



## George Ernest John James

67272 Private, 2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> (City of London) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers

Formerly 45418 Suffolk Regiment

He died on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1917 in Flanders, aged 25

George was buried at Dulhallow Advanced Dressing Station Cemetery, West Vlaanderen, Belgium.

George James was the youngest son of Mark James and Hannah nee Ives, he would have been born when Hannah was 47, after 22 years of marriage during which they produced 12 children. It is difficult to imagine producing, year after alternate year, all those children but at the time this really was not that unusual.

Although Mark was born and raised in Bedingham, his father, Robert (son of Henry and Phoebe nee Johnson) was actually born in Wortwell and baptised St Mary's Redenhall in 1817, although he had moved to Bedingham by the time he married Elizabeth Brothers at Denton.

Mark came from a family of Agricultural Labourers and, true to form, that is how he started his working life, appearing as such in both the 1861 and 1871 censuses, living in his married brother's household in the latter census. This brother had moved out to Hindringham in North Norfolk and at aged 38 to Mark's 26, was (of course) another agricultural labourer.

Shortly after this census, Mark married Hannah Ives in her home parish of Kirby Cane, the daughter of a labourer marrying a labourer, the son of a labourer. There were not many who escaped this route through life.

However, the Railways were coming. Some joined the gangs of 'Navigators' that camped or lodged along the new railway lines following the desperately hard and dangerous work of hacking out ground and boring through hills to ensure the line ran flat and smooth. Laying the railway along the flat Waveney Valley was a little easier than the lines that went across the North York moors! Others worked in the stations, loading, unloading, collecting tickets and of course there were also those working on the trains, on the tracks and controlling signals – many new jobs came with the trains.

The railway reached Harleston in 1850 but the extension to Bungay was not fully opened until November 1860. The line left the Eastern Counties system (Eastern Union division) at Tivetshall, was being worked independently of the Eastern Counties Company and was fairly notorious for the poor state of its passenger carriages. There were a few who commented that they were not much better than the wagons used to transport cattle to and from Harleston's busy livestock auctions. Indeed, if you compare the purely utilitarian architecture of Wortwell Station with the Italianate Grandeur of Harleston you get some idea of the budget! The railway thrived for quite some time and became more efficiently absorbed into the GER or Great Eastern Railway Company. Such was the quantity of traffic, that in 1898 it was being mooted that the line between Harleston and Beccles be doubled. With a population of only 286, Redenhall's station survived not quite 6 years, Wortwell,

a little further from the major towns, survived until Jan 1878 having enjoyed a service for about 17 ½ years.

Although very busy during the Second World War, the 'link' nature of the railway sealed its fate during the notorious 1950's 'Beeching Cuts'. The passenger service was withdrawn in 1953; a memorable piece of cine film of the last passenger journey is preserved in the Norfolk Records Office.

The freight service straggled on for another 10 years or so. Total closure took place when the Tivetshall to Harleston section was closed in 1966. Harleston Station building remains (Blackburn's offices) as do a few other railway buildings on Redenhall Road. The old sidings were developed into a small housing estate (Bridge Close) and the bridges demolished. The brick side piers and embankment are still visible on the footpath from Bunn Lane to Starston.

Luckily Mark by 1881 had a steady job, working for the GER railway company, initially as a 'labourer' but living in the Gate House between the Dove Inn and the Homersfield / Aburgh railway station, now used as a garage. In this context Gate would refer to the manually operated crossing gate; it is a little unclear in this census whether Mark was labouring on the railway whilst his wife was left in charge of the crossing gate or whether he was in charge of the gate, I suspect the former. There are a few manually operated crossings around even today, but not many Luckily the Gate House was a substantial 6 room building, ideal for their generously sized family.

Although the Railway Station at Wortwell had closed in 1878, it was probably a very useful depot / storage area so Mark James would have been well located for his work. By this census Mark and Hannah already had 6 children aged 8 and under, so steady income would have been a true blessing.

**4s. 6d. Case dismissed.—Geo. Skinner, Wortwell, labourer, was charged with assaulting Mark James, of Wortwell, platelayer. Fined 7s. and costs, in default 14 days'. Defendant went to prison.**

*Evening Star, Suffolk  
10 Nov 1888*

Mark became a Plate Layer, by 1888 at the latest; we know this as this was his given job when George Skinner thumped him and was sent to prison for 14 days for his pains. This does not reflect badly on Mark James, during the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Skinners of Wortwell liked nothing more than a punch up, unless it was a punch up accompanied with a lot of beer! Being a Plate Layer was essentially track maintenance making sure rails remained aligned and rotten sleepers were replaced before disaster ensued. This was undoubtedly hard work but, compared with being an agricultural labourer, steady and guaranteed which, bearing mind how regularly babies came along during Mark and Hannah's marriage, was a definite advantage, whilst his older sons followed the well-trodden route into Agricultural Labouring.

However, it seems that James' family had ambition. Oldest son Charles married Jessie South, 8 years his senior in 1893, abandoned the land and joined the Norfolk Police, being posted to Norwich and Swaffham before appearing in Brooke for the 1901 census. Unfortunately, Jessie died in 1907, in the St Faith's area; but Charles remarried, to a London Lass in 1909, and when he appeared in 1911, he had made it to Sergeant, no children just 2 P.C.s lodging with him and his wife in a substantial 7 room Police Station in Diss. Charles' 16-year-old son, Herbert, was at the other end of the county, an apprentice Grocer lodging with his employer in Docking. His daughter, Olive, aged 14 was rather closer, working as a kitchen maid for a solicitor in Diss.

Mark's next son down, Elijah, had joined the GER by 1901, employed as a Railway Engine Stoker, gutsy work requiring relatively little skill compared to engine driving but still steady work. Shortly

after this census James married and the regular wage would, as for his father been a blessing as by 1911, Fireman (referring to fire stoking) James had already 5 children in a (relatively) comfortably sized 5 room-house.

In 1901, Mark was described as a general railway labourer and one of Mark's younger sons had gone into the thatching trade. Ten years further on and retired Mark was still living at the Railway Gate house, the lad who had been learning Thatching had joined GER as a Bridge Carpenter alongside his younger brother George, our Harleston Hero. A few entries along in this census another plate layer was also claiming residence in the Gate House, indicating that GER had not probably not purpose built a dwelling for their gate keeper but just bought an existing property, probably a double dwelling, both parts of which then got called the Gate House. Mark James' family had become a true Railway family with 3 of his 4 of his sons joining him working for the GER, the fourth in the County Police Force having also stepped away from the family's agricultural roots.

In spite of the war, George married in late spring 1917 to Florence May W Middleton. I have not been able to track this lady down, although after the war she was living in Dickleburgh. There are a number of candidates but without actually getting hold of her marriage certificate – too many to choose from. She did finally receive a gratuity of £3 plus a small amount of other moneys, having been married for only a few months when her husband died, doubtless much of that time he was abroad, I have no evidence whether a child resulted from the marriage, I hope she was able to treasure those few happy memories she may have been able to accrue.