

Re-housing the Earls House School memorial plaque

The 'lost' plaque

War memorials abound in Britain. Almost every village in the country records the names of those who died during the World Wars. They are often passed by unnoticed for much of the year except for the usual wreath of poppies around Remembrance Sunday. What is not generally known is that there used to be many more. The work of groups, such as the North East War Memorials Project, has highlighted the fact that memorials are disappearing. Such was the case with the Earls House School plaque.

A chance meeting by Lesley Cauldwell of the Friends of Durham County Record Office (FODCRO), and David Hillerby, a local history enthusiast, revealed that Mr Hillerby had rescued two memorials from a skip. Whilst Mr Hillerby had managed to identify one of the plaques as coming from Winterton Hospital, Sedgefield, the other remained something of a mystery. Research by FODCRO and Durham County Record Office pinpointed the plaque as having come from Earls House Industrial School.



Photograph of Captain J R Ritson (seated), about 1908
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The original unveiling of the plaque in 1919

On 30 December 1919, Major JR Ritson of the Durham Light Infantry presided over the original unveiling of the plaque at the school. In an almost prescient speech, Ritson announced:

Earl's House School.
TABLET UNVEILED AND PRIZE DISTRIBUTION.

On Tuesday evening the annual prize distribution took place in the large schoolroom, bedecked with festive decorations and appropriate mottoes. Mr W. Whiteley, chairman of the Committee of Management, presided, and was supported by Major Ritson, Mrs Whiteley, Mr A. J. Dawson, Mr Rose, and the superintendent (Mr S. Smith).

THE UNVEILING CEREMONY.

Major Ritson said that it afforded him great pleasure to come among them that evening to unveil the brass memorial tablet to the memory of the boys who had fallen in the great war. It was very fitting that in a school like that they should perpetuate as long as these buildings lasted—and later the tablet might be put into another part of the building—the memory of those who gave their lives for their country. Having withdrawn the Union Jack which had hidden the tablet from view, Major Ritson read the inscription, which was as follows:—

"To the memory of the following who gave their lives for their country in the European war 1914-1918."

STAFF.
Sergeant Robert Yule, 19th D.L.I., school bandmaster.

OLD SCHOLARS.
Sergeant John R. Bell, 3rd Rifle Brigade.
Gunner Wm. Cribben, Royal Garrison Artillery.
Pte. John Geo. Reynolds, 2nd Northumberland Fusiliers.
Pte. John Willis, 10th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.
Pte. Thomas Charles Wilson 16th Durham L.I.
Pte. Maurice Rogerson Wood, 6th Durham L.I.
Pte. John G. Davison, 7th King's Own Scottish Borderers.

Read by Major J. R. Ritson, 8th Durham Light Infantry.

The Chairman said that the unveiling ceremony made that annual gathering more memorable than would otherwise have been the case. He was sure they were very much indebted to Major Ritson for presenting that tablet to the school and for unveiling it. The Education Committee of that county were exceedingly interested in the school and the work done there. The committee were anxious, first and foremost, that the school should be so equipped that they would be able to turn out both citizens and men. They would be aware that many things were going to be done at that school in the near future. They were going to try to make that school a real home. But the object of the Education Committee could not be fulfilled in the highest sense except they had the co-operation of the boys and the members of the staff. They thought, and he thought rightly, that they should be able to turn out from that school as good men as were turned out by other schools. They wanted to give the boys a chance, and they could rely upon the Education Committee under the direction of Mr Dawson doing all they could in that direction.

Durham Chronicle, 20 January 1920
Durham County Record Office

John Ridley, as the younger son, joined the army. Durham County Record Office holds a notebook kept by John Ridley while serving in South Africa, 1900-1901 (D/DLI 7/573/1). By the time of the original unveiling ceremony for the plaque John Ridley had risen to the rank of Major. When he died in 1927 a memorial service was said for the Brevet-Colonel in Durham Cathedral. His father out-lived him by six years and left over £100,000 in his estate.

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When these monuments were erected, they were not a piece of history, as they are today, but a very recent reminder of the massive personal losses incurred by a terrible and bloody conflict which shook the world. One hundred years on we have a choice; we can let memorials be torn down and names lost and forgotten or we can save our history and commemorate its lasting influence on our lives.

John Ridley Ritson

The Ritson family would have been very well known in the county at the time. The patriarch of the family, Utrick Alexander Ritson, owned mines in Lanchester, North Shields and Annfield Plain. Both father and son appear to have been involved with the school. Ritson senior was a member of the Managing Committee of the school in the 1890s. John Ridley lived close by to the school, at Sniperley Hall, and was also a JP and as such had the authority to send boys to the school. William Henry, John's elder brother, was also clerk to the Poor Law Union and to the local school board.

Some of the names from the Earls House Industrial School memorial

Maurice Rogerson Wood

In 1909 Maurice was sent to Earls House School as he had committed a 'felony' (more likely to have been a petty crime) and was set to be 'released' in October 1912. The 1901 census lists the four-year-old Maurice living with his mother, Elizabeth Wood, and his grandparents. William C Robinson, Maurice's grandfather and the head of the household, was 70 in 1901. His occupation is recorded as 'foreman labourer' and the previous census shows he worked at an iron foundry. There is no sign of Maurice's father and there is no mark next to Elizabeth's name to indicate her marital status – possibly suggesting that Maurice was born out of wedlock.

The plaque records that Maurice joined the 6th Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry. His rank is listed as Private but according to the book 'Soldiers Died in the Great War' he was promoted to sergeant. 'Soldiers Died' also shows that he died of wounds in this country, 29 March 1917.

Robert Yule

Appointed as the new bandmaster of the school in 1898, Robert Yule remained in the post until he joined the 19th Durham Light Infantry. He appears to have been a valued member of the staff as the minute books for the school show that he had a number of pay increases. He started at the school on 18s [£0.90] per week with board, lodging, washing, medical attendance and a uniform each year. By 1907 this had been increased to £1 15s 8d [£1.79] (although he had moved out of the school) and by the end of the year his salary was almost £100 a year. His enlistment documents show that he had already served for five years with the Tynemouth Artillery Volunteers and he was promoted from private to sergeant within five days of joining up in 1915. He embarked for France from Southampton in January 1916. He died of wounds on 17 July 1916 and is buried at the Peronne Road Cemetery, Maricourt, France.

William Cribben

William died in April 1918 after little more than four months of fighting for the Royal Garrison Artillery. He originally enlisted at Newcastle-upon-Tyne in December 1915 but his employer wrote to the authorities and produced an exemption certificate. He was working for the company of John Spencer and Sons, a steel manufacturer, which was probably in overdrive trying to fill war orders. Because of this, William was called up relatively late in the war. The army sent him to Signal School based at Bridge of Allan, where he seems to have passed '1A Class'.

