wars, fought in one, lived through the great depression, and must have known poverty and hard times.

Although quiet he was certainly in charge within the home. He was a hard worker, a professional painter and decorator, as well as being a skilled draughtsman. He set DIY standards that others can only aspire to. He attended church more as a rite, and in respect for his wife, rather than through conviction. I suspect he’d seen too many awful things in the war. He was also proud that he’d managed to give his sons a good education, and seen them do well at the start of their careers. He was a smoker, both cigarettes and pipe. His only drink was at Christmas when he was given a bottle of sherry by his boss.

My cousin Richard’s description of him as “a proud Yorkshireman, a man of quiet authority and of complete integrity” is apposite.

1895 to 1914

He was born on 25th January 1895 at Thornhill, Dewsbury, in the West Riding of Yorkshire. He was proud of his Yorkshire background. His baptism took place at the Wesleyan Chapel in Outwood, Huddersfield on 4th April 1895.

His father was Herbert Burgoine a journeyman painter. For what life was like for painters at this time read “*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*” by Robert Tressell. According to this book, employment was uncertain and at the mercy of fairly unscrupulous employers, and when men were laid off there was no social safety net and poverty wasn’t far away.

Herbert’s wife was Charlotte Elizabeth (nee Walshaw), who was the granddaughter of David Burgoine, the registrar from Thornhill who compiled a lot of the early family history. So he married a cousin of some description.

Soon after 1895 the family must have moved to Retford in Nottinghamshire, presumably to get work, since John’s sisters were born there (Evelyn in 1897, who died within a year, and Doris in 1899). They were back in the Huddersfield area in 1903 when his brother Henry was born and another sister Evelyn in 1905.

There is no information on where he went to school or at what age he left school, probably at age 12-13. I presume he followed his father into the painting trade as an apprentice. There is a picture of him as a member of the Huddersfield Mission Football Club in 1911/12, when he would be

16. Where he played and at what standard is unknown. (Huddersfield Town FC joined the football league in 1910).

1914-1918

When WW1 broke out, there was no initial pressure for people to join up, since it was assumed the war would be over by Christmas! Events soon changed that. John's war records are not available, presumably among those destroyed by an air raid during WW2, so the only information available is his regiment's war diaries. A detailed summary of these is contained in the appendix –only the main points are included below.

John must have joined up after 23rd November 1914, otherwise he would have been eligible for the 1914 Star medal, awarded to those serving between 5th August and 22nd November 1914.

He joined the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons – an Irish regiment, part of what became the Royal Dragoon Guards, who apparently had a recruitment office in York, which may be where he joined up. Why he ended up in a cavalry regiment is a bit of a mystery. He told Richard that he'd never sat on a horse prior to joining the army. However if he'd joined an infantry regiment, the chances of him surviving the war would have been minimal.

The 6th Inniskilling Dragoons were part of the Mhow (5th) Brigade in the Indian Cavalry Division. This brigade landed in France at Marseilles on 14th December 1914, and became part of the 2nd Indian Cavalry Regiment.

There were about one million horses sent to France during WW1. In September 1914, the cavalry formed 9.28% of the British Expeditionary Force; by September 1915 this had fallen to 3.88%, and by March 1918 to 1.65%. Cavalry were trained to fight dismounted as well as mounted.

In March 1915 the Inniskilling Dragoons had 27 officers, 515 other ranks and 577 horses.

In March 1915 they were moved up to act as a mobile reserve for the attack on Neuve Chapelle on 10th March. The aim was for the cavalry to exploit the initial advance. The battle went on for 3 days, and despite gains, the nature of the ground, difficulty of communications and preponderance of firepower, made exploitation by cavalry very difficult. The war diary reports that “unfortunately we were not needed”.

The same thing occurred in May 1915. Cavalry regiments being held in reserve but not being used was a common occurrence during the war.

The main risks of casualties came when they were sent on trench digging duties which occurred at regular intervals during the war. In August 1915 there were a number of casualties in the Bapaume area.

On 15th September 1915 the Mhow Brigade was transferred to the 1st Indian Cavalry Regiment, initially at La Chausse, and then L'Etoile, about 14 miles NW of Amiens.

They spent the winter of 1915-16 near the coast. During the summer of 1916 most time was spent trench digging and again been sent up to the front in support and not used. They were not used, fortunately, in the Battle of the Somme, June to November 1916. It was a similar story during most of 1917, with most casualties occurring during trench duties.

Up until this point the Dragoons had spent much of their war devoted to cavalry corps duties, usually a euphemism for trench consolidation, sentry work, traffic control and burial parties. Occasionally, tactical duties had been ordered for squadrons, and these involved scouting missions, or being held in reserve ready to exploit any weakness that a ground assault might present.

However this changed in November at the battle of Cambrai, part of the British assault on the Hindenburg Line which started on the 20th November 1917.

This was the first major battle in which the regiment were involved. The plan was to use tanks to make the initial breakthrough, and then use the cavalry to exploit the gaps. After some initial success things got bogged down. The dragoons were mainly brought into action when the Germans counter attacked on the 30th November. The battle ended on 4-5th December. Both sides lost 40,000 men in the battle.

On December 1st a dreadful incident took place on the Villers Guislan Ridge, born of immense frustration by senior cavalry officers at their failure a few days earlier. The Mhow Brigade, fighting dismounted in support of the 1st guards Brigade, was ordered to make a mounted attack against the German position. The order was given at the personal insistence of Lt. Gen. Kavanagh over the protests of his divisional and brigade commanders. This was an experience in futility to rival the worst experience of the infantry on the Western Front.

After a charge by the 2nd Lancers had been pinned down, the 6th Inniskillen Dragoons sent an unsupported squadron into uncut wire in an attempt to gallop the Villers Guislan Ridge. Blasted by artillery, machine gun and rifle fire, the squadron was virtually wiped out, losing 112 men and 187 horses for no result.

For a detailed account of this action see "A Cambrai Charge. The 6th (Inniskilling Dragoons) at Guislan Ridge, 1 December 1917" by Gavin Hughes in the Irish Sword vol. XXII (no.87) p.77.

John was involved in this mad enterprise, presumably he was not in the leading platoon which was wiped out, but in one of the ones further back. He told my cousin that he was one of the few to return with his horse.

Lt.-Gen. Sir Charles Toler MacMorrough Kavanagh was educated at Harrow School and Sandhurst, fought in the Boer War and was decorated with various awards. He was Commander of the 1st and 7th Cavalry Brigades between 1909 and 1916. He was Commander of the 1st Army Corps in 1916, and invested as a Knight Commander, Order of the Bath (K.C.B.) in 1917. He was Commander of the Cavalry Corps between 1917 and 1919. After the war he received further decorations from Britain, France and Italy. (See appendix for full details).

There were obviously no come backs on him for his decision at the Villers Guislan Ridge

For the next few months the Dragoons were doing trench duties in the Somme area.

Cavalry failure at Cambrai led to a review of the future of cavalry. The two Indian Cavalry regiments were broken up and the Indian regiments sent to Palestine. On 10th March 1918 the Division was broken up and transferred to the 7th Cavalry Brigade in the 3rd Cavalry Division. They were brigaded with the 7th Dragoon guards and the 17th Lancers. Arrangements were made the following day to change the establishment from Indian to British.

The Germans planned a major offensive early in 1918. With the Russians out of the war they planned to try and take Britain out of the war, before the Americans were present in strength. Various plans were considered, but in the end they chose to attack on a 50 mile front between the Rivers Sensee and Oise, aiming initially to take Albert and Bapaume and then Amiens. This area was defended by the southern wing of the British Army, adjacent to that defended by the French. This is known as the second battle of the Somme (March to April 1918).

The cavalry division was involved in various actions during this battle—the Battle of St Quentin (21 - 23 March), the actions at the Somme crossings (24 - 25 March) and the Battle of the Avre (4 - 5 April). There were a significant number of casualties.

Trench duties followed during the summer.

In August and September the counter attack began, referred to as The Battle of Amiens 8-11th August. The attack in the Hamel—Amiens area starting on the 8th August was successful, and an attack north of Albert took Bapaume and Peronne. On September 4th, the Hindenburg line was broken.

The division was involved in operations at Morgemont Wood/Beaucourt/Caix-Quesnel Road, and then moved to Jumel on the 12th, where they were commended for good work during the operations.

In September they were asked to support infantry attacks, but again were not needed. Their last action was in October, where they were attacked by low flying planes and suffered a number of casualties.

They were continually on the move after this point, and with the end of the war in November 1918, demobilisation started to occur. By 31 March 1919, the Division had fully demobilised and ceased to exist.

According to my cousin Richard it was common for ‘old soldiers’ to be given safer jobs to keep them alive towards the end and John was later put on cooking duties. John detested the timing of the Armistice Ceremony at the eleventh hour of the eleventh month. He thought that it had been delayed for dramatic effect and that good men died while waiting for it to happen.

1919 - 1945

Again when John was demobilised is unknown. David recalls him saying he’d thought of emigrating to Canada after the war. He’d had contact with Canadian troops during the war. However either before he got home, or soon after, he found that his younger brother Henry had died, aged 15, in the flu pandemic of 1919. This may have dissuaded him from

emigrating. (This epidemic also killed my mum's mother, and killed more people than the Great War itself).

Presumably after the war he joined his father in the painting and decorating business. The family were in Doncaster from 1917. He trained as a church decorator and became a master painter, and started his own painting and decorating business, either with his father or after he died in 1931.

He met Ellen Adlington when her father was minister at Oxford Place Church in Doncaster between 1924 – 1927. Ellen was in the choir with John's sisters, Doris and Evelyn. He also did some design work at Oxford Place Church. From 1927 Ellen was in Liskeard, Cornwall and later Ashby-de-la Zouche, so it must have been difficult to find time to meet. There are no letters in the family archives, which must have been the main means of contact.

Herbert Burgoine died in August 1931, and John delayed getting married till he had paid off his father's debts – something he was not obliged to do.

Aged 38, John married Ellen Adlington at Ashby de la Zouche on the 30th Sept 1933, describing it as the best day's work he'd ever done. They moved into 21 Whitburn Road, Doncaster, which remained their home until they moved to London in March 1950.

Their sons David and Alan were born in 1937 and 1941. David was born in Worksop (not therefore a true Yorkshireman!).

During WW2 John temporarily moved to Gloucestershire and did work associated with the RAF. Again I would like to have known more about what type of work, and how long he was away from Doncaster.

1945 - 1968

Presumably because business was poor after the war and there was not much work in Doncaster, John moved to London in 1947 to look for work. It must have been a particularly difficult decision to leave a young family and move away from his roots to the uncertain world of London. (Apropos of nothing, a century earlier in 1847, one Thomas Crapper, aged 11, walked from Thorne, near Doncaster to London looking for work).

John stayed with John Adlington and had digs in Norwood, South London for part of the time. (Philip recalls John being quite ill during this period, and also of producing excellent portraits of Richard and himself).

He was able to bring his family down to London in March 1950. They could have moved a year earlier, but waited till David had done his 11 plus and got a place at Doncaster Grammar School. They moved to a flat owned by the company in Notting Hill Gate, where John was doing costing work. The property at 22a Eynham Road W 12 was rented from this firm, G.Watts and Co.

It is difficult to remember the implications but for the first half of David's and my life, up to that point, our father would have been away from home. It must have been particularly difficult for my mother, since not much money must have been coming into the family home. I remember we did spend a lot of time with Dad's surviving sisters, Doris and Evelyn both of whom never married.

Doris was a primary school teacher. Evelyn ran a secretarial business with a Miss Hague, and both we found out after Evelyn died, were founder members of the Doncaster women's masons association.

I only remember one family holiday before we left Doncaster when we had a caravan for a week at Barmston, south of Bridlington.

There were more family holidays when we moved to London, at Hythe in Kent, at Polzeath in Cornwall and Willersley Castle in Derbyshire.

With both parents working they managed to keep both their children in full time education, and go to university. There was no pressure to leave school and bring money into the family home.

In the autumn of 1967 they made a visit to David and his new wife in Montreal. They went on the Queen Elizabeth and, as far as I know, this was his first trip abroad since WW1. The visit was not a success, due to the behaviour of David's wife, who was resentful of their presence and did not make them welcome. They were reluctant to talk about it on their return, and I only have limited knowledge of what went on.

However, I think it had a very adverse effect on John's health, and not long after his return he had a stroke and died in 1968 on 14th April at St. Charles Hospital Kensington. He died of bronchopneumonia, cerebral thrombosis, arteriosclerosis, ischaemia and heart disease.

Alan Burgoine
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