

## KENT CYCLIST BATTALION

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Percy James Fairbrass was born in Canterbury in 1898, second son of George Fairbrass, a platelayer on the railways. His mother Mary Ann died in 1902 aged just 34, and by 1911 Percy had acquired a step-mother, Jane, at their home in St Jacob's Place off Wincheap Road (now rebuilt as Priory of St Jacob). On 12 May 1916 Percy, aged 18 years and 3 days, walked into the new Drill Hall off St Peter's Lane (built in 1912) and signed up with the Kent Cyclist Battalion 'for the duration of the war'. Percy may well have seen advertisements inviting those fond of cycling to 'cycle for the King'. Recruits had to be at least 5ft 2ins tall, but apparently (according to this poster) 'bad teeth no bar'! He could not have known this would lead to his death two years later in India, recorded for posterity on a memorial in Canterbury cathedral.

The Battalion had been formed in 1908, one of 10 original Territorial Cyclist Battalions. Recruits were part time but took part in an annual 15 day camp and were responsible for patrolling the Kent coastline. A grant of £1 10s 6d pa was made for cycle maintenance. Surviving post cards show their rifles secure in special clips on each bike. Parade instructions were precise: a cyclist at attention will 'grasp the left steering handle with his left hand and place the right hand at the point of the saddle, elbow to the rear'. The cycling element, no doubt effective for running messages and patrolling Kent lanes, proved of less value in foreign battle fields. Re-formed as a non-cycling infantry battalion, Percy and his colleagues left for India later in 1916. On 5 November 1918, just six days before the end of the war, he died in the military rest station of Dagshai, not of war wounds but of pneumonia.

In 1920 a memorial tablet was placed in the military church at the nearby garrison town of Ferozepore. It contained 41 names, including that of Percy. Other records suggest that 14 (including Percy) died from pneumonia, 14 from 'unknown disease', 4 from influenza, 3 from fever, 2 from heat stroke and 2 from malaria. One drowned and just one died from war wounds. By 1950 there were concerns that the church might be destroyed - the memorial was brought to England by the Battalion Old Comrades' Association and placed on the south wall of Canterbury cathedral nave.

Sources: History of the Kent Cyclist Battalion Territorial Force 1908-1920 by Cyril Bristow (Old Comrades and Sons Association (1986) - a copy is held in the Beaney Library; postcard images kindly made available by Ian Anderson



1 Drill Hall (then Westgate Hall) under refurbishment May 2014



2 Recruiting advertisement



3 Explanatory plaque in Canterbury cathedral (nave south wall)



4 Plaque moved from Ferozepore India to Canterbury in 1950 (nave south wall)



5 postcard Kent Cyclists' Battalion 1914



6 Annotated Kent Cyclist Battalion with commanding officer Lt Col Charles Warner OBE TD



7 postcard annotated Bridge June 1916



8 postcard annotated Kent Cyclist Battalion 1916 'at Hildenborough' (near Tonbridge)



9 postcard annotated St Lawrence Road Canterbury, Easter Tuesday 1916



10 modern street sign for home of Percy Fairbrass (now post WW2 houses)