

## The Dead Man's Penny

Some medals and a plaque (the Dead Man's Penny) were discovered by Vernon and Pamela Brown when they were emptying their late mother's house in Oswestry some 12 years ago.

Vernon used an old remedy of 'tomato sauce' to clean the plaque, which revealed the name of John Sydney Williams. They knew then that the items didn't belong to their family.

Despite several attempts to locate the Williams family, they were unsuccessful until they donated the items to the West Felton Branch of the Royal British Legion, for their Centenary Commemorations. Oswestry Family & Local History Group was then contacted by Colleen Hughes (Centenary Co-Ordinator) to see if the Group could trace the family.

The Group began researching and soon discovered that John Sydney Williams came from Pontrobert, Montgomeryshire and was living in Meifod on the 1911 Census with his wife, Margaret and young daughter, where he was the Grocer and Baker. John Sydney died on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1917 and is buried in Beersheba War Cemetery, Gaza.

Margaret, his widow, received the medals and plaque, but the items were left at the Grocer's Shop, which she carried on running after his death, when she sold the business in 1959 to Pamela Brown's family. When Pamela's family moved to Oswestry in 1961 the items went with them.

John Sydney Williams had 2 daughters, both of whom never married, so there are no direct descendants from him. The Group has traced a Grand Niece, Gillian Margaret Rudge, who is a direct descendant of John Sydney's younger brother, Alfred Pasco Williams, who remembers Aunty Maggie and her daughters well. Gillian has a Grandson, Arron James Rhodes, aged 10 years old, who is currently doing a project on WWI in school.

The Group decided that it would be nice if Pamela and Vernon could present Arron with the medals and the plaque. The Group have also produced a framed Relationship Chart for Arron, which will be given to him at the ceremony, which will take place at 14:00 in Oswestry Library on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

Tony Harrison



[www.oswestrygenealogy.org.uk](http://www.oswestrygenealogy.org.uk)

# **THE FORGOTTEN SOLDIER**

**Pte. JOHN SIDNEY WILLIAMS**

**355337, 25th Bn., Royal Welsh Fusiliers died 1 Nov 1917**

**Remembered with honour at Beersheba Cemetery  
on the edge of the Negev Desert, south-west of Jerusalem**

**The Memorial Plaque and medals were found in a cellar in Oswestry  
where they had lain, blackened and covered in grime,  
for over 50 years.**

**The Brown family knew there was no connection  
with their family and tried in vain over the years  
to find out more about John Sidney.**

**Thanks to friends in West Felton he is honoured here today and the  
medals and plaque have been passed on to a gt.gt.gt. nephew.**



Representation of the Girl's Willingness



**Arron receives John Sidney Williams' Plaque and Medals  
Oswestry Library 30 May 2014**

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# 'Dead man's penny' is reunited with family

A LONG-SINCE forgotten memorial to a lost soldier has been re-united with his family nearly 100 years after his death.

John Sidney Williams from Meifod died on November 1, 1917 while fighting in Gaza in the First World War and on his death his widow, Margaret, was presented with medals and a plaque, known as The Dead Man's Penny.

Over the years this eerily named artefact became separated from the Williams family, that is until Vernon and Pamela Brown discovered it when they were clearing out their late mother's house 12 years ago.

With Vernon using the old technique of cleaning it up with tomato sauce, they realised the penny must be re-united with the Williams family and got in touch with the Oswestry Family and Local History Group.

Tony Harrison from the group, explained: "Despite several attempts to locate the Williams family, they were unsuccessful until they donated the items to the West Felton Branch of the Royal British Legion, for their Centenary Commemorations.

"The Oswestry Family and Local History Group was then contacted by centenary coordinator Colleen Hughes to see if the group could trace the family."

The group's research discovered that John Sidney Williams came from Pontrobert, Montgomeryshire and was living in Meifod on the 1911 Census with his wife, Margaret, and young daughter, where he was the grocer and baker. Margaret had then left the grocer's shop when she sold the business in 1959 to the Brown's family and took the medals to Oswestry when they moved two years later.

"John Sidney Williams had two daughters, both of whom never married, so there are no direct descendant from him," continued Tony.

"The group traced a grand niece, Gillian Margaret Rudge, who is a direct descendant of John Sidney's younger brother, Alfred Pasco Williams, who remembers Aunty Maggie and her daughters well. Gillian has a grandson, Aaron James Rhodes, aged 10, who is currently doing a project on WWI in school."

And it was to him that the medals were recently presented at Oswestry Library.



RIGHT: Aaron Rhodes with the Dead Man's Penny. HD300514

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In Memory of

Private

# John Sidney Williams

355337, 25th Bn., Royal Welsh Fusiliers who died on 01 November 1917

Remembered with Honour  
Beersheba War Cemetery



## Collecting

# A dead man's penny will fetch thousands



The memorial to Major Mannock is expected to sell for £10,000

Huon Mallalieu

In December 1917 a competition for a memorial plaque to be presented to the next of kin of all British and Imperial servicemen and women who died in, or as a result of, the First World War, was won by Edward Carter Preston (1894-1965), a medallist and sculptor from Liverpool. His design shows Britannia and a lion, with the inscription "He (or She) Died for Freedom and Honour", and a cartouche for the name. In all, 1,355,000 plaques were cast, including 1,500 for women, requiring 450 tonnes of bronze. From 1919 they were sent out with a scroll and a letter with a facsimile of King George V's signature. The words of the scroll were composed by M R James, Provost of King's and ghost story writer. They were popularly named Dead Man's, or Widows' Pennies.

Given the numbers, Memorial plaques are not rarities, but thanks to their poignancy, it is inevitable that they should be collected. Naturally, collectors are discriminating, and there is a very wide price range. There are unofficial replicas and miniature copies to be discounted. There are slight variations which can indicate when a particular example was struck. More important is what is known about the person commemorated. Since neither rank nor unit is recorded, without documentation, story or family connection, a plaque for a John Smith or Peter Edwards will not raise much enthusiasm.

However, if there is greater associative resonance or rarity

— say that this Peter Edwards, died on the first day of the Somme or in the Battle of Jutland, the price may rise to the hundreds. Similarly, only 600 of the women's plaques were presented, and so attract a premium.

A plaque commemorating, or even associated with, a war hero or well-known casualty enters a different financial league. Recently one has been on the market commemorating a man who died on the same day as Wilfred Owen. Were the poet's own plaque available, a seller could name any price.

The RFC and RAF suffered 9,378 casualties, killed and missing, and plaques of aces, especially VCs, are keenly sought after. Among them was Major Edward "Mick" Mannock, VC, DSO and two Bars, MC and Bar, the most highly decorated and highest-scoring airman of the war, officially credited with 61 kills. The son of an Irish army corporal who abandoned the family, Mannock was interned in Turkey in 1914, and was only able to join up in 1916. After a shaky start he became a brilliant and ruthless fighter pilot. On July 26, 1918, after shooting down yet another German aircraft, he disregarded his own rules, and made a couple of low passes over the burning wreckage. He flew into a storm of German ground fire and crashed.

Mannock's Memorial Plaque is in Dix Noonan Webb's London sale on September 18 to 19, when it is expected to sell for up to £10,000. He would have hated to know that it had been presented to his feckless father as next of kin.