

"For Most Conspicuous Bravery"

The Story of Thomas Woodcock V. C.



Cpl. Thomas Woodcock V. C.

On Remembrance Sunday in November, after the ceremony in the Parish Church yard, when the bands have stopped playing and the dignitaries have departed, Mrs. Veronica Ashton steps forward and, as she has done for over forty years, quietly lays a wreath on the section of the monument that bears the names of the Irish guards who fell in the Great War of 1914 to 1918.

Mrs. Ashton is the granddaughter of Thomas Woodcock of St. Patrick's, the First Wigan - born soldier to win the Victoria Cross. His story has been told many times over the years in the local press, but it is fitting that it should be told once again here, in the story of his own parish, a story in which he wrote his own heroic page.

He was born in Belvoir Street in the heart of the parish on March 19th, 1888. His family had a mining background. Tom attended St. Patrick's School and would have been among the first boys to attend the new building added on to the old church building in 1893. He may have walked in the first Whit Monday walk of 1893 and probably did walk in the 1897 walk. He may well have sat in the congregation and listened to Mgr. Nugent when he made a return visit to St. Patrick's for the Golden Jubilee.

Tom became a miner as was natural and so was in an exempted occupation when war came in 1914. It should be stressed therefore, that he did not need to join up, nor could he be accused of lacking courage as mining was recognised as the most dangerous occupation to be in outside of active service with the armed forces.



Tom Woodcock with his wife and children at his homecoming in March 1918 (the littlest girl is May, mother of Mrs. Veronica Ashton. The others are John and Nora).

When the great recruitment drive of 1915 (Your Country Needs You) came along, Tom felt it was his duty to go. He and some pals from the parish enlisted in the Irish Guards on the 26th May, 1915. He was soon in France at the front, and saw a great deal of action.

It was in September, 1917, when he carried out the deed that earned him the highest honour this country can give to one of its soldiers. The official citation tells the story and is reproduced in full on page 114.

Tom was a true hero and his self - sacrifice was not ended yet!

On the 3rd March, 1918, he came home to a hero's welcome. He was given a civic reception by the Mayor and Corporation and was presented with an illuminated scroll. This must have been a proud moment for him, but it is probable he felt even more proud a few days later on St. Patrick's Night. As Fr. Swarbrick told a packed meeting in St. Patrick's school, in its way, this was the most special of all the occasions that had been held to honour him, for here he was among his own and proud they were to own him.



Thomas Woodcock's grave at Douchy-les Ayette. It bears the badge of the Irish Guards and a representation of the V. C. The epitaph says "FIRST MY GOD THEN MY COUNTRY".

That very night, Tom Woodcock left for London to return to France and the war. Once again it should be pointed out that as a holder of the Victoria Cross, he did not have to return. But as long as his comrades were enduring the rigours of war, his self - sacrificing spirit would allow him to do no less. On March 27th, 1918, a few days after his 30th birthday, this valiant son of St. Patrick's fell in battle at the front. He lies buried in France at the British military cemetery at Douchy - les - Ayette.



Mrs. Veronica Ashton lays a wreath in memory of her grandfather, Tom Woodcock

At the time of his death, Tom's home was at No. 2 Teck Street. Teck Street no longer exists and the spot is now occupied by the green space area of St. Patrick's Infant School. Perhaps the hero is happy that St. Patrick's children now play where once he watched his own children at play.

Tom's name lives on in the parish in the shape of Woodcock House, which is named for him. His spirit and blood live on in his granddaughter, her children and her grandchildren.



INSET: Thomas Woodcock's
Victoria Cross.

CITATION

No. 8387

Private Thomas Woodcock

Victoria Cross

Awarded 13th September, 1917

Gazetted 17th September, 1918

For most conspicuous bravery and determination.

He was one of a post commanded by L/ Sgt. Moyney which was surrounded. The post held out for ninety - six hours, but after that time was attacked from all sides in overwhelming numbers and forced to retire.

Private Woodcock covered the retirement with a Lewis gun, and only retired when the enemy had moved up and around his post and were only a few yards away. He then crossed the river, but hearing cries for help behind him, returned and waded into the stream amid a shower of bombs from the enemy and rescued another member of the party. The latter he then carried across open ground in broad daylight towards our front line regardless of the machine gun fire that was opened on him.