

The Fallen

Wilfred Thomas Dooley was born in 1888, joined the GPO straight from school in 1907 as a sorter/tracer and became a member of Cygnet in March 1914. At the outbreak of war, he enlisted as Private 2053, 1st/8th Bn London Regiment (POR) and was dispatched to France on 18th March 1915. He was killed in action on 15th September 1916, aged 27, during the assault on 'High Wood' in the Battle of the Somme.

Albert John Dunn was born in Camberwell in 1877, joining the GPO from school. By 1911 he was married with two daughters. Probably a member of the Territorials before the outbreak of war, Albert was posted to France on 18th March 1915 as Sergeant 290 1st/8th Bn London Regiment (POR). He was killed in action on 25th May 1915, the last day of the Battle of Festubert. He was 38.

Ernest William Erridge was born in 1889, the son of a coachman from Kensington Park Mews. Prior to the war, he worked as a letter sorter and had already served in the Paddington Rifles and the London Regiment (POR). At the outbreak of war, he re-enlisted with POR and was sent to France on 18th March 1915, subsequently attaining the rank of colonel. He was wounded in action and transported back to England where he died on 8th April 1916 aged 26.

Robert George Erridge, brother of Ernest, was born in 1891, joined the GPO after leaving school and served for a time with the Paddington Rifles. An active club committee member, he enlisted with 1st/8th Bn London Regiment (POR) and was sent to France where he rose through the ranks to Company Sergeant Major. He was killed in action on 30th October 1917, aged 26, during the Second Battle of Passchendaele.



Cornelius Gibney was born in County Cavan, Ireland in 1883. By 1911 he is listed as an honorary member at Cygnet, living in Fulham, south-west London and working as a GPO sorter. At the outbreak of war, Gibney, pictured above, enlisted as Private 5932, 1st/8th Battalion, London Regiment (POR). Wounded during the Second Battle of Passchendaele, he was taken to a Casualty Clearing Station at Dozinghem where he died on 30th October 1917 aged 34.

Arthur James Rixon was born at Lambeth in 1887, worked for the GPO and was mobilised as Sergeant 5 1st/18th Battalion, London Regiment (London Irish Rifles) in August 1914. Sent to France in 1915, he attained the rank of Company Sergeant Major and fought in the battles of Loos and Ypres. He was killed on 7th April 1917, aged 33.

John George Rogers was born in Islington in 1887 and worked as a GPO sorter at Mount Pleasant. At the outbreak of war, he enlisted with the 1st Royal Marine Bn RN Light Infantry. He was killed on 17th February 1917 during a German artillery barrage on the 1RMLI assembly area prior to the Battle of Miraumont.

Albert Roland Russell is the person we know least about, beyond the fact that he lived in Ealing, worked for the GPO and rowed at Cygnet. A Lance-Sergeant in 17th Bn The King's Liverpool Regiment, his last will and testament records him as being killed in Flanders on 8th May 1918.

Arthur Bond Thaine was born in 1881 and worked as a GPO sorter at Mount Pleasant. Soon after war broke out, he enlisted as Private 492095, 13th London Regiment (POR) and was duly dispatched to France. Aged 36, Thaine was killed in the trenches at Neuve Chapelle on 1st March 1917 on what was described as a 'quiet night' with only two casualties.



Cecil Arthur Toms was born in Wandsworth in 1878. The son of a bookbinder and a milliner, he was educated in Wandsworth, before joining the GPO as a sorter-tracer. By the outbreak of war, he was married and subsequently had two children. Called up as Private 375586 2nd/8th Bn London Regiment (POR), Cecil was killed in action on 30th October 1917 during the Second Battle of Passchendaele.

Bertram Thomas Valentiny was born in 1881, the son of a haberdasher. By 1899 he was working for the GPO as an operative on a pneumatic mail distribution system. At the outbreak of war, he was married with four children and enlisted as Private 9/11027, 11th Bn The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment), rising through the ranks to Sergeant. He was killed on 20th January 1917, aged 36, during a raid on enemy trenches, south-west of Ypres.

CYGNET RC

World War 1 Centenary Commemoration

Lest we forget



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From Rowers to Riflemen

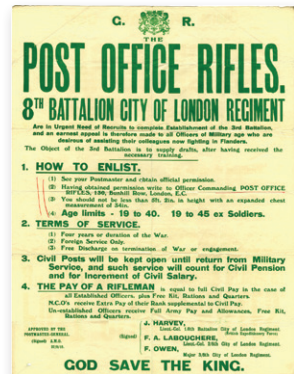
Any institution that has been around since 1890 is unlikely to have escaped the dead hand of warfare; Cygnet Rowing Club is no exception. The outbreak of the Boer War, less than ten years after Cygnet's foundation, would be the first conflict to claim several members' lives. However, the First World War was on an altogether different plane that threatened the very existence of Cygnet RC, among others. By the time hostilities drew to a close in November 1918, seventy-nine active and honorary members had served with the Armed Forces; eleven of them would never return.

For Cygnet, 1914 started with high expectations. An ambitious racing programme was agreed, a concert and dinner arranged and the club regatta was revived to include a race for double sculling skiffs with lady coxswains. It was also agreed to apply again for ARA affiliation. By the end of the year all this would seem like a dream of a bygone age.

WW1 would be unlike any other conflict, before or since. 'Dusty' Miller, the first club historian, wrote:

"It can truly be said that 1914 heralded the beginning of an end of an era that crumbled in August of that year and which by 1918 had disappeared for ever".

With the outbreak of war, most Cygnet volunteers signed up to the Post Office Rifles (POR), the General Post Office's (GPO) dedicated regiment. The POR had a long history dating back to the mid-19thC; today, they are best remembered for their role as infantrymen on the Western Front. Many would have responded to a flier similar to the one shown here from the collection of the British Postal Museum.



Such was the strength of patriotic fervour sweeping the country that the 1st/8th Battalion Post Office Rifles rapidly became overwhelmed with recruits and a 2nd/8th Bn had to be formed in September 1914. Initially styled as a reserve regiment, supplying reinforcements to the 1st Bn, by January 1917 they too had been dispatched to the 'front'. The POR served in all the

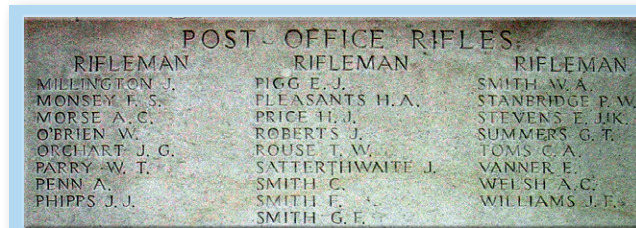


main theatres of conflict on the Western Front from 1915-18, sustaining severe losses at Ypres and Passchendaele.

The 1st/8th Bn embarked from Southampton on 17th March 1915, moving to the 'front' in early May in readiness for the Battle of Festubert, which claimed the first Cygnet fatality, Albert Dunn, a sergeant, who died on 25th May. He had been in France for barely one week. Further fatalities followed in 1916 with the demise of Ernest Erridge and Wilfred Doley, the latter during an assault on 'High Wood' in the Battle of the Somme.

The POR were at the forefront of the fighting throughout 1917, losing more than half their number at Wurst Farm Ridge in September during the Third Battle of Ypres, which gained especial notoriety because of its focus, in its latter stages, on the village of Passchendaele. Fought in appalling conditions, even by the standards of WW1, it was here, in what came to be known as the Second Battle of Passchendaele, 26th October to 10th November, that three Cygnet members – Robert Erridge (brother of Ernest), Cornelius Gibney and Cecil Toms – met their deaths on the same day (30th).

Four others – Arthur Rixon, John Rogers, Arthur Thaine and 'Bertie' Valentiny – were unfortunate enough to die in minor skirmishes or smaller set piece battles throughout 1917. Mercifully, 1918 claimed just one casualty, Albert Russell, who was the last Cygnet member to die in WW1.



There is no formal memorial to the POR in France. The names of the Cygnet fallen are commemorated at Menin Gate (Rixon and Valentiny), Le Touret (Dunn), Thiepval (Dooley and Rogers) and Tyne Cot (Erridge R, Russel and Toms). Others are interred at Dozinghem (Gibney) and St. Vaast Point (Thaine) † All of The Fallen are remembered in the Post Office Rifles Book of Remembrance at Church of St Botolph's-without-Aldersgate, London EC1.

The Home Front

Before many months of hostilities had passed, most Cygnet members had been caught up in the maelstrom and would return to rowing only fleetingly over the next five years. For those who were lucky enough to survive, one of the greatest comforts must have been the knowledge that there was anything to return to at all. Unlike so many clubs that languished and were never reborn, Cygnet strove to carry on regardless.

Club meetings continued to be held regularly throughout 1915, although there were rarely more than half a dozen members present. Nonetheless, they conducted business in the usual fashion, elected a trickle of new members, agreed to send Christmas cards to absent members and arranged to make donations to various charities.

A letter to members at the end of 1915 recounted how serving Cygnets home from France had visited the Club *"to enjoy the novelty of once again taking a seat in a boat"*, talked of improvements to The Camp ('Cygnets' bungalow) and ended with the hope that before 1916 was out *"Cygnets will have returned to greet the 'Old Cocks'"*. It was, of course, not to be.

As the war rumbled on into 1917, the secretary rarely missed an opportunity to express the hope that there would be an early return of all, and a rebirth of the desire for active sport. Nonetheless, even he found it a struggle to remain upbeat in the face of so many wounded men returning from the 'front', as this extract from one of his reports reveals: *"It must, unfortunately, be realized how great is the number who are now deprived of the ability to participate in many sports. Some of these could take part in the pleasure side of rowing and... It is a sport that will be welcomed as one that can be shared with those to whom fate has been less kind."*

Yet the 'Old Cocks' refused to concede defeat and the report continues, *"In arranging our fixtures, we propose to revive the 'Up River' trips in which those unable to take part in the vigours of racing could join. So when asked 'What of the future' we can surely say 'It is of the brightest'"*.

As club members convened on 18th June 1919 for the first meeting since the end of the war, many must have mourned 'The Fallen'. Yet their sacrifice had not been in vain: the meeting elected a host of new active members, agreed a racing programme and fixed a date for the Annual Concert. Cygnet Rowing Club was back in business with a vengeance.