

## Sedgehill Sailors

During the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which covered not just the build up to the Great War but the aftermath too, Sedgehill seems to have had an uncanny connection with the sea considering its rural location in a landlocked county. From among a population of just 160, living many miles from the coast, there were 5 families with a sailor in their midst.



*John Sidney Smith*, the son of an agricultural labourer, was 16 when he joined the Royal Navy in 1900. He had never seen the sea - the introduction to it was brutal; new recruits were thrown overboard to learn to swim and shown the whip if they were seasick.

He must have loved the navy life because at 18 he signed for a further 12 years after which he left the service having achieved the rank of Able Seaman in order to marry - he had been offered the position of chauffeur at Knoyle House along with a cottage to live in, but it was not to be.

On the day he married in East Knoyle, war was declared and he was recalled to service immediately. He served another 7 years at sea, mostly on minesweepers, before being demobbed in 1921. At a time when work was not easy to come by, John Sidney emigrated to Auckland with his wife and daughter. He spent the rest of his working life with the New Zealand Theatre Chair Company as a Master Upholsterer. He died in 1969.



*Thomas Henry Merryweather* was also the son of an agricultural labourer and was John Sidney Smith's uncle, even though he was only a month older than him. He joined the Royal Navy a month before his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1900. During his service he fell from the yard arm, landed on the deck injuring his arm and was administered rum. When he asked for more rum he was reprimanded in no uncertain terms.

Thomas married in 1905 although he must have been at sea most of the time. In September 1910 he heard that his wife was having an affair and asked for leave. He was refused, but he went anyway. His Naval record records "Ran Portsmouth" - "ran" meaning deserted. In April 1911 he was living with his wife in Mumbles, Wales, but a month later he was recovered from desertion and sentenced to 60 days, probably in one of the ship's tiny cells. Thomas left the Navy the day before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in February 1914 after which he worked as a miner in Maryport, Cumbria. Then came the Great War. He volunteered for the Army in November 1915. As he had been a Royal Navy Seaman Gunner for 14 years, he was drafted into the Royal Garrison Artillery. He left the Army in 1924 as a regimental shoemaker. He worked as a cowman in Thames Ditton and died in 1955 aged 71.



*Trevylyan Dacres Napier* was at the opposite end of the social scale. As the son of a Rear Admiral who was to marry the daughter of an Admiral, a career in the upper echelons of the Senior Service seemed assured. He had reached the rank of Rear Admiral around the time he came to live at the old vicarage in Sedgehill.

After various commands including the battleship HMS Bellerophore, he went on to serve right through the First World War. At the Battle of Jutland he commanded the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Cruiser Squadron and had similar responsibilities during the Battle of Heligoland Bight - the two biggest sea battles of the war. During his time in the Royal Navy he was appointed Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB) and Member of the Royal Victorian Order (MVO)

After the war he was made Commander in Chief America and West Indies Station - it was here that he was taken ill in the summer of 1920. Trevylyan Napier died after a short illness on 30<sup>th</sup> July at the age of 53 leaving a wife and 3 children. He was buried in the Royal Naval cemetery in Bermuda; a fine memorial in St Catherine's church recalls his death.



*Gilbert John Maidment* was born in April 1900 at Oysters Farm Semley, the son of William and Ellen. Gilbert's grandfather, also Gilbert, farmed at Butterstakes in Sedgehill in the latter part of the 1880's.

Gilbert died at the Battle of Jutland. This huge sea battle between the German and Allied navies began late in the afternoon. Barely 15 minutes had passed when Indefatigable was blown to bits with a direct hit on the ship's magazine leaving the crew with no chance. Only 3 of the 1017 men survived. Gilbert was not one of them.

When Gilbert's only sibling Rose died seven years later, she was buried close to her grandparents in St Catherine's churchyard - her ornate headstone remembers her younger brother with the touching lines "Gilbert John Maidment, who lost his life in the Jutland Battle May 31<sup>st</sup> 1916. He was a Boy 1st Class in the Royal Navy on board HMS Indefatigable. He gave his life for his home and country". Gilbert was just 16 when he died.



*Ernest Charles Gray*, son of Charles and Ellen, was born in Sedgehill in early December 1904. His family had moved from nearby East Knoyle to live at Blackhouse, close to the home of Vice Admiral Napier; perhaps living in such close proximity to the Admiral influenced young Ernest's decision to join the Royal Navy.

Blackhouse no longer exists having burnt down in the 1920's. It consisted of a pair of semi-detached cottages on the opposite side of the road to the old rectory, about 100 yards across a field. The ruin was never rebuilt and the site eventually cleared. At the time of the fire, the property also served as the village post office.

Ernest's time in the Navy was very short; it is unlikely that much, if any, time was spent at sea. He was a Boy 2<sup>nd</sup> Class undergoing training on HMS Impregnable when he died of pneumonia in the Naval hospital Plymouth on 27th March 1921. He is remembered with a traditional Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone in St. Catherine's churchyard. Ernest, like Gilbert Maidment, was only 16 years old when he died.