

## Remembrance: Names from Steep War memorial - WYNDHAM HALSWELLE

It is the dire conditions of the trenches that for many of us evoke the absolute horror of World War I. Our name from the Steep War memorial for this Remembrance month is that of Wyndham Halswelle who left a description of conditions in the early 1915 stage of World War I.



When the men had to go over the parapet of a trench, Wyndham wrote, this was no easy task to achieve in sheer practical terms. There was great difficulty in scaling the high sides which were a 'slippery clay perpendicular wall with sandbags on the top'. The men were often small in stature, laden with a pack and rifle plus fifty rounds of ammunition in a pouch and another fifty hung about them in a bandolier. On one occasion three of his men were hit just as they reached the top. Wyndham was an extremely fit former Olympic athlete, he made a dash at the parapet but even he fell back. It was only with the aid of 'the jocks' behind who 'heaved him up' that at last he was over. His small achievement was short lived for he was soon forced to jump into a ditch, which turned out to be 'an old trench filled with liquid mud – which took me some time to get out of.' In one push forward he lost nearly eighty of his 140 strong company. A mere fifteen yards were gained.

Wyndham was a professional soldier, who had been at Sandhurst. Born in 1882, he had fought bravely in the Boer War and been awarded the South Africa Medal with four clasps. As Captain and Commanding Officer of the First Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry, he went to France in February 1915. Less than a month later he was wounded by shrapnel as he led his men across a feature known as Laves Brook. Heavily bandaged, he refused to be evacuated and continued to serve in the front line. Three weeks later, while attempting to rescue a wounded fellow officer, he was shot by a sniper and died on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1915. He was thirty two years old. Sir John French mentioned him in dispatches for gallant and distinguished services. His Victory Medal with oak leaf emblem reflected this.

Wyndham was the second son of Keeley Halswelle, a noted Illustrator and artist, who had come to Stoner House, Steep, in 1880. Some accounts say that he designed both Stoner House for himself and also Stoner Lodge. The Halswelles were Scots. Keeley died in 1891 and was buried in Steep churchyard in the grave of the Gordons, his wife's parents, near the church entrance. But his gallant son Wyndham is buried in the Royal Irish Rifles Graveyard, Laventie, France. Wyndham's mother, Helen, continued to spend periods in Steep. The 1911 census records her presence here accompanied by a cook, parlourmaid and between maid. She later moved nearer to other family members in Devon. Members of this family have continued to be named 'Wyndham Halswelle'.

With thanks for information from David Erskine-Hill, Johnny Kerr, Jill Thompson-Lewis, Tony Struthers, Imperial War Museum and The Royal Highland Fusiliers Museum.

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