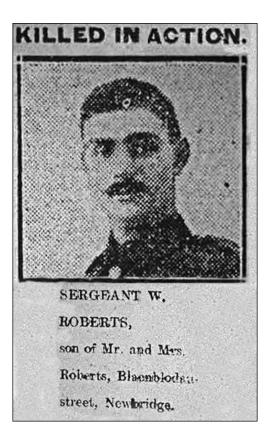
Newbridge War Memorial

# L/Sergeant Caleb William Roberts

1/2<sup>nd</sup> Monmouthshire Regiment



www.newbridgewarmemorial.co.uk

## L/Sergeant Caleb William Roberts 1/2<sup>nd</sup> Monmouthshire Rgt.

Commemorated on Newbridge War Memorial as W. Roberts 2nd Mons. Commemorated on Celynen Collieries Roll of Honour Buried in A.I.F. Burial Ground, Flers, France

#### Family

Caleb William Roberts was born in Cwmtillery, Mons around 1891, the son of Thomas & Edith Roberts. By 1901 the family were living at 23 Blaen Blodau Street, Newbridge, Thomas (48) was working underground as a coalminer (hewer) whilst Edith, eighteen years his junior, was looking after their three children – Caleb William (10), Isaac Leonard (6) and Hilda May (3).

In 1911 the Roberts were still living at 23 Blaen Blodau Street and Caleb William had started working as an underground haulier at the Celynen Colliery. The family had grown with the addition of Bertha (10) and Thomas George (3) sadly they appear to have lost a daughter, Iris between the two Censuses.

#### Mobilization

William Roberts was a member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Monmouthshire TF which had its HQ in Pontypool. Originally 'E' company had been based in Newbridge but in 1908 it was merged with the company based in Crumlin, where they proceeded to train.

Following the declaration of war on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914 the Regulars, Reservists and Territorials were put on a war footing and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mons. TF took up their war station at Pembroke Dock. It should be remembered that the Territorial Force was intended for home defence so the posting to defend Pembroke Dock is not as strange as it may seem!

On 10<sup>th</sup> August the battalion entrained for Oswestry where the training took on a more serious note when Colonel Cuthbertson gave a lecture asking men to sign up for foreign service, as Territorials signed up for home service only. Soon after signing the 'pledge', as it was known, the battalion boarded trains for Northampton on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1914 where they were to continue their training until 29<sup>th</sup> September when they were moved again, this time to East Anglia, just north of Ipswich. They were to assist in the digging of defences against a German invasion but only a day later they were on their way back to Northampton to prepare for active service.

The official battalion history commented:

To be selected as one of the first Territorial battalions to reinforce the hard tried remnants of the original Expeditionary Force was a signal honour, which is eloquent of the highest state of efficiency to which Colonel Cuthbertson had brought to the  $2^{nd}$  Monmouthshires.

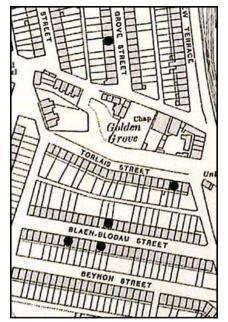
Many other Territorial units were destined to remain in training in the UK for many months so it was, indeed, an honour to be one of the first although there was to be another month getting used to new kit before moving to the front.



SS Manchester Importer - courtesy www.maritimetas.org

On 5<sup>th</sup> November 1914 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mons. boarded the troop ship 'Manchester Importer' at Southampton docks and set sail for Le Havre in France to join 12th Brigade, 4th Division.

Few of the men who left Southampton that day were destined to return with the battalion which was to take part in many of the iconic engagements on the western front.



In all 30 officers and 984 other ranks embarked, amongst them were five men who were to be commemorated on the Newbridge War Memorial.

L/Cpl. William Caleb Roberts (1270) L/Cpl. Jonathan Jackson M.M. (1966) Pte. John Parker (2068) Pte. Henry Charles Birt (2120) Pte. Frederick Hillier (2134)

The five men undoubtedly knew each other as they would have worked together in the Celynen collieries, trained together at Crumlin Drill Hall and they all lived within a few yards of each other.

Henry Birt, Jonathan Jackson and William Roberts all lived in Blaen-Blodau Street, Frederick Hillier lived in the next street -Torlais Street and John Parker 100 yards away in Grove Street.

Addresses of 2<sup>nd</sup> Mons casualties

#### Action on the Western Front

The  $1/2^{nd}$  Mons. spent the winter of 1914-15 engaged in trench warfare near to Armentières and then took part in the Second Battle of Ypres in April and May 1915 fighting alongside the  $1/1^{st}$  and  $1/3^{rd}$  Mons. The losses in the three battalions were so great that all three were temporarily amalgamated until July 1915 when the  $1/2^{nd}$  was brought back up to strength and was able to resume its own identity.

On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1916 the Battalion left the 4<sup>th</sup> Division and moved to the Lines of Communication. Subsequently, on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1916, they were transferred as the Pioneer Battalion to the 29<sup>th</sup> Division who had just arrived from Egypt, a role which they were to occupy during the Somme Offensive and then on to the end of the war.

As a result of a December 1914 Army Order, each of the BEF's Divisions was allotted a Pioneer Battalion that would be devoted to various types of labouring work. The tough coal miners who made up the great majority of the Monmouthshire Regiment were soon seen as the ideal men for the task and Welsh coal miners became well respected for their ability with both the pick and the rifle. Following their tour of duty on the Somme, where the 2<sup>nd</sup> Monmouths got off comparatively lightly compared to other units (278 casualties in July), the battalion moved to the Ypres area. At the time Ypres was a comparatively quiet sector but was destined to see some of the worst fighting of the war in what was to become known as the Third battle of Ypres around the village of Passchendaele.

In early October 1916 the battalion was on the move again and was ordered back to the Somme region to occupy a camp near Montauban, a village which had been captured the first day of the Battle of the Somme (1<sup>st</sup> July 1916). Conditions deteriorated rapidly as winter set in and the battalion's job of maintaining roads and trenches became almost impossible, some roads having been pulverised into a couple of feet of liquid mud. Stories circulated of men falling into muddy shell holes never to be seen again, whether these tales were true or not, they serve to illustrate the conditions in which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Monmouths tried to carry out their pioneer duties.

#### Caleb William Roberts - Killed in Action

Although the horrendous conditions in which they struggled made life very difficult it must not be forgotten that the Germans were still shelling the British positions so death and serious injury were a constant threat. As winter took hold the battle came to a halt and officially closed on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1916 but this didn't make life easier for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mons as they continued to be shelled by German long range artillery.

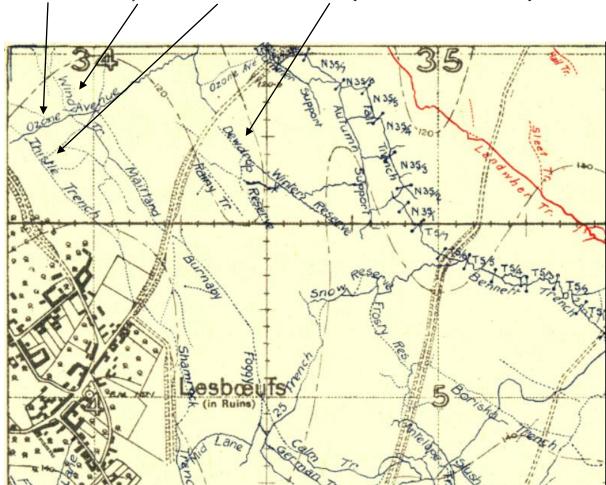
On 23<sup>rd</sup> November a direct hit on the camp destroyed the mess hut of A company and two days later Captain Clive Warneford Taunton was killed by a direct hit on his tent.

27<sup>th</sup> November 1916 saw the battalion working on maintaining the communications trenches north of the village of Lesboefs but as the battalion War Diary shows, they were hampered by bad weather which flooded and collapsed the trenches. It was whilst the battalion was working to maintain the trenches that L/Sgt Caleb William Roberts was killed, probably by another of the long range shells which had so hampered the battalion's work.

The bad weather proved too much for the communication trenches which had 27 become flooded and the sides had fallen in, rendering the trench impassable; OZONE for about 300 yards astride of the SUNKEN ROAD W. of THISTLE; おり - in FLANK AVENUE E. of GERMAN TRENCH and the AEROPLANE. During the day and night the following work was done: -The trench was OZONE AVENUE. widened and falls cleared between DEWDROP and WINDY TRENCHES. Dimensions width at top 7', at bottom 2', depth 6', with a berm 18" wide. Steps were cut at intervals of 100 yards and trenchboards were laid in the gaps. One drain and sump hole were made and 100 trenchboards carried up from GINCHY DUMP. FLANK AVENUE. 350 yards of trench were cleared and 3 sump holes and drains completed, the width of these being length 9 yards, depth 5'6", width at top 3', at bottom 1'. Dimensions of sump holes 6' x 8' and depth 6' to 8'. 80 trenchboards were carried up.

Extract from Official War Diary - 2nd Monmouthshire Regiment for 27th November 1916

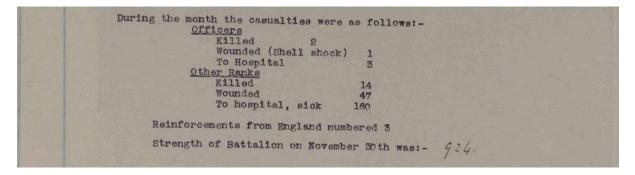
The following extract from a trench map shows the trenches which were being worked on by the battalion on the day that L/Sgt Roberts was killed.



Ozone Avenue, Windy Trench, Thistle Trench and Dewdrop Trench can be seen in the top left corner

Extract from a British Army Trench Map

The following extract from the War Diary indicates that L/Sgt Roberts was one of 16 Officers & Other Ranks of 2<sup>nd</sup> Mons killed in November 1916. In addition, a further 48 were wounded and a staggering 163 were admitted to hospital, sick as a result of the terribly cold, sodden conditions in which they were living and trying to work.



#### **Caleb William Roberts - Decorations**

L/Sgt Roberts and his colleagues were amongst the first Territorial soldiers to embark for France (7/11/1914) and as such they qualified for the 1914 Star sometimes (unofficially) called the Mons Star, the Victory medal and the British War Medal.

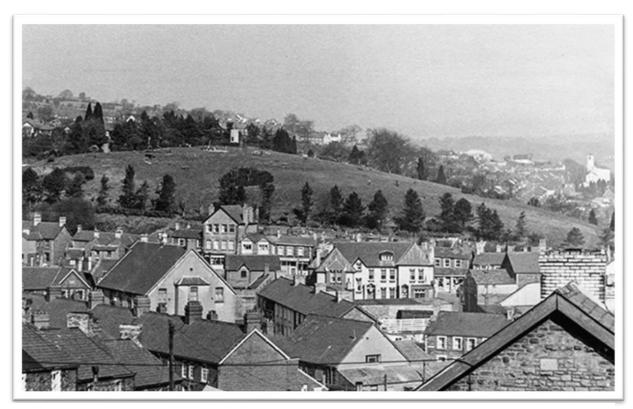
To qualify for the 1914 Star a serviceman must have served with the establishment of their unit in France and Belgium between August 5th 1914, and midnight of November 22/23rd, 1914. A bar clasp (worn on the medal ribbon) inscribed "5 Aug. to 22 Nov. 1914" was given to all those who qualified for the 1914 Star and who served under fire.

The Medal Card below shows L/Sgt Roberts being issued the 1914 Star but despite the fact that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Monmouthshire Regiment qualified for the bar clasp (because they served within in the range of enemy mobile artillery) it was not issued to him.

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The reason for the lack of a clap is simply that in order to have the clasp issued the soldier (or his family if he had been killed) had to fill in an official form, and send it off to the War Office. More than half of the 367,000 1914 Stars issued never had the clasp claimed.

#### Caleb William Roberts - Newbridge War Memorial



Newbridge War Memorial in its original location on the hill at Caetwmpyn Park

Photo © Ken Buck

Caleb William Roberts is one of 79 casualties of the First World War commemorated on the Newbridge War Memorial which was unveiled on 24th October 1936 by Sir John Beynon. Referring to those to whose memory the memorial had been erected he said:

"At the call of their King and country, they left their various occupations to take up arms. This Memorial will be a reminder to the youth of the district of what their fathers did before them, and I am confident that if the dread call comes, they will be as ready as in 1914."

The memorial was originally situated at the top of the hill in Caetwmpyn Park and commanded a view of most of the locality, it was a visible reminder of the sacrifice made by the people of the town. In the mid-1990s the location of the memorial began to become an issue as ageing veterans were finding the location difficult to access on Remembrance Sunday and the isolated location also made it an easy target for vandals who were regularly defacing it.

Something had to be done and in 1995 the Newbridge British Legion agreed to dismantle the memorial which was subsequently re-erected at the National History



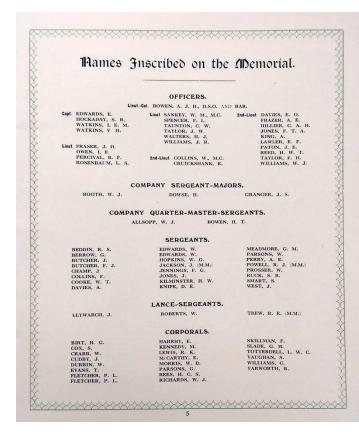
The memorial was moved to St Fagans in 1996

Museum in St Fagans and a new one was erected in the town close to the police station.



#### Caleb William Roberts - Memorial Chapel 2nd Battalion Monmouthshire Regiment

The Memorial Chapel to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Monmouthshire Regiment is housed at St Cadoc's church, Trevethin, Pontypool.



The Memorial was unveiled 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1923 by Lieut-Gen. Sir H Beauvoir de Lisle, K.C.B., K.C.M.G., D.S.O.. It consists of a window and stained glass, a reredos (decoration behind the altar), and carved oak tablets inscribed with 539 names on the East Wall of the Memorial Chapel, surrounding an altar.

The page shown on the left is taken from the Order of Service for the Dedication of the Memorial which was led by the Lord Bishop of Monmouth. It show Caleb William Roberts as one of only three Lance-Sergeants who died serving with the 2nd Battalion Monmouthshire Regiment during the Great War.

#### Caleb William Roberts - Celynen Collieries Roll of Honour

The committee at the Celynen Collieries Institute decided to build a new hall alongside the Institute in 1923 and on June 9th the decision was made to call the new hall, the "Celynen Collieries' Workmen's Memorial Hall".

In the front entrance of new the Memorial Hall a white marble tablet was placed high on the wall. The text on the tablet reads

GLORIA ERECTED IN EVERLASTING MEMORY OF ALL OUR MEMBERS WHO FELL IN THE GREAT WAR 1914 ~ 1918 THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVERMORE

In 1935 the committee commissioned a Roll of Honour which was to hold the names of Institute members who died or served in the Great War.

Following a tender process, a design proposed by the Western Mail was accepted at a price of £21. Between January and October 1935 the committee tried to draw up a list of the names to be included, a number of notices asking for names were posted in the Institute and other appeals were made.



It would appear that the Western Mail supplied a version with some names missing and following some debate the committee decided cut out the words "Memorial Hall" from the centre panel to make room for the extra names (in smaller lettering). This change of design resulted in an increase in the price to £29.5s

Both versions of the centre panel are still housed in the Memo, the first with the names of 25 men who died, the final one with 75 names. Caleb William Roberts name was not on the original version but was added by the time of the revision.

#### Newbridge War Memorial



Two versions of the centre panel of the Roll of Honour - Caleb William Roberts only appears on the second

#### Caleb William Roberts - Newbridge Medallion

Newbridge and the surrounding towns and villages were mourning the loss of hundreds of lives throughout the war and so, following the Armistice on 11th November 1918, the community set out to honour those who had fallen but it also wanted to remember the contribution of those men and women who took part in the war and came home to their families.

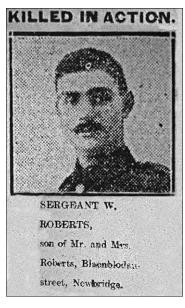
At a public meeting held at the Workmens Institute on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1918 Mr D. A. Jones proposed a motion that the meeting "pledge ourselves to establish a fund to provide a fitting reception for our Boys from the Newbridge Postal Area on their return home from the war".



Caleb William Roberts' medallion

Such was the enthusiasm to get started that the first committee meeting was held immediately following the closure of the public meeting. The Committee went on to raise funds to allow them to hold a series of receptions as men and women returned from the war and purchase and have inscribed a medal for all those, from the Newbridge Postal Code, who served in the war. The tender to supply the medals was won by a local jeweller - Mr Trigg - and on 19th June 1919 the committee asked him to supply 600 medals at 21 shillings each.

The medallion presented to Caleb William Roberts (above) was found by Drew Lloyd when he was helping his father to dig some footings in their garden in Oakdale about 15 years ago. Teenager Drew



had the presence of mind to keep the medallion safe and along with his father, Wayne, he resolved to return it to the family of L/Sgt. Roberts should the opportunity ever arise. After seeing another medallion on the Newbridge War Memorial Facebook page they got in touch with details of the medallion which they had found.

The caption on this newspaper photograph indicated that L/Sgt. Roberts' parents lived in Blaen Blodau Street, confirmed as number 23 on the 1911 Census.

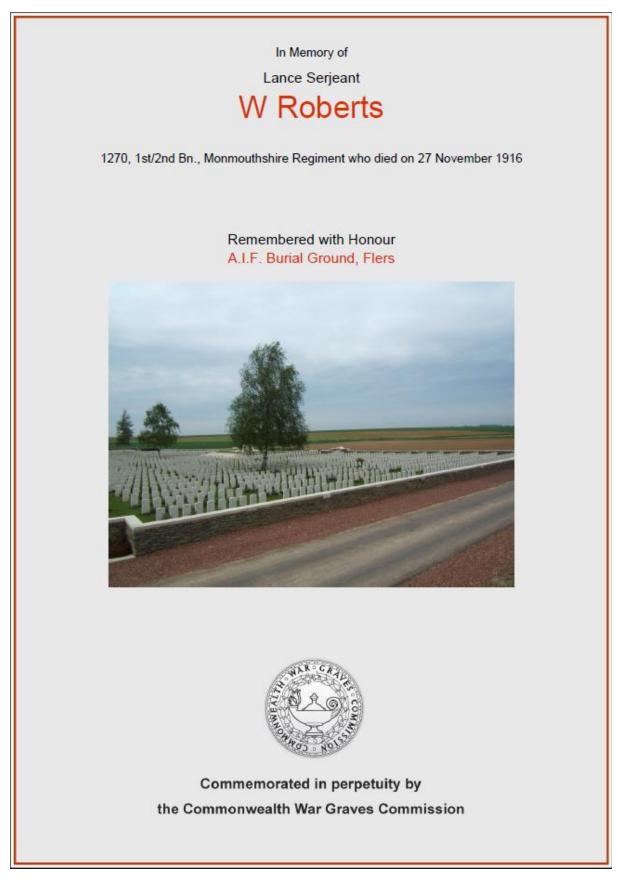
With this information a Facebook appeal for any relations soon paid dividends when Gill Price got in touch to say that her old school friend Lynn Williams' family lived there before and after the First World War.

A few phone calls later we had confirmed that Lynn was indeed the grandniece of Caleb William Roberts although she had never known that her Grandmother (Hilda May Roberts) lost a brother in the war.

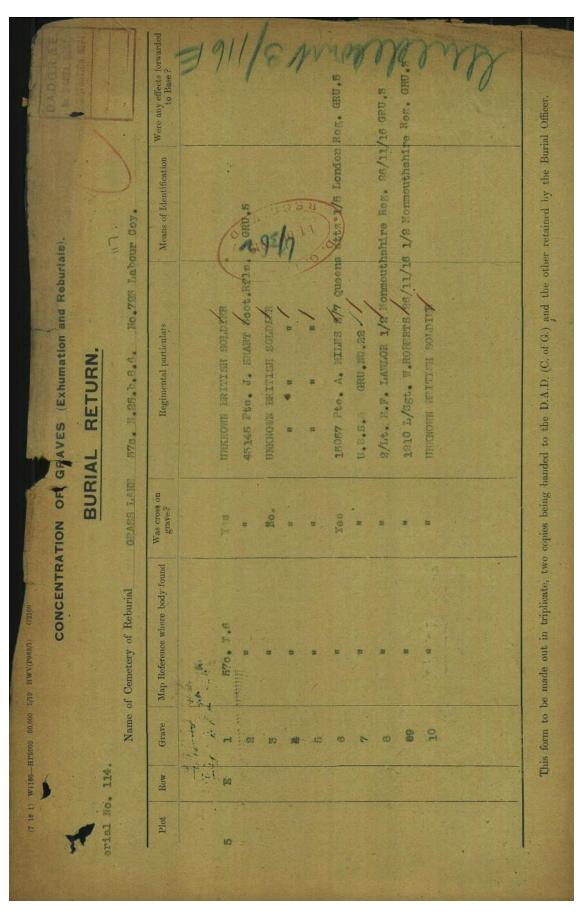


A meeting was arranged and Drew finally got his wish to reunite the medallion with the family when he presented it to Lynn in front of the new Newbridge War Memorial in November 2015.

#### **Commonwealth War Graves Commission**



#### **Burial Return**



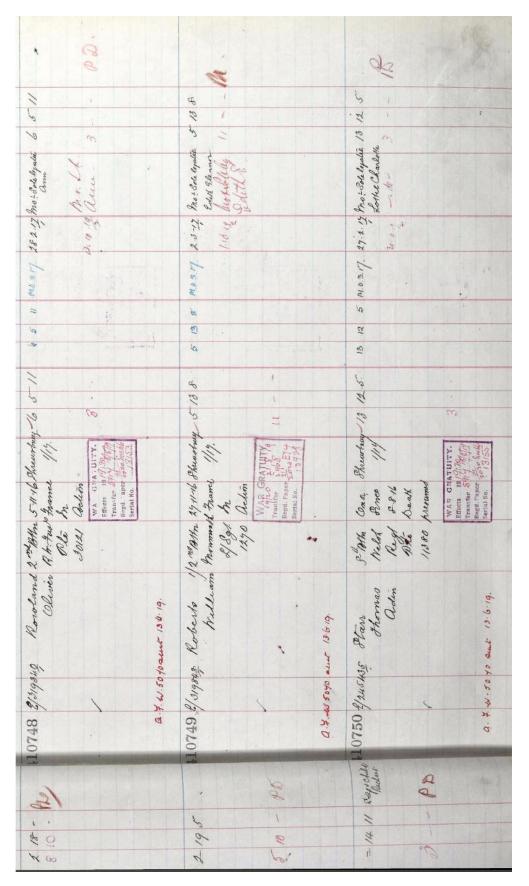
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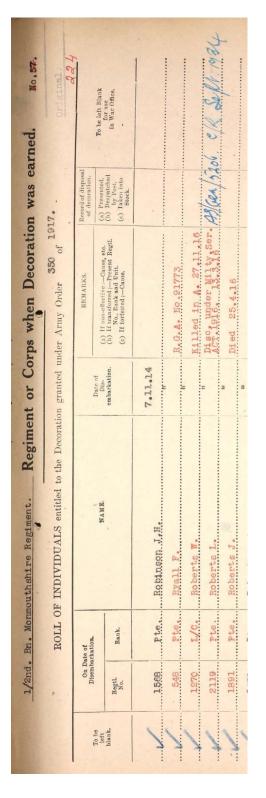
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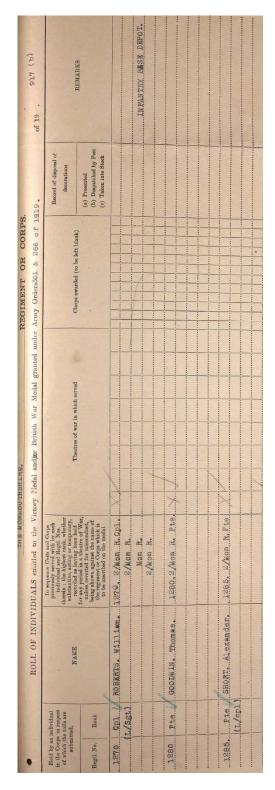
#### Register of Soldiers' Effects



#### Medal Roll Entries

#### 1914 Star





#### Victory Medal & British War Medal

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Newbridge War Memorial

#### 1901 Census

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