

RIPLEY COURT SCHOOL IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In 1886 Ben and Robert Pearce, two brothers and graduates of Trinity College, Dublin, formed a school at Ealing, named Durston House, for day boys. The school prospered, and indeed continues to prosper in Ealing, but in 1893 the brothers decided to diversify and Robert bought Ripley Court from Mr William Wainwright, to found Ripley Court School for boy boarders. The school thus, while in the village, was not rooted in the village, although cricket matches were played with village teams and events held in the extensive playing fields. The censuses of 1901 and 1911 both show that a large proportion of the boys had been born in Ealing and its neighbourhood, or in India, and it is probable that Ben recommended his brother's school to parents who were looking for a boarding education for their sons.

Before 1914 the school remained small, with only 16 boys listed in the 1901 census and 23 in the 1911 census, with an age range of 7 to 15 – the 1901 census was taken on 31 March, Palm Sunday, and the 1911 census on 2 April, two weeks before Easter, so it is possible that some boys had gone home, but nevertheless numbers would have been very few. All the old boys who died in the war had gone onto public schools, with four to Rugby and three each to Wellington and Cheltenham College – the latter two schools being particularly feeders for the armed forces and suffering losses next only to Eton. The school magazine for the Winter term of 1916 is the first conspicuous record of the proportionally great losses the school had suffered among its former pupils. 73 names are shown there as being on active service, of whom 21 are marked with an asterisk either then or (in ink) later as having been killed in action. This does not tell the whole story, as those who served later have not been included. Three more old boys, plus a former teacher, are known to have died, but on the other hand three of the men marked in ink as dying did survive. It is now probable that all those who gave their lives have been accounted for and it is hoped that there will be a garden of remembrance at the school in honour of all former pupils killed in conflicts.

The magazine article which prefixes the list and obituaries of some of the fallen outlines the loss felt by the school:

Obituary.

IT is not easy to write adequately of those who have given up their lives in this most horrible of wars. Davenport and Myles, firm friends, were both killed in Mesopotamia, though not fighting together. They were both men of strong character and in all ways first-class soldiers. Rawlinson joined the Army shortly after the commencement of hostilities and was killed in France. Of a very kindly and affectionate nature, his death was a great blow to all his friends and not least to us. Wood came home from Mauritius with his regiment, and almost immediately after going to the front was reported "missing," the meaning of which we all unfortunately understand. He was in his day especially good at hockey; his back play served us well in many matches. Prynne shared the same fate as Wood about a month ago. He was our captain of football ten years ago, and he showed the same qualities in battle as he had in the field—a steady perseverance, which never gave up trying till the end. Bowles, O'Brien and Gledstones we have no details of, except that O'Brien was lost in an aeroplane. Judge and Damiano, the two youngest of our Old Boys to succumb, met their deaths about the same time. Judge, who had passed well

out of Woolwich, was in the Artillery. A quiet disposition might have led the casual observer to overlook the firm determination which underlay his calmness, but to those who knew him his courage in the most trying circumstances occasioned no surprise. He leaves a gap which will be hard to fill and to his parents, we fear, will be never possible. Damiano held a commission in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, having only left Sandhurst a few months before he was killed in France. He was with us for six years, and we cannot express how great a shock it was to us to hear of his death at so early an age—he was only 19. A very cheerful, light-hearted disposition made him a general favourite.

Besides the above, three old Masters, have been serving their country. Mr. Garrett immediately threw up his appointment in Egypt and joined the Public School and Universities Corps as a private. Mr. Bain took a commission in the Connaught Rangers and is wounded, but we hope not seriously. Mr. Dunnage, we are grieved to say, was killed in September. He was a capital cricketer and endeared himself to all by the warm interest he took in our games and pursuits. An excellent letter relating how he lost his life we publish in full.

Interesting stories are to be told about several of these men, both in their service careers, and in their achievements in lives so cruelly cut short by the war.

Frank Pearce Pocock was a nephew of Robert Pearce, the owner and headmaster of Ripley Court. From the school he went on to St Paul's and thence to Westminster Hospital on an open scholarship. On the outbreak of war he offered his services to the Navy and was on a battleship in the North Sea, but gaining his first MC in France with Drake Battalion. With chronic influenza he was invalided home in 1917 but returned to serve as surgeon on HMS Iris II in the Zeebrugge raid, where he gained a DSO, the citation reading "By his devotion to

duty he undoubtedly saved many lives when Iris II was hit. He at once commenced tending the wounded and as all the sick-berth staff were killed had all the work to do alone. After the dynamo was damaged he had to work by candle and torchlight". He returned to Drake Battalion and was mortally wounded, gaining a bar to the MC with the citation "He attended to the wounded under very heavy fire & most adverse circumstances during operations lasting several days. His courage & self-sacrificing devotion to duty were a splendid example to his stretcher-bearers & his skill was instrumental in saving the lives of many wounded men." Not obviously a military person, this citation and the use of his medical skills marks him out as the most heroic of Ripley Court's war dead.

Desmond O'Brien was a more spirited old boy, whose sense of adventure probably led him to his death in the early stages of the war. He was a son of Lord Inchiquin, an Irish peer, and passed through Ripley Court briefly on his way to Cheam School and thence to Charterhouse, from which he was expelled. His one report from Ripley Court, now in the National Library of Ireland, shows him to be of variable ability – top in some subjects, bottom in others – but he played a useful innings of 42 for the fathers in the annual fathers' cricket match, his own father having died. At Charterhouse his inventiveness caused him to forge keys to the chapel (where he played ragtime on the organ), the library and the headmaster's study, as well as setting up a radio station in the shrubbery. His exploits are recorded in Robert Graves's 'Goodbye to all that', and he was cheered by the boys as he left for Godalming station on his expulsion. His talents were put to good use then as he went to work for his brother-in-law – Marconi. He gained qualifications as a pilot in September 1914, but was killed flying in action off Cuxhaven on 16 Feb 1915: his body was never found.

Less flamboyant was Harold William Bennett Daw, from the Grange, Ealing, who was at Ripley Court from about 1902 to 1904 and briefly afterwards at Rugby before joining the training ship 'Conway', and thence to the Merchant Navy. On the outbreak of war he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve and served on various ships from the Dover patrol to Mesopotamia, where his health suffered. On recovery he joined the Grand Fleet, but was taken ill on HMS Perthshire, a transport ship disguised as a battleship, and was transferred to the hospital ship Soudan and died on 28 March 1917, aged 26.

One boy from the School who went on to Rugby was a local boy, Edward C.H.R. Nicholls whose home was in Woking. After Rugby he went to Sandhurst Military College, from which he graduated in July 1916 as a 2nd Lieutenant in the West Surrey Regiment. He attended the Military Flying School at Brooklands to learn to be a pilot, gaining his aero certificate on 6th August 1916 flying a Maurice Farman Biplane. Edward was seconded to the Royal Flying Corps 41 Squadron, and was injured on 1st May 1917 during the Battle of Arras. By October 1917 Edward was declared fit for light duties on Home service but no flying, although he was declared fit for limited flying in November 1917 but only in aircraft with dual control. He was still considered unfit for general service for a further 2 months. Edward was killed in a flying accident at Stow Maries on 20th September 1918, aged 20. His death certificate gives the cause of death as a "Fractured skull resulting from falling out of an aircraft". He is buried in the churchyard at Stow Maries.

This article records the stories of only four of the 25 old boys and staff who were killed in the First World War and its aftermath. Although the school was larger by the time of the next conflict, there were fewer deaths in that war, twelve in all, mostly serving in the Royal Air Force, and since then one Old Courtier, Charles Morpeth, was killed in a helicopter crash when acting as a civilian observer during the Bosnian conflict. The School hope to be able to give further details of all these men on their website in due course.