



Richard Pallent

33240 Private, 7th Battalion East Surrey Regiment

He was killed in action on 14th July 1917 in France, aged 31.

Richard is buried at Fins New British Cemetery, Sorel-le-Grand, Somme, France.

Richard Pallent was born in Stradbroke in 1886 although he was not actually baptised until the 20th of July in 1889 when his mother's abode was given as Harleston. This gap between birth and baptism was not that unusual for irregular church attendees at the time. Rootling through local baptism records, you will occasionally find anything up to 6 children from one family being baptised at the same time. These multiple baptisms can occur in batches as and when the church had a crack down on its parishioners and rounded up unbaptised children. Sometimes a child will fall through the gaps entirely and not get around to being baptised until in its twenties when it wanted to marry.

Richard was the oldest of three illegitimate children of Ann Pallent, a single lady born in Weybread. Sadly, it was the birth of the youngest of these three children, Anna Pallent born in early 1893 that led to her mother's death, also in the first quarter of 1893. The middle child Jane (or Jenny W. as she appeared in 1891) was born in either early 1891 or late 1890.

A common assumption, largely based on contemporary middle-class popular literature targeted at middle class readers, is that in Victorian times having an illegitimate child would render the mother beyond the pale and ostracised by her community. Not so; in some instances, a degree of clouding the issue would be used, a child passed as a 'late' addition to the family may well have been a grandchild; the result of a slip up by one of the daughters. When researching Harleston Common, I was surprised to find just how many illegitimate births were associated with those living on the Common at one time or another. A spot of research¹ produced the interesting information that during the high Victorian period, rural counties, Norfolk in particular, had very high illegitimacy levels, 1 in 10 births according to an 1869 report, even twenty years later when the national average was only 4.3%, Norfolk managed a quite impressive 6.7%, narrowly beaten by Cumberland and Herefordshire at 7.2% whilst Shropshire carried on at a steady 10%. Bearing in mind that illegitimacy was almost unheard of amongst the daughters of the upper, middle, and squirearchy classes this would indicate that amongst the working classes you could add at least a few percentage points to these figures. Also, in the time of large families (10 to 20 children was not uncommon), if one reversed the statistics from percentage of births being illegitimate to percentage of women having illegitimate children, including those of women who went on to marry the father and have a number of further, legitimate children, those percentages would soar.

¹ The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales, Pamela Horn p92

rooms than families required. He was sorry to say that there were more illegitimate children born in the county of Norfolk than in any other comparative portion of England; indeed, he thought the illegitimate children of Norfolk were more by one-third, than in other counties, on an average. He could not of course say that this state of things had been owing solely to the insufficiency of cottages; but he believed the inadequate accommodation in cottages was, in many instances, the origin of the evil to which he alluded. (Hear, hear.) The landlord, some-

As early as 1849² the owner of a large Norfolk Estate, Lord Wodehouse, was fulminating against the number of illegitimate children born in Norfolk, he believed this to be more, by one third, than the norm. Part of this he laid at the feet of landowners providing inadequate housing, rather open-mindedly including himself as being at

fault!

The ubiquity of illegitimacy probably explained why these children became so well integrated into the community - let those families with no stain, cast the first stone! It does seem, certainly when looking at the Suffolk papers of the early 19th century, that the sin was not in having bastard children but having bastard children who then became a burden on the Parish, mothers being imprisoned for up to a year if they were repeat offenders. Presumably, if they or the extended family could support the child – c'est la vie!

Baptism records can give clues beyond the obvious but minimal facts entered by the celebrant. The cleric who baptised the child would be perfectly at ease detailing the child as base born, bastard or illegitimate, including when a child was born to a widow. A common practise with an illegitimate child would be to give it, boys particularly, a first name and middle name that matched the putative father's first name and surname thus making sure the community knew the child had been semi-officially ascribed. It was not unusual to find that this earlier child would be baptised, or re-baptised on the same day as the, now married, happy couple's legitimate first born. However, beware, as it was also common for a respectably married lady to use her maiden name as a middle name for her children, or even her mother or grandmother's maiden name depending on the status of her maternal line's family. One could also repeat a particularly respected relative's name in its entirety – hence, in Harleston, a long line of Cleer Sewells who eventually popped up in the Algar family with boys named Cleer Sewell Algar.³

Following this logic, we might expect that in the Pallent case, we could be looking for a father with the name of Richard – more of this later.

Another phenomenon I came across as side benefit of research about Harleston Common was that of the 'house-keeper with child'. If a man, with several children to his name, lost his wife whilst those children were still young, he would be in the difficult position of finding care for those children. If there were only one or two children, they could be farmed out, with a small payment, as 'nurse children' either to family or neighbours. However, these were times of large families in which eventuality, moving in a 'housekeeper' was a good plan. 'Housekeeper' tended to be a polite fiction for the benefit of the census taker, a marriage between householder and housekeeper often followed shortly before the baptism of a subsequent child although some of the more 'reputable' widowers might marry before importing the lady. An ideal candidate for this would be a youngish (with energy) lady with a child or two of her own who would be both grateful for male support and practised with children, what eligible pretty young thing would want to take on 3 or more children from another woman? Often an illegitimate child brought into a family would be absorbed into the mix of step and

² Norwich Mercury 24 Nov 1849

³ Cleer Sewell Algar Victorian surveyor, lithographer, auctioneer and appraiser (and photographer).... stereographs of his from Diss and the Waveney Valley. Son of Charles and Charlotte Algar nee Sewell

half siblings – blended families really are not a late 20th Century phenomena although during the period between the end of WW1 and the 1980's attitudes to such children hardened somewhat.

Moving back to Richard Pallant's mother, Ann, she was the daughter of a Jeremiah, Groom/Gardener and Mary Pallent living in Weybread in 1871 although her parents came from Dennington and Fressingfeild respectively. She was then aged ten and the oldest of 5 children. Her father, who was one of the youngest of his family, was working as an agricultural labourer by the age of 15, the sole wage earner in a household consisting of himself and his widowed mother. By 1861, Jeremiah Pallent had moved to Weybread to set up home with his wife Mary / Maria who herself died in 1875 at which point, as described above Jeremiah needed a new wife to look after those of his 6 children remaining at home. Harriet Cooper nee Wright fitted the bill and the pair wed in 1877. She brought not just one, but two of her children into the marriage, Anna Wright and Arthur Cooper aged 15 and 11 in the 1881 census, the older being her illegitimate first child, the second the product of a marriage to a Christopher Cooper in 1869 who also acknowledged himself to be the father of Anna; Christopher had died in the latter half of 1876. All the protagonists were living in Weybread so when Jeremiah needed himself a wife – bingo!

However, Jeremiah took on both this child and her younger brother Arthur. Hopefully, Jeremiah having married a woman with an illegitimate child, not much younger than Ann would have ensured the family were more relaxed about Jeremiah's daughter, Ann Pallent's, illegitimate children, particularly as it later transpired all three of her children belonged to one man.

This tale of varied and various illegitimacy continues to weave its tangled strands as by the 1891 census, Jeremiah and Harriet, having moved to Swan Lane in Harleston had in the household young John Wright, a 4 years old grandson, the illegitimate child of Harriet's illegitimate child Anna Wright. With the bluntness typical of the time, Anna Wright was described as being an 'idiot from birth', this is rather harsh but she may well have been vulnerable; in addition to John, another illegitimate child, Arthur, aged one year was in the Pulham workhouse with his mother Anna.. Unfortunately, I can't find the family after this, I suspect they actually got omitted from the census, but old Jeremiah died in 1909 in Depwade so I don't think he moved too far. I suspect that in 1901, Jeremiah and his wife were still caring for Anna and her children but by 1911 Annie, former charwoman, and her then 23 years old son John a labourer, were both back in Pulham Workhouse, she died the next year aged 47.

Stay with me, I appreciate it is complicated, but it does help to put in context that Richard Pallent's illegitimacy really was not that unusual in working class rural communities of the time!

So back to young Richard Pallent; following his mother's death in 1893, by 1901 he and his two younger siblings appear in Richard Smith's household and are described as Smith's_son and daughters. This fits in neatly with the assumption that Richard Pallent had been, as was the custom, given his father's first name as his own. What this does raise a question about is why Richard Smith, living in Weybread in 1901, aged 38, never married the children's mother, Ann Pallant. With three children blessing their illicit union, it was hardly a one-night stand! Smith had been born in and continued to live in Weybread and remained there during the period his children were born. He actually appeared in the 1891 census, one of five adjacent related households, all based around the Watermill, containing in total 27 members of his family. I suspect if you had upset one member of the family, the full wrath would descend – perhaps for some reason it was decided that Ann Pallent was not a suitable consort for Richard Smith which might in turn explain why Ann had left her home village and family in and of Weybread and moved to the slightly large town of Stradbroke, For whatever reason the couple did not marry and when, in 1893, Ann died, Richard Smith was left with

a dilemma, to recognise and care for his children or to abandon them. I am glad to say he chose the former course which left him with the problem of providing care for those children

.I have not been able to track down the details of his marriage so cannot tell whether Richard Smith's wife, Emma from Ubbestone, who appeared with him and his three children in the 1901 census was married in order to look after those children or if he had wed prior to Ann Pallent's death and had the three children imposed on her willy-nilly. The mystery is not solved in the 1911 census as Richard Smith was by then a widower being looked after by his 18 years old daughter Annie Pallent, described as his daughter whilst he blithely claimed to have no children (from his marriage, not his melange of course!)

Richard Pallent, who was a grocer's apprentice when he appeared living with his father, Richard Smith, in Weybread in 1901, had moved into Harleston by 1911. Perhaps he had originally moved into his grandfather's household which had been on Swan Lane but when old Jeremiah died in 1909, had to find alternative accommodation. Bit tricky to tell as I can't find Jeremiah in the 1901 census but since his death was registered in Depwade I guess he had not travelled too far.

In 1911, as a 25-year-old, Richard Pallent was living in the generously sized Gowing Household:- 2 parents, 9 children (one older had flown the nest, another had died). Not an overcrowded household though; Charles Gowing, a horse trainer, and his family were living in a 10-room house on the London Road.

The next year Richard married an Ellen M Fox, in the Wayland district in mid-1912, I think we can be fairly confident this was Ellen Mary Fox of Attleborough, who appeared in the 1911 census as a draper's assistant. In mid-1913, their daughter Kathleen Mary was born, she was to be their only child; living to the grand old age of 86, she died in the third month of the 21st Century. In Kelly's 1916 Directory, Richard appears with his own grocery shop, he gives his address as the London road and since, in those days, it was almost universal practice to 'live over' the shop we can assume that is where his shop was. With his wife familiar to the business and a three-year-old child to his name this young man was doing well, however in May of that same year 1916, married men were conscripted. Perhaps Ellen carried on the business, she does not seem to have remarried and she would have needed to support herself and her child. However, Kathleen never married so unless she carried on the family tradition of illegitimate children, with her died Richard Pallent's line.

To precis the tangled web of Richard Pallent's family history, tends to sound like an extended soap opera plot but contrary to our cliched view of up-tight Victorians such complications were fairly common. It could be thought that Richard Smith had cruelly mistreated Ann Pallent, his consort and mother of his three children, I would prefer to think of the pair as star crossed lovers who maintained their relationship in spite of all obstacles. Richard Smith did finally step up to the mark when his paramour died and took on their three illegitimate children including our man Richard Pallent. Smith married for the first time in order to supply a parent to those orphaned children even though this surrogate mother died before she was 40 and before she and Smith had any children themselves. The widowed Richard was left with one of his daughters to care for him.

The death of Ann Pallent's mother meant that her own father Jeremiah, needed to remarry to help raise his children and this stepmother, Harriet, entered into her marriage with Ann's father bringing an illegitimate child with her, possibly with learning difficulties, who had in turn been acknowledged by that child's father after a somewhat belated marriage terminated rather abruptly on his death. The early death of her husband left Harriet in need of a husband to help support herself and her two children. The older of those two children, Anna Wright, grew up to have at least 2 illegitimate children of her own whilst her step-nephew Richard Pallent (I think – it is all very complicated) worked hard,

married his wife before the birth of their own child and was building a rosy future from behind the counter of his store in the busy town of Harleston when the war whisked him away never to return.