

The WW1 Memorial Plaque to Victor John Backhouse

Student Presentation at Queanbeyan Museum, Nov 7th 2009.

Officially called a memorial plaque, this is a commemorative memento given by the Empire to bereaved next of kin in WW1; commonly referred to by servicemen as the 'dead man's penny', for obvious reasons.

Representative

This artefact was donated to the Batemans Bay Museum by the Backhouse family. A large family, this branch lived at Currowan Creek between Nelligen and Braidwood. Accompanying it were two framed, enlarged studio photographs of the Backhouse brothers, Victor and Leslie. Victor died on the Western Front and it is *his* commemorative 'Penny' which you see today.

Provenance

Unfortunately we do not have the item which accompanied every Penny- a scroll, 27 x 17 centimetres made of slightly darkened parchment, headed by the Royal Coat of Arms with a passage written in old English script,

'He whom this scroll commemorates was numbered among those who, at the call of King and Country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardness, faced danger, and finally passed out of sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others may live in freedom.

Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.'

Beneath this passage, written in the same style, was the name, and rank and service details of the deceased. To accompany the scroll, again in old English script, a personal message from King George V.'

'I join with my grateful people in sending you this memorial of a brave life given for others in the Great War.

-----George R I.

Myfanwy Thompson

As I said, we do not have the scroll itself, which one imagines was easily slipped into a drawer, and separated from the Penny over the intervening years. As for the Penny

The Military History online website advises, *“The history of the Dead Man’s Penny began in 1916 with the realisation by the British Government that some form of an official token of gratitude should be given to bereaved next of kin.*

History

The enormous casualty figures not anticipated at the start of WWI back in 1914 prompted this gesture of recognition. In 1917, the government announced a competition to design a suitable plaque with a prize of 250 pounds. There were 800 entries from all over the Empire, the Dominions, and even from the troops on the Western Front. Mr E. Carter Preston of Liverpool, England, was the eventual winner.

*The selected design was this 12-centimetre disk cast in bronze gunmetal, which incorporates an image of Britannia and a lion, two dolphins representing Britain’s sea power, and the emblem of Imperial Germany’s eagle being lustily **torn to pieces** by another lion at the base.*

Description/
Aesthetic

*Britannia is holding an oak spray with leaves and acorns. Beneath this is a rectangular tablet where the deceased individual’s name is cast into the plaque. **No rank was given as it was intended to show equality in their sacrifice.** On the outer edge of the disk, the words, **‘He died for freedom and honour’.***

Unfortunately, the production and delivery of the plaques was not a complete success and the scheme ended before all the next of kin of the deceased received the official recognition they should have. There were some relatives who returned the pennies to the Australian Government in protest as they felt it was insulting and it did not replace their loved one’s life. ¹ “

There are 'Dead Man's Pennies' in private and public collections, museums and national archives. Although not rare, our example links directly to a local resident, is in excellent condition,

Integrity/
Personal
connection

¹ MilitaryHistoryonline.com.ww1 Downloaded Nov 1st 2009

Myfanwy Thompson

professionally mounted and framed in a manner complementing the photograph of Victor whose death it commemorates.

The fact that the rarely awarded Victoria Cross medal is made from the same bronze gunmetal as the Penny, gives additional impact to the context in which the Penny is viewed.

Spiritual

This particular Penny has been mounted on a square of bi-coloured wool. I checked with the **Department of Defence online image library**², and it replicates the colour patches awarded to the 54th Battalion Infantry for battle action. There's a matching patch in the corner of Victor's full length portrait.

I can find no record as to how these items came to be donated. An ex-curator advises a deceased member donated them, and she was a descendant of a branch of the Backhouse family. The Backhouse name is in the Batemans Bay telephone directory so I do have another opportunity for building provenance.

HOWEVER, given Victor's name written on the back of his portrait, and on the Death Penny itself, I was able to research sufficient information to provide an assessment and profile of this young man's artefacts.

The first place I looked was the **Honour Role of the Australian War Memorial**³ which provided the following information:

Victor John Backhouse

Service number: 4432

Rank: Private [Pte]

Unit: 54th Battalion (Infantry)

Service: Army

Conflict: 1914-1918

Date of death: 19 July 1916

² http://www.defence.gov.au/army/ahu/images/Image_library_index.htm

³ **AWM Source:** AWM145 Roll of Honour cards, 1914-1918 War, Army



Myfanwy Thompson

Cause of death: Killed in action

Cemetery or memorial details: VC Corner

Australian Cemetery Memorial, Fromelles, France

War Grave Register notes: BACKHOUSE, Pte.

Victor John, 4432. 54th Bn. Killed in action

19th/20th July, 1916. Age 20. Son of John and

Maud Mary Backhouse, of Currowan Creek, Clyde Rd., Braidwood, NSW.

I next visited '**Mapping Our ANZACS**'⁴, a website of digitised records established by the National Archives of Australia, where I could double check where he lived and presumably where he enlisted. Turns out he was listed as born in Braidwood, but enlisted at Holsworthy. His next of kin was his father, John F Backhouse.

This listing gave me the following information:

Title

Backhouse Victor John : SERN 4432 : POB Braidwood NSW : POE Holsworthy NSW : NOK F Backhouse John

Barcode

3043318

Series number

[B2455](#)

Series accession

number

B2455/1

Control symbol

BACKHOUSE V J

Contents date range

circa 1914 - circa 1920

Extent

Location

Canberra

When I accessed **the Series number**, it gave me pages of information about how the service records were created, to what purpose, etc.

⁴ <http://mappingouranzacs.naa.gov.au> Downloaded Nov 1st 2009

They are **service personnel dossiers** for Australians who served in the following entities during WW1:

- Australian Imperial Force (AIF)
- Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF)
- Royal Australian Naval Bridging Train (RANBT)
- Australian Flying Corps (AFC)
- Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS)

Depot records for personnel who did not go overseas but instead served in Australia can also be found in **B2455!**

The Service records began in August 1914 when war was declared. Various entities have maintained them, but they now reside with the National Archives who are in the process of digitising all of them.

And more power to their elbow!

In each personnel dossier are two VERY *important* documents:

1. **The Attestation Paper**. This document was completed by the person on enlistment, and provides the following basic biographical information:
 - - full name
 - - place of birth
 - - age on enlistment
 - - marital status
 - - religion
 - - employment / trade details
 - - next-of-kin details
 - - place & date of enlistment; and initial unit posting
 - - prior military service
2. **Service and Casualty Form (otherwise known as Form B103)**. This provides rudimentary details about an individual's service and

casualty history in Australia and overseas.

Specific information can include:

- Movements and transfers between units (including names of troop ships)
- Promotions and awarding of important decorations and medals
- Details of illnesses and injuries, and treatment received
- When and where a soldier was killed, and basic burial details.

Some files contain other miscellaneous military documents and correspondence, including:

- notification to next-of-kin of death and injury
- letters concerning a soldier's whereabouts
- details of awards and medals
- pay information
- wills
- information about wartime marriages
- burial information

The extent to which such information can be found in the dossiers varies greatly. Records were subject to extensive culling in the 1950s by the Department of the Army, with the intention to remove any material that did not provide an essential record of service.

With Victor's dossier, we were **fortunate** - because Victor has some **35 pages of digitised correspondence** between Army and family concerning both sons.

Provenance

The most poignant, of course, are the hand-written letters from his parents seeking to find out if he was wounded – or missing in action. Then a note on his service record advising he was killed in action in France. There were no details as to how, just a date. 19th/20th July 1915.

Back to the **Australian War Memorial** website⁵ and their section entitled "**This Month in Australian Military History**". Sure enough. 19th/20th July

⁵ <http://www.awm.gov.au>

Myfanwy Thompson

was the Battle of Fromelles. The first time Australian troops were engaged on the Western Front. It was an Allied forces disaster. Over 5,500 Australians were either killed or wounded in 48 hours. Victor had been a soldier for only 4 months.

The AWM's **Roll of Honour** lists Victor as being buried at the VC Corner Cemetery near Fromelles in northern France.

I then 'Googled' **Maps - Fromelles**⁶ – and found a colour location map illustrating the route from the township to the cemetery. You can see how the cemetery sits in the landscape.

The Google map site also references information provided by **Wikipedia**⁷ – so I took that link and found information on the *VC Corner Australian Cemetery and Memorial*. There are no headstones in the cemetery, two large concrete crosses mark where 414 unidentified soldiers are buried. The Fromelles site was in the news earlier this year when they found a new mass grave of as yet unidentified soldiers.*

Currency

*DNA testing conducted to help identify individuals.

From that Wikipedia site you can link to a **youtube**⁸ page which offers a tasteful video by a visitor to the cemetery. It looks a very peaceful place.

I went back to the AWM website and checked biographical data – including the **Red Cross Wounded and Killed** records⁹. Again I was fortunate to find something. Eye witness accounts first place Victor as wounded, and then a day later the corrected description '*tall, dark, young - blown up by enemy shell fire.*'

⁶ <http://maps.google.com.au/maps?hl=en&tab=wl>

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fromelles>

⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ew5lsprUIms>

⁹ http://www.awm.gov.au/cms_images/1DRL428/00002/1DRL428-00002-0171001.pdf

Myfanwy Thompson

Victor was just 20 when he died; had been a sawmill hand before enlisting, a common enough occupation in those days and in that area. He looks fit and with a country background was probably an excellent shot. Of little use against shellfire, of course.

From correspondence I know that his family were deeply concerned about him. I can't imagine how they when told by the Army that the newspaper report listing him as wounded, was in error – and actually Victor was missing, later to be confirmed as killed in action. In 1922 the records note his father applied for the Memorial Plaque.

Victor's brother, Leslie, survived WW1 and in fact, fought in WW11 as well.

The reason our Museum has a **Lest We Forget** permanent exhibition is the public interest displayed in Australia's armed service history. In particular the First World War where Australia was demonstrably a nation in her own right, with defining characteristics which are still valued.

Social

For me this project has been a learning curve – never having accessed any of these records before I was delighted to see how much was available to help me shape a significance assessment for this artefact. I will be able to do similar research for other service personnel memorabilia, and so enrich the collection we hold.

Research
potential/
Interpretation

It particularly pleases me that I have been able to deepen Victor's story from a captioned artefact, to an honoured personal narrative.

This young man now has a **real** presence in our **Lest We Forget** Room.