

THE BLEASDALE FALLEN OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

DRIVER

GEORGE THOMAS BREWER

1882 – 1918

11TH BATTERY 3RD BRIGADE

NEW ZEALAND FIELD ARTILLERY

ARMY NUMBER: 30470



KILLED IN ACTION 5TH APRIL 1918



REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR

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11th Battery 3rd Brigade New Zealand Field Artillery
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George Thomas Brewer was the eldest son of Richard and Alice Brewer who had farmed at Quernmore for many years before moving to Lower Fairsnape Farm, Bleasdale some time before 1911. George emigrated to New Zealand between 1901 and 1911, where he was working on a farm at the time of the outbreak of the First World War. He enlisted in the New Zealand Field Artillery and fought in France where he was killed on 5th April 1918. He was 35 years old.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND UPBRINGING

George Thomas Brewer was born on 22nd August 1882. His parents, Richard and Alice farmed at Lower Moorhead, Over Wyresdale for over twenty years before they moved to Lower Fairsnape Farm, Bleasdale sometime before 1911. The Brewers were a long-standing Quernmore family. Grandfather Thomas Brewer had been born there in around 1820, and was still farming at Brow Top Farm at the age of 81.

WORKING LIFE

George had left his parents' farm by the time he was 18 and in 1901 he was working for his uncle, John Gardner at (Lower) Brow Top Farm. However, he subsequently emigrated to North Island, New Zealand. His younger brother Richard also left the country, going to Canada some time after 1911.

The Brewers had horses on their farm, as in 1911, George's younger brother, John, was described as a teamsman. George also may always have worked with horses on the farms where he was employed as he became a driver in the New Zealand Artillery during the First World War, where horses were used to pull the guns. An article on Wikipedia explains this:



'A Driver was a military rank used in the British Royal Artillery and artillery corps of other commonwealth armies throughout the First and Second World War, as well as in earlier conflicts. It was equal to the rank of private; however it consisted of driving a form of transportation which pulled artillery and equipment. During the First World War, drivers were in charge of a team of up to six horses which pulled field artillery to areas of fighting. It is likely that they were also capable of performing the duties of a Gunner when required or a replacement was needed. During the Second World War the position was almost the same, although horses were replaced with jeeps and other more modern military vehicles.'

ENLISTMENT

Karen Macaulay writes:

‘Some time before 1901 and 1915 George emigrated to New Zealand where he continued to farm, employed by Mr. J.R. Taylor at Manutahi. Manutahi is a small community in south Taranaki on the North Island of New Zealand.

‘It would appear that George tried to enlist as early as April 1915, but was at first rejected (for reasons unknown, as his service documents are faint to read). However, he reapplied and was accepted. He enlisted at Featherston on 21st August 1916 at the age of 33. His medical documents dated 4th May 1916 tell us that he was 5 ft 10 ½ inches tall, weighed 11 stone 11 lb and had a chest measurement of 37 inches. He had a fair complexion, fair hair and blue eyes. His religion was Church of England.

‘His records list his father – Richard Brewer of Lower Fairsnape as his next of kin, but another name appears on his file of someone he wanted to be notified should anything happen to him. Listed as a ‘friend’ was Miss Marchant (or Marcham) of Taranaki, New Zealand. Perhaps she was his sweetheart? His documents seem to indicate that she wasn’t notified of his death until 13th August 1918.

THE VOYAGE TO ENGLAND

‘Following his enlistment he remained in New Zealand until 16th February 1917 when, as part of 22nd Reinforcements NZ Field Artillery, he embarked on the troopship Aparima at Wellington. They arrived in Devonport on 2nd May 1917 and from here marched to the NZ Field Artillery at Chadderton (Oldham?). They remained here for just over a month, probably in training. I would like to think he found time to visit his parents before departing for France on 7th June 1917.

ACTIVE SERVICE IN FRANCE

‘On arrival in France, they marched to the base camp at Etaples where they remained for ten days, leaving here to join their Division on 17th June.

‘The next day he was posted to the Divisional Ammunition Column ‘in the field’, and on 11th July he was transferred to 3rd Brigade New Zealand Field Artillery and posted to 11th Battery.

‘On 4th February 1918 he was evacuated from his unit to a field hospital and from here to 63rd Casualty Clearing Station on 14th February. Whether this was through illness or injury is not known, but it can’t have been too serious as he was back with his unit on 25th February.

THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE OF MARCH 1918

‘In early April 1918 the Batteries of the 3rd Brigade were engaged on the Somme. The Germans had begun a huge offensive on 21st March 1918, which forced the Allies to withdraw from many positions they had fought so hard to secure on the Somme during the battles of 1916.

‘An Operation Order for 3rd New Zealand Field Artillery stated that from 12 noon on 1st April, until further notice the Brigade was to provide artillery fire (map references given in war diary) and to engage the enemy wherever seen. No doubt this was to try to halt the German advance.

‘On 1st/2nd April the war diary reported that the enemy artillery was very active around the batteries at Mailly-Maillet, so the 3rd Brigade batteries were engaged in harassing fire to counter this bombardment. On 3rd/4th April it was noted that the enemy put over intermittent salvos on all batteries and that three men were wounded in 11th Battery. It is possible that George was one of the men wounded in this bombardment, but remained on duty’.

‘At 5.30 on the morning of 5th April the 37th Division to the left of the 11th Battery attacked and the 3rd NZ Field Artillery created a diversion on the right firing 18 pounders and 4.5 Howitzers at the enemy. Between 8 a.m. and 8.30 the enemy shelled the whole of the Brigade front and rear areas. In this bombardment 2 other ranks were killed and officers and 3 other ranks wounded.’

George was one of the men killed in the attack, having stayed at his post overnight despite having been wounded the previous day. According to the information given to his parents, he was killed instantly by a shell while he and some other soldiers were taking cover in a shelter.

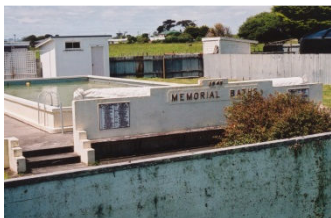
AFTERMATH OF GEORGE’S DEATH

The information about his death led him to being seen as a local hero. Following an article giving details of his death, the Preston Guardian headed a second article about his death with ‘Bleasdale Hero’, in which it said that Mr. and Mrs Brewer:

‘continued to receive many sympathetic and glowing tributes their heroic son. These include one from the War Office on behalf of the King and Queen (George V and Queen Mary); from Lord Liverpool, Governor General of New Zealand and a further one from Mr. J. Allen, New Zealand Minister of Defence.’

Perhaps these letters were some comfort to Richard and Alice at a time of grief and worry. Their second oldest son, now in the Canadian Field Artillery, had been wounded, and two of their farm servants had been killed. John Shaw was killed at the Somme in August, 1916, and in the previous October, their nephew, James Mason, who had worked for them, had died of illness while serving in the army in Plymouth. Fortunately, their son Richard returned home and later farmed at Winmarleigh.

George’s body was recovered and buried at Forceville Cemetery, Somme, France, Plot 3, Row E, Grave 11. At Manutahi the community had the Memorial Swimming Baths erected to honour the men from the area who had lost their lives in the First World War, and George’s name is on the First World War Memorial Plaque in the Cemetery. He is also commemorated on the Bleasdale War Memorial.



The Memorial Swimming Baths, Mantahi
North Island, New Zealand

References:

The Preston Guardian 20th April 1918 and 4th May 1918 (microfilm, Community History Library, Harris Library, Preston)

For other references etc., see the Acknowledgement Page.