

FORGET ME NOT

HENRY CROPPER & HARRY BONSHOR ROGER CROPPER'S GRANDDADS



I have photographs of both of my granddads in uniform that were taken during the First World War but I don't know anything about their time in the army.

Henry Cropper, my father Eric's father, was born in 1887 and in 1900 was apprenticed as a plumber to John Harris of 2 Thorpe End Melton Mowbray. I still have his apprenticeship indentures, written on vellum and signed and sealed before a solicitor. The photograph of Henry in his uniform shows a Royal Engineers cap badge on his cap. During the war, amongst other things, the Royal Engineers maintained water supplies to the troops and it seems logical that as a Master Plumber Henry would have been put into the Royal Engineers. Granddad put the heating into Hoby Village Hall when it was built in 1926 and used to take his lunch across the road to eat it at The Forge with Mr Worrell; he also did work at the Rectory. My father told me that Henry died in 1939, a few weeks after my parents got married, he was stung repeatedly by bees.

Harry Bonshor, my mother Florence's father, was also born in 1887. He married my grandmother Mabel Emma Smith on 26th December 1911. My cousin said that she didn't think he was in the army during the First World War as he worked on a farm but the photograph of him in his uniform must have been taken in the early autumn of 1918 as my Auntie Glad, the baby on my grandmother's knee, was born in March 1918 and she looks about six months old. There are no badges on granddad's uniform to help identify his regiment. Although Bonshor is quite an unusual surname, there are three medal records for "Harry Bonshors" and it is impossible to tell which is his. After the war granddad worked for Mr Whit on his farm at Ashby Folville; he lived at Barsby and when I was a lad I went to stay with him and grandma for two weeks during the summer holidays. He was very keen on cricket and in about 1956 I remember going to watch a match at Grace Road with him when Leicestershire were playing South Africa. He loved it as the South African team whacked the ball around the stadium, I was bored stiff!



Pictured left Harry and standing on the chair is my mother

my father Eric sitting on his mother's knee



GEORGE THOMAS BLAXLAND, O.B.E. 1871 – 1953 SUE BLAXLAND'S GRANDFATHER

My grandfather, George Thomas Blaxland, was a sea captain in the Merchant Navy. He had gone to sea as a very young man and had braved the perilous voyage round Cape Horn to Australia under sail. He was awarded his Master Mariner's Certificate in 1899 in Hong Kong and was the youngest ship's master in the South China Seas.

He returned to England and married my grandmother in 1904 and they lived in Folkestone, Kent. At this time, ferry services around the British coast were seen as an extension of the railway system and were owned by as many as twenty different railway companies. Captain Blaxland worked for the South Eastern and Chatham Railway Company (known affectionately as the "Slow, Easy and Comfortless!") and was in command of one of the fast cross Channel ferries, the "S.S. Empress".

At the outbreak of the First World War, he volunteered for the Royal Naval Reserve and was immediately commissioned as a lieutenant.

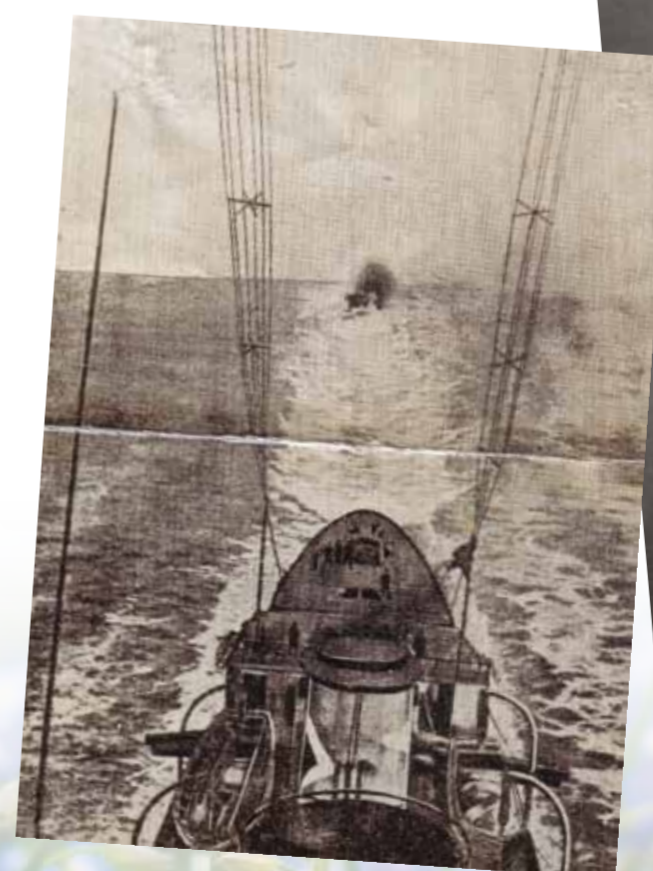
The "Empress", along with her sister ships the "Engaldine" and "Riviera", were commandeered by the Royal Navy and were converted into carriers for launching sea planes. My grandfather became one of the ship's officers. (I believe that the ship's Captain was Commander Sir Freddy Bowhill of the Royal Navy, as a Merchant Navy captain would not have been able to command a ship in a military situation.)

On Christmas Day 1914, all three ships were engaged in a raid on the German port of Cuxhaven, launching sea planes from their decks to bomb the port. During the raid, they were attacked by a Zeppelin which tried to bomb the "Empress" from low altitude. My grandfather, who was acting as pilot, manoeuvred the ship in a zig-zag course, taking evasive action for over an hour and succeeded in foiling the Zeppelin. This was the first time that seaplanes had been used in an attack on the enemy's harbours from the sea.

For the remainder of the war, he commanded troop ships, transporting soldiers to the Western Front.

In April 1918, his ship the "S.S. Onward" was moored at Folkestone Harbour and a fire, supposedly started by an enemy agent, broke out on the ship. It spread quickly and threatened both the ship and the adjoining quayside. Captain Blaxland got on board hand-over-hand by the bow hawsers and slackened off the ropes to take the ship clear of the pier. He was commended for his brave action by Admiral Jelverton.

After the War, in 1920, he was awarded the O.B.E. for his wartime service.



Zeppelin bomb as seen from the Empress

