

The Jesus war memorial

As the season of remembrance comes upon us once again, it seems like a good time to look more closely at the Jesus war memorial. In common with most memorials it was set up by public subscription, with a printed appeal leaflet being produced and sent out to potential donors. From the covering letters sent with donations, we know that many who responded were families of those killed. Around a third of the families responded, with donations of between one and ten guineas.

It is very striking how many letters were written by women, the mothers and sisters of the fallen (none of the families of married men appear to have subscribed.) In some cases this was because of the death of a parent, but in others it seems to have been left to them to handle correspondence.

The women's letters are often a good source of small emotional details. Nellie Payne, whose brother George was one of the first to die in 1914 writes that her father has died "he never got over the suspense caused by my dear brother being missing for so long, it seemed to absolutely break him down." Judith Massey, writes to apologise that her husband has sent the wrong postal note "he had no glasses on, so did not notice his mistake..." and goes on to say that her son (John, killed May 1918) had spent some of the happiest moments of his short life" at the College.

Hetty Savory, who lost her son Henry in April 1918 writes simply: "It is two years to the day exactly since my dear son left me for France to do his duty and loyal service for his king and country; and to fulfil his own high ideal of what a man should be."

Many letters describe the financial impact of losing a son or sons. War memorials were erected by public subscription, but families of the fallen were expected to be key contributors. Beatrice Crookham, mother of Hugh, killed in August 1915 writes: "We have so many memorial funds to give to, school, regiment, town and church." FCA Aldous, father of Alan, killed in July 1916 who lost two sons, writes that "it will take me years to meet the demands of this year" he continues that "I really can't spare what I'm sending" but that "I have made a truce with my bank manager". Even a modest contribution of a guinea would be the equivalent of £50 in today's money.

Clergymen were under particular burden of the expectations placed upon them and their relatively small incomes and "we wish it could be more" is a regular theme. Revd. Edwin Evers, father of Bertram, killed in September 1916, writes several letters to the Master speaking of the burden of "numerous applications from so many parishes". He has already spent nearly £50 (that's £2,300 today) in responding to appeals from his former parishes and "where my dear lad was either born or at school".

Revd. Evers nonetheless gives 5 guineas. With wry humour he speaks of the recent golden wedding commemoration which had seen all 14 of his surviving children gather. As a result he is feeling his 77 years and “a halo of doubt and uncertainty must hang over my movements”.

There was also ongoing worry (and presumably some added financial pressure) over sons who had survived. Revd Evers again: “Three sons have come out of the war wounded, one so badly that he was incapacitated for life.” Similarly Edwin Bradley, who lost his son Geoffrey in December 1914, writes that his son Edwin (another Jesuan) has narrowly survived an attack of pneumonia, brought on by the effects of poison gas during the war, whilst his younger son is still incapacitated by shellshock, some 2 years after the end of the fighting.

Life went on, however, and Elizabeth Nevill encloses money for examination fees for her younger son Thomas, as well as her contribution to remember his brother Wilfred, one of many killed on the first day of the Somme in 1916.

Reading the words of bereaved mothers, fathers and sisters we can only feel deep sympathy for all those who faced a post-war life of anxiety and grief. It adds an extra poignancy to our annual commemoration at the War Memorial. The final word must go to Frederic Furze:

“in sending you these few lines I cannot help my thoughts going back to the happy days we both spent at Cambridge whilst our dear boy Claude was at Jesus, it seems so cruel to think that his young life and so many others should have been cut short in this terrible war.”

Claude Furze lost his life in April 1918, 7 months before the Armistice was signed.

In the past two years the College archives have been constructing an online memorial that includes details of full name, rank, regiment and dates of birth and death to each of the fallen, together with what we can reconstruct about each man from the College archives and a photograph, where one can be traced. Each man will be commemorated in the centenary of the month that he died.

<http://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/about-jesus-college/history/first-world-war/the-roll-of-honour/>