

Axminster's War Memorial

Introduction

Axminster's war memorial was erected and dedicated in 1921. Originally it bore 66 names of men killed in the 1914-18 war. Later, 19 names from the 1939-45 war were added. More recently, in 2017, two further names from World War I were added.

The research which led to these additions was carried out in 2015/16 by Axminster Heritage Centre. Originally intended to provide basic background information on the men whose names were recorded on the memorial, and how their links to the town and parish of Axminster had come about, this research identified several further names which do not appear on either the Axminster War Memorial or those of other neighbouring parishes. All of those names are presented in two separate documents, one for each World War.

The initiative to add the two further names to the War Memorial was taken by the local branch of the British Legion, supported by Axminster Town Council.

Even in 1921 it would not have been a simple matter to decide whose name should and whose should not appear on any town or village War Memorial. Those who were born and brought up locally, and whose families continued to live in Axminster, would be obvious candidates for inclusion. What is equally clear is that one of the main determining factors was where the parents of fallen servicemen lived: some of the men named on the Axminster War Memorial had few personal links to the town, but their parents did. In at least one instance of three brothers who were killed, two had lived locally for some years but one either had not, or had only done so for a very short period. However, it would have been very difficult to justify to the grieving parents including two of the names but not the third.

In some other cases the men who had been killed, although born and brought up in Axminster, had moved away from the town before the war. A few appear not to have had any surviving family members living locally to speak for them when the War Memorial was being designed. These men's links are, however, at least as strong as some of those whose names do appear, which is why they have been documented.

The main sources used in the research were (1) the website of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; (2) census and birth / marriage / death records from ancestry.co.uk; (3) the 1938 electoral register for Axminster town and hamlets; and (4) the britishnewspaperarchives.co.uk website.

A common format has been adopted for presenting the resultant information, and while it would be both possible and desirable to include some further details if surviving family members would like to do this, our aim has been to keep the length of each entry broadly comparable.

If anyone knows of Axminster servicemen who were killed in the Korean War, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, Afghanistan, Iraq or any other post-1945 campaign, and can furnish us with the necessary details, we would be pleased to pay appropriate tribute to them as well.

World War I (1914 to 1918)

The Axminster War Memorial provides a tribute to 68 men who died as a direct consequence of their service in World War I, albeit in a few cases after the cessation of hostilities. Sixty six of these names appear on three panels, on the west, south and east faces of the Memorial. The two names added in 2017 are those of Job Henry Adams and John Norfolk Bevan.

Axminster Heritage Centre also has a copy of a poster which lists many more persons from Axminster who were serving in the British Army and Navy by late 1914, most of whom survived the war.

There are several other men with well-known local surnames and direct connections to Axminster whose names can be found on other nearby War Memorials. As well as dealing with the 68 names on the Axminster War Memorial this document contains details of a further seven men with clear links to Axminster at some stage in their lives, but whose names have not been found on any local War Memorial.

Of the 68 named individuals, in only one instance (that of Albert H Parker) has no connection to the town (yet) been found, and it is uncertain which of several servicemen whose records have been assembled by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was him.

Of the 74 men for whom details have been traced, 16 are buried in the United Kingdom, including in eight in Axminster Cemetery. Of those who are buried or whose names appear on British War Memorials overseas, 28 are in France, 14 in Belgium and 12 in Iraq. The other four are buried one each in Germany, Greece, Latvia and Turkey.

Six of the 74 men died in 1914, 12 in 1915, 20 in 1916, 17 in 1917, 15 in 1918 and four in 1919.

Throughout the War, and well before the issue of which names were to be carved onto the War Memorial had even been thought about, the press carried reports of Axminster casualties. Most of these reports were simple lists of names of those who had been killed and wounded. Some reports, however, provide a local and contemporary perspective on how many men regarded as being from Axminster had been killed.

The Western Times of 21 January 1916 reported that the vicar of Axminster, Rev E Bramwell, had held a memorial service for "... *those gallant local men who have lost their lives whilst serving King and country*". Most had been Privates in the British Expeditionary Force. The following names were reported: Cecil G Elson, Charles F Chant, William A Claybyn, Edward C Claybyn, John Spiller, Frederick J Stentiford, Frederick G White, John Froom, Archibald J Harris, Edwin Snell, Charles F Sprague, Percy H Gribble, Leonard H Gardiner (see below), Philip Young, Ben Hoskins, Reginald Hoskins, William Haysom, William J Russell and Francis F Chick.

Of these 19 names all except one appear on the War Memorial. The exception is Leonard H Gardiner. He was married to Edwin Snell's sister Eva, but had no other strong link to Axminster.

The Western Times of 23 June 1916 reported that a further memorial church service had been held. The further names cited were: Henry Albert Bruce, Sidney James Tucker and John Harris.

The Exeter & Plymouth Gazette of 17 February 1917 reported that five Axminster men had been killed in a single day: Sergeants L W Lethaby and F C Perham, and Privates F W

Coote and L W and R C Sprague. All had been killed at Kut-al-Amara in Mesopotamia (Iraq). The number of Axminster men killed so far was put at 33.

The Exeter & Plymouth Gazette of 9 June 1917 reported the death of Charles Enticott, and described him as the 36th Axminster man to have been killed.

The Western Times of 9 November 1917 reported that a further church service had been held for the 42 men of Axminster killed to date.

The clear implication is that only a relatively small number of names not mentioned above were included on the final War Memorial.

World War II (1939 to 1945)

At the end of World War II a further 19 names were carved onto a tablet which was then mounted on the north face of the War Memorial.

The research carried out by Axminster Heritage Centre provides some information on all 19, plus one further serviceman whose links to Axminster were equally strong, but whose name has not been found on any of the local War Memorials, and one more who had no clear links to the town, beyond the fact that he is buried in Axminster Cemetery.

Of the 21 men whose details are given six are buried in the United Kingdom (four in Axminster Cemetery), four in Italy, three in The Netherlands, two each in Egypt and Germany, and one each in Canada, India, Kenya and Palestine.

Four of them were killed in 1940, three more in both 1942 and 1943, six in 1944 and five in 1945.