

It's never too late to say thank you: a tale from WW1



Brewery Orchard Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, Bois-Grenier, France. One memorial reads: 'In Memory of Private A MASON, 19846, 9th Battalion, Yorkshire Regiment, who died on 25 January 1916. Remembered with honour. Commemorated in perpetuity.'

In a far-off battlefield cemetery at Brewer Orchard in Bois-Grenier (near Armentieres) France lie the mortal remains of Private Alfred Mason – originally of the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, he later transferred to the 9th Battalion, Yorkshire Regiment. He was killed in action on 25th January 1916. His place of birth is given as 'Kilsby, Northamptonshire'. His military record shows that he enlisted in Leicester, giving his place of residence as Earls Shilton.

These bare details were presented to me in an email from a military historian, who contacted me to ask if I could find Alfred Mason's record on Kilsby's WW1 Roll of Honour so that it could be added to his file.

However, I soon discovered that Alfred Mason does not appear on either of the WW1 Rolls of Honour in Kilsby Church; and when I checked further, I found that his name is also absent from the WW1 Roll of Honour for Earls Shilton. How strange! This called for some detective work ... and here are the results of it.

The story starts back in 1875, when 23 year old Thomas Mason married 21 year-old



Pte. Alfred Mason's decorations

Emily Jane, and the couple came to live in Kilsby, where Thomas found work as a labourer on the railway – the second line to London via Northampton, running just north of Kilsby, was under construction at this time, and railway employment was plentiful. The couple had five children – Mary Louisa (baptised 2-Jul-1876), George Thomas (baptised 6-Jul-1879), twins Mary Ann and Alice (baptised 6-Aug-1882) and Emily Elizabeth (baptised 5-Dec-1886).



By 1893, 17 year old Mary Louisa Mason was working as a signalwoman on the railway – a most unusual occupation for a young woman, she would almost certainly have been the only female in an entirely male environment. And this is where the difficulties started ...

There is only one baptism for an Alfred Mason in the Kilsby church registers (it is in 1894), so there can be no doubt, this is definitely the man who died for his country aged only 21 and now lies buried in France. The baptismal entry reads:

"2-Jul-1894: baptised Alfred, son of Louisa Mason, signalwoman".

No father's name is given. You can work this out for yourselves, I do not need to spell it out. And from the facts I have given above, you can visualise all too easily how it must have come about.

This was the most puritanical period of Victoria's long reign, and an illegitimate child would have been stigmatised along with his mother – especially where the mother was still a teenager; there would have been scant sympathy for either mother or child, and Alfred's future in Kilsby would have been one of name-calling, bullying and universal ostracism. It is difficult to imagine today what it would have been like for Alfred – and it is all the more unjust since Alfred himself was merely the innocent victim of his fate.

It was therefore no surprise to me when I found no record of young Louisa Mason or her little son in the 1901 census for Kilsby; it seemed clear that they must have moved away to escape the ignominy. But there was more to it than that ... and as I carried on working through the parish registers, I found two further sad little entries:

"2-Jun-1896: buried Emily Jane Mason, aged 42"

"18-Nov-1897: buried Thomas Mason, aged 45"

So, Louisa had lost both of her own parents within three years of the birth of her son Alfred. Even more reason, one might suppose, for her to get away from Kilsby ... but then I found a further record:

"11-Nov-1896: William Alfred Baker married Mary Louisa Mason"

William Alfred Baker came from Rugby, he was a labourer and the son of railway platelayer William Baker – so it seems very likely that both father and son worked on the railway, and that they must have known Louisa Mason the signalwoman and been familiar with her situation, perhaps even at close quarters.

This raises some very interesting questions. Was young William Alfred Baker the real father of little Alfred Mason? Did William's father intervene to ensure that the

marriage took place? Were the railway authorities involved? We will never know any of these things for sure. On the one hand, young William Baker's second forename was Alfred, and it could be plausibly argued that Louisa discreetly named her baby after his father; but on the other hand, we know that young Alfred retained "Mason" as his surname. On balance, I am inclined to think that William Alfred Baker was Alfred's real father, but it is only a personal view. At any rate, it seems that young William was an honest and kindly man, and prepared to save Louisa from a future that would have been truly grim. She married William Baker just five months after burying her mother – and they moved away from Kilsby, for there are no Bakers in the 1901 Kilsby census return.

So, here we are at the end of this little story from the late Victorian age ...

And yet, perhaps the story is not quite over. Alfred Mason made the supreme sacrifice, he fought and died for his country, but his name is not recorded on any Honour Roll, even in his birthplace. Given the circumstances, it seems very likely that the people of Kilsby would have been unaware of his death in battle, when they erected the war memorials in St Faith's.

19 Campaign — **1914-15** (A) Where decoration was earned.
(B) Present situation.

Name	Corps	Rank	Reg. No.	Roll on which included (if any)	
(A) MASON	Yorks R.	Pte	19806	VICTORY	0/1/10/3/2 988
(B) Alfred	—	—	—	BRITISH	cb cb
				153TAB	2/1/873 533

Action taken *Dead*

THEATRE OF WAR *(1) France*

QUALIFYING DATE: *26.8.15*

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But we do know the story now, thanks to a chance email from a military historian and a bit of simple research. So perhaps it is still not too late, almost a century later, to say a belated 'thank you; rest in peace' and commemorate this son of Kilsby who died in the mud at Armentieres on a cold wet Tuesday in January 1916.

Gren Hatton