

FORGET ME NOT

THOMAS ELLIS (1885 – 1918) BOB ELLIS'S GRANDFATHER



My grandfather Thomas Ellis was a victim of the "Spanish Flu" pandemic of 1918 which is believed to have killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide, making it one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history.

Unusually for influenza outbreaks, which normally have a disproportionate impact on the very young, the very old and those already weakened by ill health, the "Spanish Flu" predominantly killed healthy young adults between 20 and 40. The outbreak had reached its peak when my grandfather died on 25th November 1918 at his home at Woodend, near Kingsbury in North Warwickshire. He was 33 years old and worked on the coal face at a near by colliery.

His death certificate gave the primary cause of death as pneumonia, with the secondary cause as influenza. This is consistent with the findings of recent research which shows that most victims of the pandemic died from bacterial pneumonia. This pneumonia is believed to have been caused when bacteria present in the nose and throat entered the lungs along a pathway created when the influenza virus destroyed the cells lining the bronchial tubes and the lungs themselves.

The newspapers of the time advertised various products which were claimed to offer protection against the disease. Most notably the manufacturers of "Veno's Lightning Cold Cure" described

it as "the world's supreme remedy" for influenza. According to my grandmother Elizabeth, Thomas had already taken so much of it that she was convinced that it was the Veno's and not the flu that had killed him.

She was now left to bring up her own five growing children ranging in age from 2 to 9. At the time there were pensions for war widows but not for others widows so the next few years were a time of particular hardship until her sons, Charles, Wilfred, Alfred and Arthur, could apply for work at the collier aged 14. To eke out a living she took in washing, providing a laundry service to those who could afford it. As the oldest child, my uncle Charles was the first to become a bread winner for the family. Fortunately, he was equal to the task and possessed a natural authority, eventually becoming a colliery overman.



AMELIA ALICE SAVORY CAROLINE ELLIS'S GRANDMOTHER

My grandmother, Amelia Alice Savory, was a forceful personality, not well suited to a quiet life of domestic activity. When my grandfather enlisted in 1915, giving up his job as an engineer in Suffolk, she was determined to contribute to the war effort in her own right.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Alice was 35 years old with two small boys aged 8 and 3. Her family lived miles away in Oxfordshire. Nonetheless an opportunity to contribute came in February 1915, training with the Red Cross to administer first aid to the injured and she enrolled in a Voluntary Aid Detachment. I'm not sure that she ever worked as a nurse. However, when in 1917 the government called upon women to take the place of male agricultural workers my grandmother decided to get fully involved. She must have contacted the Women's Defence Relief Corps in London in order to offer her services and been accepted despite having two young children. Presumably family took care of them while she carted her double bed mattress off to rural Worcestershire for her wartime adventure. She was extremely proud of herself for joining the Land Army and kept numerous photos which she loved showing to her grandchildren.

She is pictured standing in front of the cottage where she stayed wearing trousers, boots and coat and sitting, holding a rake in another photo. The women appear to be planting potatoes in a couple of photos and having lunch in a wheat field in another. One photo shows a lady, said to be an artist, in a field of hops with children in the background. The weather changes from late summer to winter.

In 1918 my grandfather returned from France, infected with tuberculosis and my father belatedly started school, aged 7. The family moved to Oxford, where my grandmother helped family finances by taking student lodgers. Although my grandfather's health recovered sufficiently for him to return to work as a motor mechanic, the family never regained their pre-war prosperity.



WOMEN'S DEFENCE RELIEF CORPS
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Telephone: 3307 Hampstead.
Office for Interviews (Daily 11-1 and 4-6 p.m.) or by appointment. Saturday 11-1. 21.8.17.
It is such ages since I have heard from you or any of the others at Stockton that I write to ask if you are still there - Hoping you are all well & happy.
Yours sincerely
P. Myers

Every woman who helps in agriculture during the war is as truly serving her country as the man who is fighting in the trenches or on the sea.
Walter Ameyman
President of the Board of Trade
Selborne
President of the Board of Agriculture