

Walter George Offord (1881-1918) – Lance Corporal, London Regiment 1/21st Battalion, Service Number 36091, and Alan William Offord, who survived the war (1893-1975) – Tank Corps, Service No 200382

By Alan Cecil - Alan Offord's grandson

Walter's name is not included on the Rayleigh War Memorial, probably because he was living in Hertfordshire when the war started, but he was born in Rayleigh, and had lived most of his life in the town. In fact, he had lived in Rayleigh for longer than some of the men whose names are included on the Memorial. And, his father was still living in Rayleigh during the war, so it is perhaps a little surprising that his name was not included on the Memorial.

He was the son of George Frederick Offord and his wife Mary Ann, who also had a daughter and a younger son, Alan William Offord. George was a coach painter. The family is recorded at Chapel Road, Rayleigh in 1891, and at Castle Lane in 1901. Mary Ann had died in 1899, when Walter was in his teens, and his brother Alan was only 5. By 1901, Walter had long since left school, and was working as an ironmonger's assistant.

By 1911, Walter had married Annie Isabel Card, a native of Kent, and they were living at The White Hart, Royston, in Hertfordshire with a four year old daughter. Walter described himself as an innkeeper and fishmonger. His brother, Alan, was living with them. The premises comprised a public house, and a fishmonger's shop alongside.

When the war came, Walter did not enlist at first, but by December 1915 he had decided to do so, perhaps in response to appeals for men to join up, following the huge losses in the early part of the war. His brother Alan did so as well. As it happens, they both have surviving service records, telling us when they enlisted, and more besides.

Walter was originally posted to the Royal Flying Corps, and spent the first eighteen months of his service with the Corps, during which time he never left England. It appears, from his service record, that he was briefly assigned to the East Surrey Regiment in the summer of 1917, before being transferred into the London Regiment. He soon found himself despatched into the European theatre of war, where he would have been involved in battle action prior to a fateful day in August 1918. He was reported as missing, presumed killed, on 24th August, and is commemorated on the Vis en Artois Memorial. He had been promoted to Lance Corporal only shortly beforehand.

The information here is enough to tell us that Walter was one of the many men who had no known grave. Evidently, the Army wrote to Annie advising her of his presumed loss, and the letter must have said that he was part of a team manning a Lewis gun at the time. We know this because his service file includes a letter written by Annie to the Army in November 1918, asking if there was any more information available, such as where the incident occurred, and whether the other men manning the Lewis gun were also reported as simply missing, or otherwise. She speculated on the possibility that Walter was still alive, and was a prisoner of war. The file does not indicate whether the Army replied, and if so how.

Annie was just one of the thousands of wives who found themselves in this situation, enduring a lingering hope that their husbands might still be alive, which slowly faded day by day, until in the end they were reconciled to their losses, but with no grave which they might be able to visit and pay their respects. The loss of a man in these circumstances was particularly harrowing, especially, as in Walter's case, when it proved to be so close to the end of the war. Even more harrowing is the fact that investigations carried out by the family suggest that Walter's body was found, but could not be formally identified as his identity tag was missing, and he was one of the many men buried during the war as "an unknown soldier".

Military records show that Walter's unit was part of the 47th (2nd London) Division of the Army, which had been engaged in the Battle of Albert at that time, and this must have been where Walter lost his life.

The White Hart Inn at Royston was soon closed down when the brothers went to war, and the premises converted to residential use, but the adjoining shop was retained, and the brothers intended to resume trading there as fishmongers when the war was over. In the event, Walter never came home, but his brother, Alan William Offord, survived the war, and re-opened the shop, which he ran for nearly 50 years until failing health brought about his retirement in 1965. The business was expanded to include the sale of greengrocery as well as fish.

Alan initially trained with the Machine Gun Corps, but was later transferred to the newly formed Tank Corps. The tank had only just been invented as an instrument of war, and as a man transferred into the Tank Corps at the outset, Alan became one of the pioneers of its operation in the theatre of war. The first tanks were notoriously cramped and uncomfortable for those aboard. Alan must have found it particularly so, as he was one of the tallest men of his generation, recorded as 6 feet and 2 inches in height, and it is no surprise to learn that he was known as "Lofty". He was posted to France, where he saw plenty of action, albeit probably uncomfortably on

many occasions. He was involved in battles at Arras, Messines, Ypres and Cambrai in 1917. By March 1918, he was at Gouzeacourt, and here his tank received a direct hit from German artillery.

He received both wounds and burns as a result, which saw him confined to hospital for several months before he was able to re-join his unit, whereupon he served at the Tank Gunnery School at Lulworth until he was demobilised. Like so many of our war survivors, he carried a certain amount of disablement from his wounds for life, being unable, among other things, to drive a motor vehicle, although, as we have seen, he was able to continue the family business until he was in his 70's. Unlike some war survivors, who said little about their experiences, he spoke openly about what he did in the service of his country, and regularly wore his regiment's colours.

The Offord brothers, sons of Rayleigh, certainly left their mark on their new home town of Royston. Walter's residence there proved to be relatively short, but he was remembered by a local resident as "the gentleman fishmonger from Royston". Alan's long term tenure of the shop meant that he was very well known in the town. A book written by the Rev J W Parkes entitled "Voyage of Discovery" hailed him as "Royston's magnificent fishmonger".

In 1953 many towns and villages gained new facilities of various kinds to mark the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. In Royston, Alan donated a pair of ornamental iron entrance gates, which were erected at the Priory Memorial Gardens. The gates were donated as a memorial to Walter, with his initials, WGO, and his date of death, worked into the ironwork, and a short service of dedication was held when they were installed. Walter's name also appears on the Royston War Memorial, and the family name Offord's is still on display at the shop premises, despite the fact that the family business was closed almost half a century ago. The ornamental tiling on the floor of the shop doorway, showing the name, has remained in place during the tenure of the various businesses which have been based there since. The Offord brothers did, indeed, make their mark on their new home town.

Alan died in 1975, aged 82. We are grateful to his grandson, Alan Cecil, for much of the information shown above, and the photographs shown below.

THIS ADVERTISEMENT WAS PUBLISHED IN . . .

DEMOBILISED
A. W. OFFORD
 Begs to announce that he will
RE-OPEN on TUESDAY NEXT, SEPT. 30th
 The Well-established Fishmonger's Business, &C.,
MARKET HILL, ROYSTON, Herts.,
 and takes this opportunity of thanking customers for their past patronage and recommendations. He will endeavour to give the same satisfaction in quality and attention, combined with lowest market prices, which the business was always noted for when carried on by the late W. G. Offord.

THE "ROYSTON CROW"
OF SEPT. 26th 1919



The originator of the business in 1905, W G Offord was described during his period of trading, by the wife of a well-known resident of Bassingbourn, as "the gentleman fishmonger from Royston." He served in France with the Royal Flying Corps and the 21st London Regiment, and was missing presumed killed on August 24th 1918.



Donated by Mr A W Offord the entrance gates at the south end of the Priory Memorial Gardens were dedicated to the memory of his brother, Walter George Offord, who died on August 24th, 1918. This date and the initials "WGO" are incorporated in the ironwork of the gates.

The gates were dedicated and officially opened on Sunday morning, May 31st, 1953, at the time of the Queen's Coronation. Mr A W Offord and his family were present with the Chairman and members of the Urban Council during the ceremony. The vicar, the Rev A E Barber (Congregational Minister) walked with the Church Choir in procession to the spot. Prayers were led by the Rev Barber, and after dedicating the gates the Vicar led the whole procession through them and through the Priory Gardens to the church, for a Coronation service.



A founder member of the Royal Tank Regiment, A W Offord saw service in France and Belgium and took part in tank actions at Arras, Messines, Ypres, and Cambrai 1917, also Gonzeacourt, March 1918, where his tank received a direct hit. Returned to England with wounds and burns, and after several months in various hospitals was posted to the staff of the Tank Gunnery School at Lutworth, Dorset, where he remained until demobilisation. Referred to in Rev. J W Parkes (late of Barley) "Voyage of Discoveries" as "Royston's magnificent fishmonger." Was forced by ill-health to dispose of the business in 1963.

An article from the local newspaper, The Royston Crow, showing the memorial gates, and photographs of Walter and Alan



Alan Offord's grandson, Alan Cecil, alongside the memorial gates.



Alan Offord's daughter, Mrs Jean Cecil, at the location of the family business.



Royston War Memorial