

GUNNER HARRY HURCOMBE, M.M.

69682, 78th Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery

Died aged 26 on 27 August 1917

Buried with honour at *Zuydcoote Military Cemetery, near Dunkirk*; I A 14

Commemorated in Tewkesbury at the Cross and in the Abbey



Zuydcoote Military Cemetery



Military Medal



Royal Garrison Artillery

HARRY HURCOMBE was born in Tewkesbury in 1892 to William Henry Hurcombe and Sarah Ann (formerly Castle). William was born in Gloucester and Sarah came from Gretton; they had eight children, only five still living in 1911. The 1891 Census records William as a Carpenter but he died in 1899. By 1911 Sarah and four children were living in St. Mary's Lane. Harry, a former pupil of the Abbey Schools, was employed at Healing's Flour Mill. The 1911 Census lists both Harry and his brother, Charles, as Miller's Porter, but in 1913 Harry joined the Birmingham Police Force. By 1915 Sarah was a Needlewoman, living in Smiths Lane; her later address was Bulls Court, Church Street.

Harry enlisted as a part-time soldier in the Gloucestershire Regiment in August 1904. He was probably assigned to the 2nd Volunteer Battalion which, in 1908, became the 5th Battalion, one of the Territorial Force units in the regiment. He gave his age at attestation as 18, although he was then just under 12 years old.

Whilst serving as a Police Constable in Birmingham, Harry enlisted on 15 November 1915 in the Royal Garrison Artillery. After a period of training in Gosport he was posted to France on 15 April 1916 with his unit, the 78th Siege Battery, one of the Heavy Artillery units in the Fourth Army. The battery was equipped with four '8-inch howitzers', employed in destroying enemy artillery and other key targets behind enemy lines. In July 1916, during the *Battles of the Somme*, Harry became the first Tewkesburian to win the *Military Medal*; according to the *Register* of 5 August 1916, it was awarded 'for conspicuous bravery in repairing communication wires under shell fire'.

Gunner Harry Hurcombe lost his life on 27 August 1917 in most unfortunate circumstances. On 3 September the *Register* quoted a letter from his Section Officer, 2nd Lt. Masterman to Mrs. Hurcombe: 'I am very sorry to have to tell you of your son, Harry's death in action. We all feel his loss very much, for he was one of the very best. ... He had been sent away for a few days rest at the sea side, behind British lines, and went for a walk along the beach. He must have walked unawares into a gas cloud, which has no smell and gives no warning, and was overcome. He probably became unconscious at once'. The Superintendent of Birmingham Police Force wrote: 'I am very sorry indeed to hear of your great loss ... That he was a good son I am sure, judging by his manly habit and honourable ways whilst attached to my division. His old comrades ... extend to you their deepest sympathy in your bereavement.' Gunner Harry Hurcombe was buried in *Zuydcoote Military Cemetery* near Dunkirk.

On 15 June 1918 the *Register* reported that Harry's mother had attended a parade to receive his *Military Medal*; the ceremony took place on Durdham Downs in Bristol, with troops, cadets and scouts, and six bands, in attendance. The medals were presented by Major-General the Earl of Scarborough, in the company of the Lord Mayor of Bristol and the High Sheriff.

His younger brother, **Private Charles Hurcombe** [†] of the Gloucestershire Regiment, had been killed in February 1915. His sister, Gertrude, born 1898, was a familiar figure about the town in her hand-powered tricycle wheelchair, recalls historian Brian Linnell. She was the last survivor of this well-known local family.