

IN MEMORY OF SYDNEY WILLIAM MULLIS

DIED IN ACTION 25 APRIL 1915

Unknown Harbury address
NO PLAQUE

Sydney was born in 1878 to Elizabeth Mullis, an unmarried woman in Harbury. Less than a year later she married Thomas William Overton of Harbury, their marriage registered in Birmingham. Both the brief period of time between Sydney's birth and his mother's marriage, and Sydney's middle name, suggest perhaps that William was his father all along. By 1891 Sydney was living with his mother, his 'stepfather', five brothers and one little sister. They lived together in Binswood End, almost definitely number 22, with 13-year-old Sydney working as a ploughboy.

Sometime before 1901 Sydney abandoned the work of a ploughboy and joined the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, serving in the 2nd Boer War. On 6 March 1901 he became a prisoner in Venterberg Road, though was released, presumably at the end of the war the following year. On his return to Britain he left the army, got married and found a job as a quarryman. He lived in Farm Street, Harbury.

In April 1912 Sydney left his job, his family, and his country, and travelled to Toronto to find work in the gas industry. Once securely employed, he sent for his family. On 19 August 1912 his wife and children had made the move to Canada to join him.

Though he had left Britain, he was still on the army reserve list, and at the outbreak of war in August 1914 he was recalled to the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. By April 1915 he had been promoted to Lance Sergeant, and was fighting in the second Battle of Ypres, France. This was a cold, difficult battle, as the trenches were often flooded and the soldiers forced to stand in cold water for hours without protection. Boots frayed and fragmented, and trench foot would have plagued the men's damp, sore feet. After only a few hours of standing in such conditions the infection could break out, the feet going numb then turning blue or red, and blistering. Though the weather improved, the illness caused by the wet trenches would have rendered many men weakened and unable to fight.

This battle saw the first use of a chemical weapon, as the Germans released a cloud of chlorine gas. However, the use of chemical weapons had not yet been refined, so the gas was easily visible, had a strong smell, and could be resisted by even simple masks. Despite the failure of this early move, the Germans pushed on, launching a second gas attack on 24 April. Canadian and British troops, using improvised gas masks made from damp cloth, were able to hold the line.

The week before battle, Sydney had been training in fine weather. On 24 April 1915 the Brigade was ordered to advance, at which point the April weather broke. Rain fell on the troops, as they halted outside Ypres to watch the town being destroyed by heavy shell fire. The following day Sydney Mullis was killed in action, one of 517 from the Brigade killed, wounded or missing in that battle. His body never found, he was presumed dead on 16 June 1915.

The regiment continued the battle under heavy shelling, with the war diary on 30 April commenting that they were 'somewhat shaken'. Colonel Pool, the Battalion Commander and the writer of the War Diary, completed his April report by suggesting that it was 'inadvisable to attack an enemy's position, unless properly supported by artillery fire and a thorough reconnaissance beforehand'. These had been the issues that led to so many casualties, Sydney among them. It reads like a weary condemnation from a man who had seen too many of his men fall.

Sydney is remembered on the Menin Gate in Ypres, a memorial to men killed without a grave. Upon it are 54,595 names. His name is spelt Muliss - how he signed it himself on his marriage certificate, a lifetime ago.

His widow Ada received £9.16.7, later collecting a further £6 as a War Gratuity, more than four years after Sydney's death. She left England and returned to Canada, becoming a citizen. She never remarried.



Harbury World War 1 Memorial Trail

Remembering the men of Harbury parish who fell during the first world war in service of their country.

