

Pte H. Hygate – The Queen’s (Royal West Surrey Regiment)

Henry John Hygate was born in Warlingham in 1871. He married Caroline Gibson of Reigate in 1904 and they lived at 1 Spring Cottages, Westcott Street. They later moved to 1 Bailey Road and it was from this address that he enlisted. Henry was a bricklayer’s labourer. Henry and Caroline had an adopted son named Harold.

Although he was well over the normal age, Henry volunteered for service shortly after the war started and enlisted at Dorking in the Queen’s (Royal West Surrey Regiment) on 16th October 1914. He joined the 5th (Home Service) Battalion, but was admitted to Hounslow Hospital on 7th January 1915, suffering from acute bronchitis. After suffering recurring bronchial attacks and deafness in his left ear, he was discharged from the Army on 21st July 1915 as being medically unfit for service.

The opportunity for Henry to serve again came in August 1917 when the Royal Defence Corps was created from the ‘Home Service’ garrisons of 18 regiments. Made up of old soldiers who were over the age set for combatant service, or those who were not fit for duty overseas, the role of the new Corps was to guard railways, tunnels, ports and other installations, thereby relieving other troops for front-line service. Unlike the Home Guard of the Second World War, those serving in the Royal Defence Corps could be deployed anywhere within the United Kingdom.

Henry re-enlisted at Chilworth and was serving in the 59th Protection Company, Royal Defence Corps when he died on 5th June 1918. At the time of his death he was serving at the Prisoner of War Camp at Wisborough Green, which was actually the Workhouse at Billingshurst, where he would have been tasked with over-seeing German internees and prisoners of war on agricultural or similar work. He is buried in Reigate Cemetery; his headstone records him as serving with the Royal Defence Corps and bears the Corps badge. Aged 47 at the time of his death he is the oldest of the men now remembered on our war memorial. Although his name is recorded on the Holy Trinity war memorial, it appears to have been erroneously omitted from the memorial in St John’s Chapel.