

STORY BEHIND THE NUMBER – DAVID HARKNESS BLAKEY



HERITAGE GROUP

David Harkness Blakey's story in death was as remarkable as his life.

Born at Crow Hall Cottages, Sunderland Road in Felling, Gateshead in November 1889, he was the son of a coal miner, progeny of his father's second marriage and one of at least 10 more siblings in total.

Educated at Gateshead Higher Grade School, in 1907, the family moved to Winlaton where he began to play rugby seriously, joining Winlaton Vulcans and proving to be a highly talented forward. As his father had, he also worked down the pit at Stargate Colliery and, a year later married Sarah Kendall, who everyone knew of as Sally.

Capped nine times for Durham, Blakey was signed by Leeds during the 1913-14 season and made his debut in a 22-5 home win over Bradford on the 11th April, Billy Jarman and Belfred Ward, two of the other Leeds players to lose their lives during WWI, both scoring tries.

In all, Blakey made 10 appearances for the Headingley outfit but did not register a point.

A member of the Blaydon Territorial Army unit from 1909, he enlisted in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in January 1915 after a recruitment drive in the Gateshead press and by 1916 he had been promoted to the rank of sergeant, serving with D Company, 11th Battalion.

On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916, aged 26, his battalion was part of the 36th joint Ulster Division that attacked enemy lines between Thiepval and Beaumont-Hamel, being seriously wounded in no-mans-land on a day when there were 57,000 casualties.

He was awarded the military medal for 'bravery in the field' according to a citation in the London Gazette of 14 December, 1916. During a concert organised by the Winlaton Welcome Home Committee in August 1917, the decoration was pinned to the chest of Blakey's then seven-year-old son, Harry.

David's body was never recovered but his name commemorated on the Thiepval 'Memorial to the Missing' with more than 72,000 other men who died between 1915 and the 20 March 1918, and whose remains were never recovered or could not be identified.

In November 2013, during roadworks being carried out by the Somme Departmental Council on the D73 close to the Ulster Tower and Connaught cemetery, and on the way into the Memorial -to accommodate the extra traffic expected for the centenary commemorations - his remains were discovered. They were identified thanks to a metallic dog tag given to him by his wife, rather than the standard cardboard military issue, that read '18634 Sgt David Harkness Blakey MM of the R Inniskilling Fus' along with the discovery of a regimental cap badge.

At the time, he was only the fifth soldier in the previous 10 years to be identified using personal items.

Following an appeal for relatives, his great-granddaughter Jackie Coleman said: "David's remained a constant part of the family because everyone has always spoken about him. My grandmother died in 1999, but as children growing up she'd tell us about him and his son Harry, who died in World War Two [at Dunkirk in 1940]"

Sadly, David's grandson, Jackie's father Norman, who had led the search for David and had travelled to Thiepval in 2010 and again two years later for a memorial service to all those who lost their lives in the Great War, died just before the discovery.

On Thursday 8 October, 2014 at 11am, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission held a moving reburial service at Connaught Cemetery for Sergeant Blakey and two unknown comrades discovered with him, one a member of the Royal Irish Rifles, the other the Cambridgeshire Regiment. The service was conducted by the Reverend Robert J Birnie CF, Chaplain to 1st Battalion the Royal Irish Regiment during which a poem written by Blakey's father in memory of his son was read by his great-great-grandchildren.

The flag that draped his coffin was then presented to his 77-year-old granddaughter Helen. As well as three generations of family members present, the service was attended by representatives of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Royal Irish Regiment, UK Defence Staff and local dignitaries.