

THE BLEASDALE FALLEN OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

PRIVATE
JOHN HARRISON

1892 – 1918

**127TH INFANTRY REGIMENT, 32ND DIVISION – US ARMY
AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE**

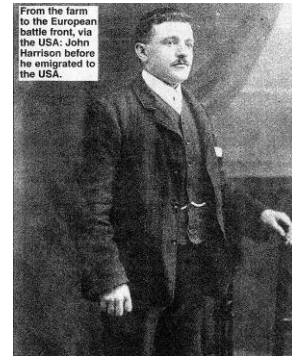


KILLED IN ACTION OCTOBER 1918



REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR

PRIVATE JOHN HARRISON 1892 – 1918
127th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Division – US Army
AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE



John Harrison was the son of Cuthbert and Alice Harrison, born in 1892. Sometime after 1911, they moved from Crook Lane End Farm, Goosnargh to Bailey Hey Farm. John left England, probably in July 1912, to start a new life in the United States. He registered for service in the American Expeditionary Force in 1917 and arrived in England in the summer of 1918. He was killed in France in the following October. He was 26 years old.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND UPBRINGING

John Harrison was the fifth surviving child of Cuthbert and Margaret Alice Harrison who were farmers, born in 1892. He was baptised at St. Michael's Church, Kirkham on 3rd April 1892. His father was brought up on a farm in Leyland, and after he married he moved to a farm in Kirkham Road, Greenhalgh-with-Thistleton, where John was born. Cuthbert and Margaret had twelve children, of whom only seven were still alive in 1911. The account below shows that one of his brothers died from scalds after a pan fell from the stove.

Sometime during the 1890's his parents moved to Crook Lane End, Goosnargh (referred to below as Crooklands) where John was brought up. In 1901 they employed a girl servant, Mary Smith. John was not living at home in 1911. In around 1914, the family moved to Bailey Hey Farm, Goosnargh where they became part of both the Bleasdale and Whitechapel communities.

John was very probably the John Harrison who sailed from Liverpool in S.S. Haverford to the United States. A young man of that name, aged 20, describing himself as a labourer, sailed from Liverpool to Philadelphia, departing on 31st July, 1912. The fact that John Harrison wrote to his mother from Philadelphia in January 1915 strengthens the probability. (*Our thanks to Karen Macauley for pointing this out.*)



It is likely that two of his brothers, Robert and William, joined up, and returned home. The names 'R. Harrison' and 'W. Harrison' are inscribed on the board at the Bleasdale Parish Hall showing those who had served and returned, although no details of their military careers have survived.

The following account written by Anthony Coppin, and published in the Garstang Courier, was based on papers, photographs and letters John wrote home, lent to him by a member of his family. It describes John's life as a farm labourer in the states of Illinois and South Dakota, his somewhat reluctant service with the American Expeditionary Force in 1918 and his death in action less than a month before the Armistice on 11th November.

‘A HERO’S STORY’ by Anthony Coppin:

JOHN’S LIFE IN ENGLAND BEFORE EMIGRATING

‘Life was tough on the tenanted farms of Lancashire towards the end of the late Victorian/early Edwardian era. As a youngster John Harrison had witnessed his father descend into drunkenness and lost a brother when a pan of hot water fell from the stove onto the boy.

‘The answer for many was emigration. – to the colonies and Dominions of the Empire or in America, where work opportunities abounded, especially for those with a farming background. John, then in his early 20’s, seized the opportunity – leaving his parents and several brothers and sisters, then living at Crooklands Farm, Goosnargh.’

EMIGRATING TO AMERICA

‘But his new life in the USA was only to last a few short years.

‘Snapshots from John’s life story in the form of letters and postcards written between 1915 and 1918, have been passed down and preserved by family members over the years. The year John emigrated to the USA is uncertain. It was probably 1914, the same year war broke out. On January 3rd 1915, he wrote to his mother from Philadelphia. By this time the Harrisons had moved from Goosnargh to Bailey Hey Farm, Bleasdale. (*New research suggests it was in fact mid-1912 – see above.*)

‘John was aware of the tumult into which Europe had descended, though he doubtless felt safe due to the distance between his newly adopted homeland from the war-torn continent and because of the US government’s non-interventionist policy.

‘In his letter he mentions he has read in the US press about an English battleship being sunk with the loss of 600 lives. (This would be the Formidable which was torpedoed by a German submarine in the English Channel on New Year’s Day 1915.)’

FARMWORK IN ILLINOIS AND SOUTH DAKOTA

‘John’s letter, however, concentrated on domestic matters, telling his mother: “Our cows are not giving much milk now – we only had 20lbs of butter last week ... The weather is very cold now ... plenty of people are filling their ice houses. We are busy getting posts and rails out of the woods to put up a new fence ... the ground is frozen about two foot down ... it would be a nice job ploughing now.”

‘More than a year later, in August 1916, John wrote from Alden, Illinois, to his mother having quit a job, in apparent annoyance at his boss’s laziness. John complains that his boss had bought a car and “often he did not get home for milking on Sundays “leaving all the work to him.” ’

THE US ENTERS THE WAR

‘In May 1917 the US Government decided to enter the war on the side of Britain. Nearly 10 million men were listed and a lottery was held to choose the first 687,000 to serve – eventually 3,000,000 men served as draftees. That summer the tone of John’s correspondence reflected on the implications of the US’s decision to join in the war, as well as domestic happenings.’

REGISTRATION

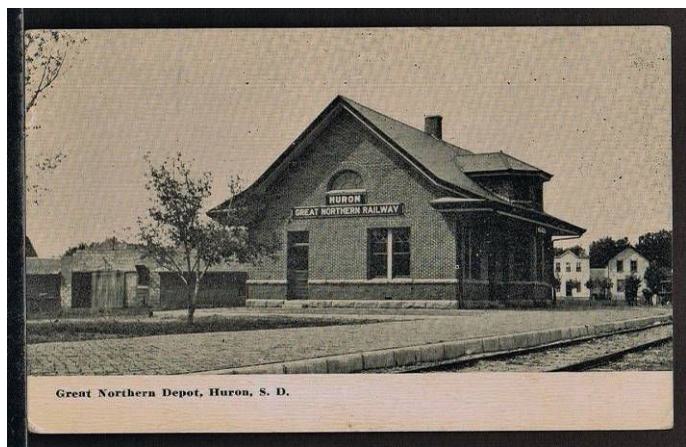
‘John, now in Huron, South Dakota, wrote to his mother: “I had to register (for military service) on the 4th of June. The government is going to take so many men out of each state. I may have to go. I don’t know yet.”

Great Northern Depot, Huron

‘After commenting on the price of eggs and “spuds” he continues: “If the war is over this winter I may come back to England for a visit. It will be very strange at first if I do ...”

‘But he also accepts that the war might not be over.

‘ “If I go to war I don’t know what to do with my money. If I have to go over to France I will take it along with me.”



‘And in a note showing reluctance about being drafted into the U.S. Expeditionary Force, he adds: “If they want me I will go and not before.”

‘Whether John was called up via the lottery or the wider draft isn’t clear. What he does record though is that in March 1918 he was declared medically fit for the war in Europe.’

RETURN TO ENGLAND

‘He journeyed by ship, the Nestor, from New York to Liverpool in mid-August, 1918. It was one of 26 ships which sailed to Britain in convoy. After arriving in the Mersey port, John posted a letter he had written during the journey. “We are packed here like sardens (sic). It was very hot the day we was loading. We did not get our own beds. I slept on deck all night. I am tired of this life the boat is so crowded we can hardly move round. There is about 3000 troops on this boat.

‘ “The boat was roaling (sic) every way. The grub we can’t eat and the high seas drives a man crazy.”

‘He also asks about his family’s day to day work, and mentions his own farm work: “I hope you are through with the hay. This is the first harvest I have missed for a long time.”

‘Hopes of a family reunion, or posting to a camp in Lancashire, from where he could visit Bleasdale, were quickly dashed. John and his fellow troops were sent to Winchester. In a

reflective mood he writes: "I heard there were a lot of camps in Lancashire. It would be nice if I was sent to Fulwood Barrikes (sic) but no such good luck."

'From Winchester he sent a postcard bought in Huron, showing the town's railway station , to his sister Maggie at Bleasdale, again hoping to head up north. But a family reunion was not to be.'

IN FRANCE

'After heading across the English Channel to the battle front he wrote to his employer, a Mrs. J. Brodensen in Huron. This was probably the last of the letters and cards he sent.

'The arrival in summer 1918 of the American Expeditionary Force was the decisive factor in restoring the advantage to the Allies, as the German armies crumbled.

'The AEF sustained about 360,000 casualties, including 116,000 dead – some 50,000 were killed in action or died of wounds (234,000 were wounded). Thousands also died from disease.'

JOHN'S DEATH

Karen Macauley has researched information on the American Expeditionary Force and she has found details of his death among the soldiers of the 32nd US Division who fought in France, although two conflicting dates, 7th and 25th October 1918, are given in two separate registers. Karen writes as follows:

'An entry in the Roll of Honour for 32nd Division shows details as follows:

*Harrison John
Private 127th Infantry Regiment – Company B
MIA (missing in action) 7th October 1918***
Bleasdale Lane, Garstang (NOK)
Entered service from WA
Margaret Harrison (Mother)
Tablets of the Missing at Meuse-Argonne
32nd Division in WW lists him as KIA (killed in action)
ABMC (American Battle Monuments Commission) lists date of death 25th October 1918 and from WA.*

The American Battle Monuments Commission had the following listing:

*John Harrison
Private US Army
127th Infantry Regiment – 32nd Division
Entered service from South Dakota
Died 25th October 1918***
Memorialised – Tablets of the Missing
Meuse Argonne American Cemetery, Romagne, France.*

The Meuse-Argonne Cemetery is the largest American war cemetery in Europe with more than 14,000 burials. Originally it contained over 27,000 but many were exhumed and repatriated in the 1920's.'

AFTERMATH

Anthony Coppin's story continues (slightly amended in the light of Karen Macauley's research):

'... some details (*of John's death*) can be worked out from another letter. On August 28, 1919, nine months after the war ended, Mrs. Brodensen wrote to Mrs. Harrison at Bleasdale. After saying, "We have not heard from him since last October when he said he was 20 miles from the Front." Mrs. Brodensen asked if the family knew if John "ever got through". 'And the answer was a sad one, as sad to the Harrisons in Bleasdale as it was to the relatives of the millions of dead servicemen in the towns and villages of all the countries which had contributed troops to the bloodbath which was the First World War.'

John's father, Cuthbert, put the farm at Bailey Hey up for sale in May, 1918, although the family remained in the area.

' His mother, Margaret Alice Harrison, received a pension from the United States government up until the late 1930's.

'John Harrison's name is not forgotten in the countryside he knew and loved as a boy. It is remembered at two churches - on the roll of honour of the war dead inside St. Eadmer's, Bleasdale and on the war memorial outside St. James's, Whitechapel, close to where his parents are buried.' (*and as we now know since this article was written, he is also commemorated on the memorial at the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, France*).

'Thanks to John Harrison's great niece, Brenda Cummings of Elswick for loaning her collection of family letters to The Courier/News for help in researching this feature.'

References and acknowledgements:

Please see the Acknowledgement Page.

