

New College Servants in the 1914-18 War

The last three names on Eric Gill's 1914-18 war memorial on the south wall of the Antechapel are 'Richard Alfred Bridgewater, John Wright Smith, and Maurice Henry Sammons, *Servants of the College*.' They follow the names of the choristers and lay clerks, and the chronological list of students and fellows who died in that war, and they give pause for thought concerning the role and activities of the college servants in those years.

Richard Alfred Bridgewater (1879-1915) grew up in Cowley, and worked for the college as a bicycle cleaner. He married in 1907 and appears in the 1911 Census returns at 31 Lime Walk, Highfield in Headington, with his wife Annie and three small children. Like most of the college servants who enlisted when war broke out, he joined the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, a Territorial Force which was raised at Oxford, had its first wartime headquarters in St Cross Road, and drilled in Port Meadow before being sent out to France and Flanders in mid-August 1914. By November Bridgewater, as a Private in the 2nd Battalion, would have fought at Mons, Marne and in the First Battle of Ypres and adapted to trench warfare in 1915. Private Bridgewater died on 16 May 1915 amidst the heavy fighting which took place at Richebourg L'Avoué, and his name appears on the nearby Le Touret war memorial as well as on our own chapel memorial.

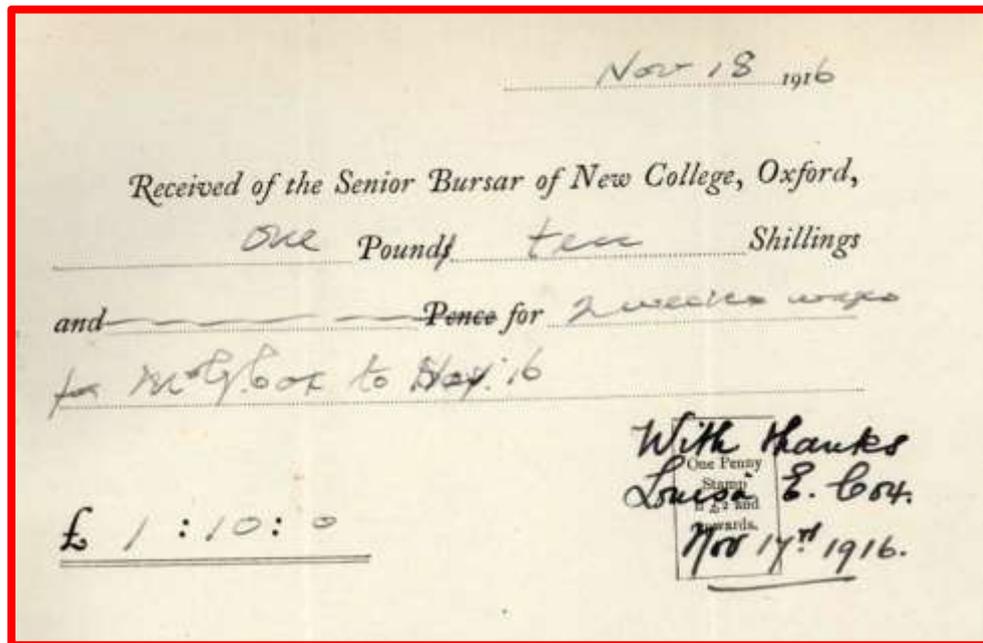
John Wright Smith (1890-1916) was the son of Edward and Charlotte Smith of St Aldates, but by 1914 he was living at Grandpont and had been employed by the college since the previous October. He joined the 2nd/4th Oxon & Bucks Light Infantry as a Private in 1915, which by then was run from Northampton and trained on Salisbury Plain. In May 1916 he was posted to France and based at Laventie (the Allied support position for the long-drawn out fighting on the Somme, and where – according to Geoffrey Rose's *Story of the 2nd/4th Oxon & Bucks Light Infantry* (1920) – one of the defence posts was nicknamed 'Winchester' and boasted a board bearing the names of Wykhamists who arrived there). The battalion's task was to storm the German trenches and thereby hinder access to the Somme by the German reserves. Smith died of wounds on 23 July 1916.

Maurice Henry Sammons (1888-1917) was a second-generation New College servant, his father George having retired shortly before 1911; Maurice himself had been employed by the college since October 1907, and his brother Philip also worked at the college until the end of the war. Maurice enlisted as a Private in the 1st/4th Battalion of the Oxon & Bucks Light Infantry and went out to France, where he was killed in action near Cambrai on 5 April 1917.

But what of the other college servants? The Servants Wages Books which survive from 1907 to 1920 (Archives DB/D1-5), together with bursar Horace Joseph's (alas incomplete) register of servants for much the same date (Archives DB/H1), also yield information about other New College servants who enlisted or were called up for war service: some eighteen or so are mentioned by name, some of them clearly quite lively characters. William Henry Barritt, for example, aged 74, whose curriculum vitae included having 'fought for the North in the USA Civil War'. He came to us as a pastry-cook in late October 1916 but, as bursar Joseph noted, 'he was useless. Only stayed about a fortnight.' His replacement was not much of an improvement: the apparently self-opinionated Albert Victor Henry Townsend, aged 35, who had spent six years as college cook at Balliol and was judged by Joseph in 1916 to be 'a good cook but rather tiresome with others, since the war working as chef ... last at Fisher's Hotel Pitlochry two months, previously at Rothays Hotel Edinburgh 14 months.' It perhaps came as a relief when he was called up in early November 1917 and disappeared from Oxford.

Barritt's predecessor had been Frederick William Slay, who been a newly qualified cook here in 1911 after serving his apprenticeship in our kitchens. He then went off to gain experience in the Calverley Hotel at Tunbridge Wells, and also in the King's Head Hotel at Sheffield, before returning here in early February 1914 as pastry-cook. That November however he volunteered for four years' war service and became a Private in the 4th Reserve Battalion of the Oxon & Bucks Light Infantry and subsequently found himself in France. On 19 November 1916 he was wounded by shrapnel in the shoulder and arm, and invalided home, but returned to the Front the following September. He was

finally demobilised in April 1919 and returned to work here, by which time the college had got through several more pastry-cooks. Slay's experience seems to have been typical in that, while on active service, the college continued to pay his wages – in most instances to his aunt, Mrs Rhoda Underwood, who regularly signed receipts for his wages from 1916 onwards.



Mrs Louisa Cox similarly received the regular wages of her husband George, who had worked as a bed-maker at New College since 1887 before enlisting for four years' war service in 1914; he too returned to college after the war as a porter at the Holywell Lodge, and was pensioned off in February 1919 (aged only 50) when no longer able to cope with the physical demands of the work. Examples of colleagues signing for wages and passing them on to the serviceman's family also abound in the Wages Books for the war years, a few exceptions being those men who volunteered as hospital orderlies with the Royal Army Medical Corps and remained in Oxford, thereby being able to come into college and sign for their own wages. Such men included Harry Westell, a former SCR waiter and, since 1902, bed-maker who joined up as an RAMC Orderly for the entire war and very likely worked in the hospital tents in New College's garden or at the Base Hospital in the Oxford Schools building in the High Street.

George Chapman, born in Oxford, came to college as a scullery man and garden help in October 1914, aged fifteen. The son of a printer at the Holywell Press, he apparently presented bursar Joseph with excellent references from the headmaster of St Mary & St John's School, and 'from the manager of the North Oxford Kinema where he had worked lately'. He departed in April 1915, having enlisted 'without giving any warning' which rather annoyed Mr Joseph.

Cyril Harry Cooper on the other hand, born in 1897, came to New College in August 1913 with glowing references from Mr Hine of the High Street who had employed him as an errand boy, and also by the Reverend Scott of Cowley. He worked here as the SCR messenger, and decided in December 1915 to enlist. His weak eyesight proved a not insuperable problem, and he was placed as a Private in the Army Reserve and mobilised as part of the Royal Berkshire Regiment in June or July 1916. At the end of the war he was demobilised with a good character and two service medals, and returned to New College in July 1920 as the under-porter at the Holywell Lodge.

Although most college servants who went to war, predictably (given its Oxford links) served with battalions of the Oxon & Bucks Light Infantry, a few broke the mould. SCR messenger Albert Joyce, for instance, who had worked here since the age of fourteen in 1907 and lived with his parents in Bath Place, left in 1913 determined to enlist in the Army Flying Corps; and the long-serving kitchen

clerk Mr Launchbury, who had worked here since 1895, left in early 1915 to serve as 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal (Independent) Air Force, and after the war took up a clerical post at Didcot Ordnance Depot.

Not everyone could cope with civilian work after war service. Mr G. Munday (who replaced the truculent Mr Barson, scullery pan man, in May 1917 after Barson had absented himself without leave and then given notice when rebuked) had been discharged from the Oxon & Bucks Light Infantry in August 1916 as an exemplary soldier but unfit for further military service. Being an Oxford man (from St Ebbe's), he came here in January 1917 but, as bursar Joseph noted, he 'has a stiff knee from a bullet wound. Found there was too much standing', and he left after six months. F.E. Taylor, who had been an under-bed-maker at Keble before the war and wounded while serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force, came here as a 'not very good but steady and honest' bed-maker in January 1919, but could not cope and left after a term. Others were not even steady or honest: ex-munitions worker John Howard who came here to look after 'boots and bicycles, and help in the garden when needed' in April 1919 was dismissed a few weeks later for refusing to carry water up the students' rooms, and for repeatedly skiving off work: 'an unsatisfactory lout' was bursar Joseph's rather unkind verdict on him. Another who should best remain anonymous worked here as a shoe-black for several years before the war, returned after war service as a bed-maker, and was dismissed in 1921 for 'appropriating an undergraduate's money for his own use' while under the continued 'grave suspicion' that he had been stealing clothes from the students' rooms.

The college's wartime employment of women also reveals interesting insights. Most were taken on between 1915 and 1917 to cope with the enormous influx of Young Officer Cadets coming to the college. They included the likes of Mrs Merriman of 1 St Helen's Passage, who in earlier years had been a cook at Radley and in hotels in Henley and Maidenhead, but was now in Oxford while her husband was working at the Base Hospital in the High Street. She was taken on here as a vegetable cook and to 'help in the scullery', and clearly found it uncongenial as she only stayed a few days, went off sick and failed to reappear: bursar Joseph wrote her off as 'Not very efficient' in his register.

A much more sad case was Mrs Heinrich of Church Street in St Ebbe's, whose husband William had been head waiter at the Clarendon Hotel but was now interned, leaving her to fend for two small children. She herself came from Kent and, being English, had been recommended to us by the Citizens' Emergency Committee. She came in February 1916 to help in the kitchens, but left in late April, ostensibly because the work for the Young Officer Cadets was coming to an end, although bursar Joseph hints at the real reason: 'She was good at her work, but her name and connections caused difficulty.'

Jennifer Thorp
Archivist