

*A Sermon preached by The Revd Eleanor Whalley on Remembrance Sunday 2017 at Soham Parish Church*

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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We've not got very long this morning

but I did want to share something very moving with you – something I discovered only yesterday.

Some of you know that for a while now I've been trying to find out more about

the writer of this letter I've got in my hand.

This letter was found in one of the cushions from our chancel -

Cushions which a team of our Thursday Communion goers are in the process of recovering.

Here's a 'before' and an 'after' [SHOW CUSHIONS]

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So, as I say, this letter – this piece of paper – was found in one of the cushions -

Jean Doty discovered it a few weeks ago

when she was stripping down one of the cushions.

The letter says this:

It's headed 'Sunnyside, Soham, Cambs.' And it continues,

'Twenty cushions covered by Mrs Townsend just previous to the War. September 1939 a gift from her'

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Now even before I'd seen that letter –

From the moment Frances told me about it, something about it struck me.

I felt there was something behind this letter – something the letter didn't say

So I tried to find out a bit about Mrs Townsend –

Initially I couldn't find out very much at all – no one seemed to know much about her,

but yesterday afternoon, quite by chance, I discovered a lot more.

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Mrs Townsend, I discovered, then Constance Taylor married Harry Townsend of Fordham

She married him in this church.

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Constance herself was from Soham.

Before she moved to Sunnyside

she lived at The Place – in the house that is now the Pavilion.

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On 23 Sept. 1895 Constance Townsend gave birth to her first child.

She gave birth to a little boy, and she called him Harry Gordon.

She had him christened in this church - christened in that font

christened when he was one month old on 25 October 1895.

The family lived at The Place with Mary Taylor,

Who was Harry's maternal Godmother.

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By 1901, the census tells us, Harry had two sisters:

Winifred who was 3 and Irene who was 1.

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By 1911 Harry was 15 and a pupil at Framlingham College.

3 years later – you'll've guessed where this is going –

Harry had joined up.

He was 5ft 9" tall and his chest was 35-37".

He said he was 19 and he gave his address as The Place.

He joined the City of London Yeomanry

and on 7 May 1915 he arrived in Egypt.

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By 12 July 1918 Harry was dead –

he'd been sick with appendicitis almost from the time of his arrival in Egypt.

He had an operation in Cairo, but he developed a disordered action of the heart and late the onset of TB.

He was sent to hospital first in Stoke on Trent and then in London, and finally discharged from the Army.

He died at home – at the The Place – so 200 yards from where we are now, just across the Recreation Ground.

He died, we can only hope, with Constance at his side,

nursing him to the end.

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21 years later, Constance finished covering 20 seat cushions.

She finished them – the letter says - as a gift.

What is so striking about this letter, it seems to me, is what it doesn't say.

It doesn't say who the gift is for.

It says she finished the cushions 'just previous' to the War: Sept. 1939.

Constance writes nothing about that other war.

She says nothing about the war in which she lost her only son.

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But she covers twenty cushions and she puts them in our chance!

Ask the ladies who are re-covering those cushions now

and they'll tell you that re-covering one is a labour of Hercules.

Covering twenty was something else.

Mrs Townsend must have worked on them for months. She'd've hurt her fingers as she sewed.

And she brought the cushions here.

She brought them to a church – to our chancel –

She brought them to a place which through its community engagement and through its services and its prayers  
tells and stands for a story.

It tells a story of another mother who lost her only son.

It tells the story of the son,

a son who like Harry knew the agony of suffering and death –

knew it not because he'd read about it or heard about it or listened to it

but knew it because he'd lived it – lived it and lived it faithfully to and beyond the end.

For this son too gave his life -

gave his life that others – that we – might be free and have life ourselves.

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And if that story is true,

Constance might have thought –

and she'd be forgiven for questioning if it was true –

then perhaps Harry's life was not given in vain.

Perhaps the degradation and destruction of war would not have the last word.

Perhaps all who gave their lives and still give their lives

would find a dignity in death lost to them in life.

Perhaps people would come to this church and sit on those cushions

as Constance herself might have sat –

people would come as we come today

as a mark of respect to Harry, to Charles Loveday and to so many others.

I think Constance hoped we'd remember them.

Amen.

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Announcement at the beginning of service:

One of the readers in Act of Remembrance: James Robinson, great great nephew of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Charles Loveday.

Lieutenant Loveday was an officer in the 54<sup>th</sup> machine gun corps

He died on 17 Oct 1917 at 27 at the Battle of Passchedaele – his body was never found.

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SUNNYSIDE.  
SOHAM.  
CAMBS.

Twenty cushions  
covered by Mr. Townsend  
just few coins to the  
War Sep: 1939  
a gift from her