

A Royal Marine Ancestor

Ernest Beckett was the much loved maternal grandfather of my husband, Ernie Newell. When we decided to start investigating the family tree, he was the trigger. Ernie had known his grandfather and so was interested in discovering more about him, and there were still family members alive who knew him and could embellish the basic records.

Parish records both online and in various record offices and libraries are a wonderful research tool, but although we knew that Ernest Beckett was born in Bridge Street, Wickham, on 10th April 1881, there was no baptism in the Wickham parish records. Eventually he was found – baptised in Hambledon. Why? Obvious really! His parents had been born there, as had the previous four generations on each side of his family – the Becketts and the Goughs. This conjures up a picture of a large and happy family, with aunts and uncles, cousins and other relations all living in the one village, and all close enough to visit and enjoy each others' company. The parties that could be held must have been legendary, if only they could write about them. In fact the marriages of all the Beckett and Gough family members show them to have been related to nearly all the other families in the village of Hambledon.

Henry Beckett had married Hester Gough in 1865 and they had 11 children – 8 boys and 3 girls, and Ernest was the 9th child and 8th son. Ernest and the final two girls were born and brought up entirely in Wickham. Why did the family leave Hambledon? We have not found out yet, but it may be due to an agricultural crisis in the village and Henry, being an agricultural labourer with a large family, may have been forced to look elsewhere and became a general labourer in the small market town of Wickham. They moved in 1880, and the house in Bridge Street is still there, being in the row of cottages opposite Chesapeake Mill, and a crowded noisy time they must have had in it.

When he left school Ernest gained employment with the West Meon Railway alongside several of his brothers. Then on 11th May 1905 he joined the Royal Marines as Eastney Barracks. Why he did this we do not know. There is no history in the family of military service, let alone the Royal Marines, but there he was! Also he stated that he was 20 years and one month old. Yet he was born in 1881, which any calculator will say is 24 years old. Again there is no obvious reason, but he must have worried that he would be rejected, or that he did not look as old as he was. Who knows and isn't it frustrating that our ancestors do not write their reasons for doing things on to paper for us to read later?

He did his initial training at Deal and he is described on his Service Record as 5ft. 8ins. tall, with fresh complexion, blue eyes and brown hair. His conduct is usually very good and his ability the same. The original service record had been kept by one of his daughters and given to us to help in our research. This service record lists all the different ships he served on, together with the date of joining and discharge back to barracks. In his promotions list he seemed to have been demoted and promoted quite a few times, which did not seem to fit in with the 'very good' citations he was receiving. Detective work proved that he was obviously the senior marine in his detachment and was therefore acting a higher rank on board ship, but that he reverted to his original rank on return to barracks. He was eventually promoted permanently to Sergeant in June 1916 and to Colour Sergeant in March 1922.

He served in HMS Baccante in 1906, HMS Formidable in 1907, HMS Barham in 1908, HMS Jupiter in 1909/10, HMS Neptune in 1911 and then HMS Medina. No matter where we looked we could not find a record of HMS Medina. All sorts of possibilities were suggested,

from the name being recorded wrongly in the Service Records right down to secret operations! Eventually the truth will out! HMS Medina was a P & O liner which was commissioned by the Royal Navy to be the Royal Yacht to take King George V and Queen Mary to India in 1911/12 for the Delhi Durbar. The Royal Yacht (RMY Albert & Victoria) of the time was not a seagoing vessel and was totally unsuited to the long voyage to India, so the Medina was requisitioned as she was being fitted out for her maiden voyage. She was the height of luxury and was the only Royal Yacht to carry a King Emperor, as King George V was known in India. The voyage began from Portsmouth 3 pm on 11 November, 1911 and it took three weeks for the vessel to sail via Gibraltar, Malta, Suez and Aden before reaching Bombay. There the King and Queen travelled to Delhi for the Durbar before returning to Bombay and then to Portsmouth, arriving back on 5 February 1912. She then returned to being an ocean going liner, sailing to Australia. Unfortunately, she was sunk by a u-boat in April 1917. The Portsmouth News and Hampshire Telegraph of those times relate the story of the voyage in great detail, with reports from their correspondents in all the various ports of call. The logbook for the voyage is held in the National Archives in Kew and there is a record of the voyage written by the captain of one of the escorting warships held in the archives of the Royal Marines Museum.

From February 1912 to August 1914 Ernest was based at Portsmouth as part of the Portsmouth Division of the RM Brigade. In October 1914 they were sent via Dover to Dunkirk, where they were then entrained to Antwerp. They were heavily engaged in the defence of this port, in support of the Belgian troops who were being overwhelmed by the invading Germans. The trenches had not been designed to withstand artillery fire, and the Royal Marines were put straight in to save the Belgians. It was not a glorious campaign, but, as usual, the Allies were not very organised and the trenches were overrun. Ernest was one of several Royal Marines that were captured and made prisoners of war. Most of the Royal Marines were surrounded later in the battle and chose to be interned over the border in Holland, where they were allowed quite a lot of freedom and privileges.

However, those who were captured by the Germans were marched further into Germany and kept in fairly primitive camps. Ernest was one of just under 1,000 Royal Marines who were made prisoners of war in this action. There are several interesting accounts of their suffering in the Royal Marine Museum archives. One of the men described the beginning of their journey when they were marched to a ruin 24 miles from the battle front and had to carry the German guards' packs. When they rested the guards went into the fields and threw swedes at them, which they had to eat raw! They were then packed into trains – 40 to a carriage – and travelled two and a half days with only two small meals in that time. When they arrived at their destination – Doberitz – they were given half a loaf of bread a day per person for 4 weeks! Finally they were put on better rations, but as the war progressed these dropped again and their families in Britain were able to subscribe to a fund to pay for bread to be double baked in this country, packed in cardboard boxes and despatched to the prison camp. It was only through this bread fund that many of these men survived to the end of the war. Some of the stories contained in these reports are harrowing.

The war finished on 11 November 1918 and by 19 November Ernest had been repatriated. He was re-engaged in the Royal Marines and continued to serve until May 1926. During that time he had served on HMS Royal Sovereign and HMS Southampton. Then he was posted to HMS Dryad, which in those days was the Navigation School. When he was discharged he was transferred to the Royal Marine Reserve, and reported for regular training and weekly

deployments. In 1935 his records say that he reached 50 years of age, and he was downgraded from active participation in the Reserve. However, this did not stop him presenting himself for duty in September 1938, but he was finally discharged in November 1939 as being too old for active duty.

After his discharge in 1926 he was able to rejoin his family in 'Civvy Street'. In 1913 he had married Sarah Lampard in Fareham and they had lived in Wallington. Sarah was based there all during his imprisonment, and their first daughter was born there in 1914. Their next daughter was born in 1919, followed by two more daughters in 1922 and 1924. Finally, their son, Ernest William, was born in 1927, but tragically he died in 1929, so there was to be no son to follow Ernest into the Royal Marines. Little Ernest, known to his sisters as Peter, died of inanition, which is a term meaning that he was a small weak baby, and he was buried in the cemetery at Warblington.

After his discharge, Ernest found employment with the Automobile Association, as an AA Patrolman, and his daughters remember him standing on an island at the junction of North, West and High Streets in Emsworth directing the traffic. He did not stay in this position long and by 1930 he was employed as a Rating Officer for Havant and Waterloo Urban District council and the family moved to Victoria Road, Emsworth. He was very active in the village life, and appears to have been involved in the water carnivals on the Mill Pond among other activities. Although he lived in Emsworth he still travelled to Eastney for events for ex-Royal Marines and stayed a great supporter of the Corps until his death. He died in April 1961 and was also buried in Warblington Cemetery.

Linda Newell