

## The First World War and Goldington, 100 years on - February 1919

*Concluding the occasional series of articles to add some detail to the scant information on the First World War memorial in the church porch and to mark one hundred years since each individual soldier fell:*

Our final soldier in this series is **Sapper Albert Charles Stonebridge** who appears only on the Goldington Green war memorial and his story brings us right back to Bedford.

Albert was born in Wilstead, the son of Charles and Sarah Stonebridge. Charles was a brick maker and Albert was initially a general construction labourer.

By 1911 the family had moved to Bedford and on 13 January 1912 Albert married Ada Caroline Ludman. They lived at 22 Newnham Lane and had three children.

On 19 March 1916 Albert joined the 5<sup>th</sup> Bedfordshires in France as a 'Pioneer'. Ada at this time would have been pregnant with their third child who was not born until August 1916.

The rank of Pioneer was introduced during the war and indicated someone whose primary role was to provide labour in digging, maintaining and repairing trenches, roads, communication systems etc. to relieve these duties from the general infantry. They would still pitch in with fighting if they found themselves in such a position, just as the general infantry would have spells of labour between their turns at the front line, but it was not their primary purpose.

Their work would be completed in all weathers, often during the hours of darkness and under the constant risk of enemy fire.

Shortly after he arrived Albert was admitted to a hospital in France on 17 April 1916 before being discharged back to his regiment on 1 May 1916. Perhaps it was the result of difficult work in adverse weather conditions that led to this as his medical inspection notes records him as 5' 10½" but of poor physical development.

The rank of Pioneer was possibly meant to signify a lower level of skill than the equivalent rank of Sapper in the Royal Engineers but this was often an arbitrary distinction. This needn't have bothered Albert, however, as on 3 December 1916 he was re-mustered as a full Sapper of the Royal Engineers.

At the time of his enlistment Albert was working as a telephone wireman for the General Post Office in Bedford (the GPO being responsible for the telecoms network at that time). It was presumably this expertise that was recognised and caused his transfer as he was recorded as 'proficient with permanent lines'

Maintaining communications at the front line, from trenches back to command posts, was a task under constant challenges from inadvertent shelling, movements in the front line position and adverse weather conditions - not to mention deliberate efforts by the enemy to disrupt communications.

Unfortunately Albert's work took a toll on his health and he returned to England on 20 July 1918 having developed pulmonary TB from "exposure to wet and cold on active service". He did not return to France.

On 21 January 1919 he was discharged as no longer physically fit for service and was issued with a Silver War Badge or "SWB".

The SWB was intended to be worn by discharged soldiers on their civilian clothes and read "For King and Empire; services rendered" around the royal 'GRI' cipher. The badge was a measure to counter the common practice of issuing apparently able-bodied men who were not in uniform with a white feather to accuse them of cowardice.

Albert's health never recovered and he died on **3 February 1919** aged 34. He is buried in Bedford Cemetery and his gravestone stands beside that of his parents.

Albert's mother died shortly afterwards on 1 April 1919 having lost both adult sons in the war - Albert's younger brother Arthur was killed in action in France on 3 May 1917 but is not listed on either Goldington memorial as he had settled as a newsagent in Luton after leaving the family home.

**Andrew Dennison**