

The Teachers who never came back – World War One

The losses during the Great War at a small school like St. Edward's were traumatic and amongst the worst per capita of all its peers. 121 OSE and 3 teachers were killed in action or died of war-related illness during those dreadful years. In fact, there were actually four teachers lost as one, the Reverend John Bussell, was both an OSE and later a Set Tutor at the School who is usually included in the Alumni rolls rather than the Common Room one.

One of the most sobering memories of this war, amongst so many, was the fact that there were so many instances where whole families and local groupings ('Pals') fought shoulder to shoulder and school communities were no different. The St. Edward's 'contingent' that went to war numbered 673, including 7 teachers and an estimated 4 non-teaching staff (probably more), the war made no distinction and all these men fought alongside each other in the various theatres most enlisting as soon as they could.

There is written evidence in the archives at the heartbreak amongst the School staff as the names started to come in of those lost, with so many still teenagers and so recently amongst their number. Equally their teachers wasted no time in getting into uniform especially if they already had military experience to offer. John Bussell had served as a boy soldier in the Boer War (while still a pupil at the School), John Partington was a Territorial before war broke out, Leonard Cass had spruced up his military credentials to qualify as an officer in the School's O.T.C. when war broke out, however Leonard Davies, the fourth member of this illustrious quartet had absolutely no leanings or qualifications to the military, but went to war anyway.



Common Room 1913. Bussell sits on right, Davies and Cass are standing 3rd and 4th from left.

John Bussell was perhaps the best known of the four having been an outstanding pupil at the School 1898-1900, arriving at the age of 16 and playing for the School's 1st Rugby XV in 1898 and 1899 and by the Christmas Term 1899 was a School Prefect and in the Sixth Form. At this time, he volunteered for the Boer War and paraded in uniform at the School awaiting the call which came in 1900. He served for two years with distinction in the Oxford Yeomanry. On his return he entered Brasenose College, Oxford where he gained his BA and also two Rugby Blues in 1903 and 1904 (he also coached the pack). Outside the university he played his club rugby for the Harlequins. He was ordained Deacon in 1905, Priest at Truro Cathedral the following year and in 1908 returned to St. Edward's as a teacher of Divinity as well as coaching the XV and



running the early O.T.C., later elevated to Set Tutor in a spell which lasted until 1914, when he moved to Marlborough College. He had married in the meantime and was the father of two children. When war broke out, he immediately volunteered and was appointed Captain with the Royal Sussex Regiment and shipped to France in 1915. He was killed by a sniper in Flanders 'sitting in his trench' on 28th June 1915 and was much mourned back in Oxford both at the School and the University.

Leonard Cass had been a teacher of Mathematics and Science and later Set Tutor at the School between 1909-14: a giant of a man, who 'ruled his Form with a rod of iron' was a close friend of Bussell's and on hearing the news of his death immediately enlisted in the exact same regiment, taking over Bussell's command, and was killed in almost exactly the same spot by a sniper on 12th December 1915; both men are buried near the spot next to each other.

John Partington (*pictured above*) joined the St. Edward's from Oakham School in 1913 as an Assistant Master in charge of the Fifth Form, and had been a Territorial before the war, he spent only a few months at the School before enlisting in the Devonshire Regiment in October 1914. He was sent out to India with his regiment with the rank of Lieutenant (later Captain) where he was based at Fort St. George in Madras supervising Prisoners of War. He was killed on 3rd February 1917 at the Second Battle of Kut against Ottoman forces, having resigned his commission in order to get involved with more front-line fighting.

Last was Leonard Davies, killed in action serving with the Rifle Brigade on 3 June 1917 at Wancourt, France. A universally popular master, especially the younger OSE 'by whom his room was so often filled' at the School and outstanding Set Tutor. A Classics teacher, he had taught the Sixth Form with the Warden. A very able oarsman both at Oxford and with the Leander Club also a musician of note he was never in the military mould but was horrified by the news of his young charges dying in great numbers and immediately enlisted when his time came. He had been involved in some of the heaviest fighting around Arras and on the Somme and was promoted to Lieutenant just before his death. On his grave was the inscription 'Here rest the mortal remains of Leonard Davies, Scholar, Musician, Athlete, Rifleman'.

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Sources: *Members of a Very Noble Friendship* by Christopher Nathan
School Archives