

## The Souls Brothers

Annie and William Souls from Great Rissington had six fine sons. The five who were old enough gave up their farm jobs to fight for king and country in the First World War.

None of them came back.

Annie Souls would never stand for God Save the King after that and her grand-daughter, Katherine Hall, recalled how Mrs Soul's overheard cruel gossip about how well off she must be with the pensions from five dead sons.

Annie Souls got a shilling a week for each dead son and a letter from Prime Minister Herbert Asquith in 1916 conveying the "sympathy of the King and Queen for Mrs Souls in her great sorrow" after three of the boys had been killed.

She left the village soon after the end of the war to live the rest of her life at nearby Great Barrington.

There, she suffered further tragedy when her surviving youngest boy died from meningitis.

Home for the Souls family was a four-bedroom tied cottage across the green from the village school.

The boys would have followed their father into agricultural labouring by the age of 12 or 13 but they could at least write their names, which they carved into the beams of a village barn.

When war broke out in 1914, Albert and Walter quickly joined the 2nd battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment.

The older boys - Fred, Alf and Arthur - enlisted originally in the 16th Cheshire's, a 'Bantam' battalion, raised to take big-hearted recruits otherwise too small for the army. Arthur won the Military Medal for the action in which he was killed but the citation detailing the courage that cost him his life probably went on a bonfire of family papers said to have burned for two days.

From Battalion records we know that:

Albert and Walter sailed to France in June 1915 and were soon surrounded by death and knee-deep in mud.

In September, they were flung into the Battle of Loos where the British suffered 50,000 casualties.

The diary paints a chaotic picture of trenches jammed with dead and wounded, where men risked being gassed by their own side before going over the top into a firestorm of enemy machine guns.

The brothers came through it and the Worcester's were singled out for special praise for their gallantry.

A month later they were paraded before King George V on a damp and foggy morning.

The diary reports that the King's horse reared up and threw him off as he left the parade ground.

Inseparable, the Souls lads transferred to the newly-formed Machine Gun Corps in January 1916 and spent weeks on training and trench duties amid the slag heaps in the bleak, flat mining area around Bethune in northern France.

On March 14, the 5th Brigade Machine Gun Corps war diary reports one casualty.

It might have been all quiet on the Western Front but it was the day Annie Souls lost her first son to the war.

Walter's unit was hurled into the battle of the Somme on July 20 - he probably wouldn't have known that a day earlier, brother Fred had gone over the top nearby with the 16th Cheshire's never to be seen again.

Walter was wounded and shipped out to a hospital at Rouen, from where his mother received this letter:

"Dear Mrs Souls, I much regret to have to tell you that your son died very suddenly about nine o'clock yesterday evening.

"He came to us with a wound in the upper part of his left leg, and on Tuesday he had to undergo an operation, but he rallied from that all right and he seemed to be better.

"In fact he was quite cheery, and then in the evening on the next day he quite suddenly collapsed and died instantly from an embolism (or clot of blood) in the heart.

"I am enclosing a postcard which he wrote on the day he died. He will be buried in the little British cemetery just outside Rouen where lie other brave lads who have fallen in this dreadful war.

"This will be a dreadful blow to you and you have our deepest sympathy in your great loss - M. Phillips, Matron, 25 Stationary Hospital, BEF, Rouen."

The hospital chaplain wrote: "You have both made a great sacrifice - you have given your son, he his life. It was only the day before I had a talk with him. He seemed quite happy and little did I think that he was so near the end."

Alf went from the 16th to the 11th Cheshire's who, from their diary entries, were badly mauled in the early days of the Somme and reduced to just 100 men - one tenth of normal numbers.

"Tired and weary, the men never failed to respond to any exertion demanded of them," reports the battalion diary

They suffered appalling casualties again at Messines Ridge and Ypres in 1917 and were in the thick of the backs-to-the-wall action at Ploegsteert Wood in Flanders in the great German spring offensive of 1918, when Alfred Souls met his death.

The 11th Cheshire's fell back 38 miles over one 48-hour period, stopping six times to dig in and make a stand and being reduced once more to just a handful of officers and a straggling bunch of exhausted survivors.

**Alf wasn't one of the lucky ones - he was killed, aged 30, on April 20, 1918, and is buried in leafy Strand Military Cemetery on the edge of the wood.**

Family legend says that Arthur, by then a lance corporal attached to the 7th Royal West Kent's, lost all will to live when he heard of his twin brother's death.

The West Kent's' diary for April 1918 records orders to hold the Villers-Bretonneux plateau "at all costs", lists casualties as six officers and 228 other ranks killed, wounded and missing and gives a roll of honour, including "Military Medal for 21683 L/c Arthur William Souls (since a casualty)."

**Arthur** is among 550 soldiers, half of them unidentified, **buried in Hangard Communal Cemetery extension**, one of those places of terrible beauty, sloping down towards a poplar-lined lane and the winding Luce River - once running with blood but now as peaceful and pretty as the River Windrush near Great Rissington.

**Albert is buried at Bully-Grenay** in a grim part of northern France where the scars of battle have healed but the slag heaps and scars of coal mining remain. **Walter is laid to rest at St Sever Cemetery, Rouen.**

Close by is the grave of another soldier who shares a tragic bond with young Walter Souls - he, too, was one of five brothers to die in "the war to end wars".

The occasional TV camera apart, Rissington has been spared the Hollywood invasion and the Souls haven't received the Saving Private Ryan treatment just yet

But those haunting pictures in the church are a reminder how one family was destroyed.

Every Remembrance Sunday the names of the brave village sons are solemnly read out at a special service.

The congregation turn, heads bowed, towards the memorial, and silently remember them all.

**Alf** and **Arthur** were identical twins. Born an hour apart, they died five days apart.

**Walter** wrote a cheery postcard home from hospital and was dead from a blood clot by the time it was delivered.

**Albert**, the youngest and, with Walter, the first to enlist, was the **first** to be killed.

**Fred** was never found but his mother kept a candle burning in the window in the hope that he would return.

### **The full Roll of Honour:**

- Albert Souls, aged 20, killed in action, France, 1916, buried in Bully-Grenay Communal Cemetery.
- Frederick Souls, aged 30, missing in action, France, 1916, commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.
- Walter Souls, aged 24, died of wounds, France, 1916, buried in St. Sever Cemetery at Rouen.
- Alfred Souls, aged 30, killed in action, Flanders, 1918, buried in The Strand Military Cemetery.
- Arthur Souls, aged 30, killed in action, France 1918, buried in Hangard Communal Cemetery.

**Albert Souls**  
Died: 14/03/1916



**Frederick Souls**  
Date of Death: 19/07/1916



**Walter Souls**  
Died: 02/08/1916



**Alfred Souls**  
**Died: 20/04/1918**



**Arthur Souls**  
**Died: 25/04/1918**

