



Semley's Sad Soldier

*Why one grave at Semley points eastwards
by Bernard Pike, a native of Semley*

Within St. Leonard's churchyard there is an exquisite bronze statue of a mounted cavalry officer. Standing about a metre high, atop a cube plinth, it has been facing east alongside the road to Tisbury for the past 80 years. Many years ago, as a schoolboy, I would look at it and wonder at its past. The story behind it is a fascinating and tragic one.

The statue, completed by Henry Albert Pegram, commemorates the life of Lieutenant George Dewrance Irving Armstrong who spent his last years in Semley living at Broadoak. The son of a coal and iron merchant, he was born on 13 April 1879 in Woodford, North London. His father's trades matched his marriage, as he had gone to the altar with the sister of Sir John Dewrance KBE who made a fortune by developing the Kent coalfields and was later to become chairman of the huge engineering firm, Babcock and Wilcox.

Around the turn of the century, young George Armstrong joined the Army and a week after his 21st birthday was commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant in the Sherwood Foresters. They were fighting the Boers in South Africa attached to H Company under Captain Saddler.

Long patrols and difficult conditions were the order of the day; George was involved in a number of actions in Western Transvaal during the next year. Constantly out-manoeuvred by a skilful and mobile enemy, times must have been hard for anyone used to the luxuries of life. The Boers were too clever to fight a pitched battle, so the British Army had to play a deadly game of hide and seek, a strategy that stretched its resources to the limit.

On 29 May 1901, by now an experienced and decorated full Lieutenant, George fought in a particularly savage encounter at Vlakkfontein. H Company, made up of 5 officers and 95 men, was part of a larger force moving towards Mafeking and although appearing well protected by the rest of the battalion, H Company took the brunt of the action. Outnumbered six to one, only 28 men survived. The battalion history recounts the height of the battle thus:

"The next few minutes are such as a man is apt to remember, yet of which he can afterwards give no definite account". It must have been now that the bulk of the casualties occurred. They were surprised, outnumbered and all the odds - moral and physical - were well on the other side.

Captain Saddler, with his subalterns, Lieutenants Armstrong and Rimmington - kept their men steady and coolly gave orders up to the very last moment, but no courage - individual or collective - could serve to turn the scale. Fortunate to have survived at all, Lieutenant Armstrong had been wounded in the leg and just how much this affected him might be seen later.

He retired from the Army in 1907 to live a gentleman's life at Broadoak, his mother having recently purchased the property. A keen follower of the South & West Wilts Foxhounds, he also farmed horses and cattle on the 50 acres that went with the house. A bachelor and, believed to be an only child, he lived with his mother, there being no record of his father at Semley.

He was described by someone who remembered him as "an affable gentleman, smartly dressed with a military bearing, he often attended Shaftesbury market and enjoyed conversing with local farmers". So, a splendid fellow recalled by an equally splendid statue, but all is not as it seems.

The clue is that his grave is facing the opposite direction to all the others in the churchyard. For reasons that cannot be explained, it was the custom at that time to bury those who died by their own hand with their head to the east, while all other coffins are laid with heads to the west.

Just after midnight on Tuesday 3rd August 1915, Lieutenant George Dewrance Irving Armstrong, aged 36, fell head first from a window on the first floor at Broadoak. He was found by his mother who sent for the doctor from Shaftesbury and, with great difficulty, she succeeded in dragging him to the foot of the stairs. The doctor arrived on horseback but there was little he could do and the patient died at 6am from "compression due the fractured base of the skull".

The next day Mr. F.H. Trethowen, Coroner for the South Western District of Wiltshire, held an inquest at Broadoak. Dr. H.U. Gould, who had been called to the tragedy the previous night, told of an accident in the hunting field two years earlier where the deceased had sustained serious concussion from which he never fully recovered. He had become increasingly depressed at the reported deaths of many of his friends in the Foresters in WW1. He had also been upset that the doctor had been unable to support his application to rejoin the Army. The Doctor stressed that he had no fear in his mind that his patient might do himself any harm.

George's distraught mother was too unwell to attend the inquest, but in a written statement she told of her son's last words - "I had to see the poor old chap". Whether this remark referred to an Army friend or to his favourite hunter could not be discovered.

There is no doubt that having seen war at first hand at Vlaktefontein, Lieutenant Armstrong could visualise what his friends were facing in France and was frustrated beyond endurance because he could not help them. The jury returned a verdict of "suicide whilst of unsound mind".

Mrs. Armstrong still thought of her son as a soldier although he had left the Army 8 years previous to his death, for the statue she commissioned shows him not as a country gentleman following hounds, but as he was in Africa during the Boer War. Moreover, she refers to him on the inscription as "Lieutenant Armstrong", a rank not normally retained when leaving the Army.

George's mother, Elizabeth Hane, is buried with him and is remembered on the plinth. She sold Broadoak to the Wightwick family soon after her son's death and moved first to Kent and then to Edinburgh where she died on 5th August 1937, almost exactly 22 years after her son. Before moving to Scotland, she entered into a legal agreement with a Dr. Robert Crawford, part of which details that he reminded her so strongly of her son, that she proposed to adopt him to some extent and give him for personal outlays £150 per annum during their joint lives. Dr. Crawford would reside with Mrs. Armstrong each alternative month and each other month, he will be at Keswick or elsewhere. At the same time she made a will leaving her house and most of her remaining assets to Dr. Crawford, but he was in poor health and died before her. Perhaps these arrangements were too much for Mrs. Armstrong's brother, Sir John Dewrance KBE, for he declined to act as Executor and Trustee.