

The Minnie James' Children Collection



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November 1, 2020

By Sam Mutter

Jack

Before the war, Jack worked as an apprentice fitter in his home village of Dowlais. He entered the theatre of war on December 1st 1915. Much like his brother David before him, he wrote letters back home to his family, describing the day to day workings of his time within the trenches. He would spend over a year there, until he received a wound to his right arm. While not life threatening, he would be taken multiple war hospitals, spending a large majority of the rest of the war in hospital.

March 22nd 1917:
Most of the letters that we have from Jack contain no date on them, except two, which were most likely written before his injury. Addressed to his mother, he states 'I am still alive and kicking' before describing the current conditions of his stay in France. Much like David, he



too has become frustrated with censorship by this point, stating;

“Well I don’t know what to tell you now as they are so strict in censoring our letters, or else I could write you a book of what’s happening out here.”



22/3/17

Dear Mother

I am still alive
and kicking and have just
received your parcel. Arrived
in good condition, I haven't had
one smashed yet, it's a pity to
see some that my pals get but
I have been very lucky with
mine. How are you all getting on?

May 22nd 1917: In a letter addressed to his mother, Jack describes the appalling conditions in which he recently had to sleep.

"We are billeted in a large barn which is swarming with rats, and at night they come out in full force walking over the chaps and some cheeky enough to sit on one's face and even nibble at your big toe if it is poking out of the blanket."

Moreover, he fears that illness will run rampant in the trenches once again, stating;

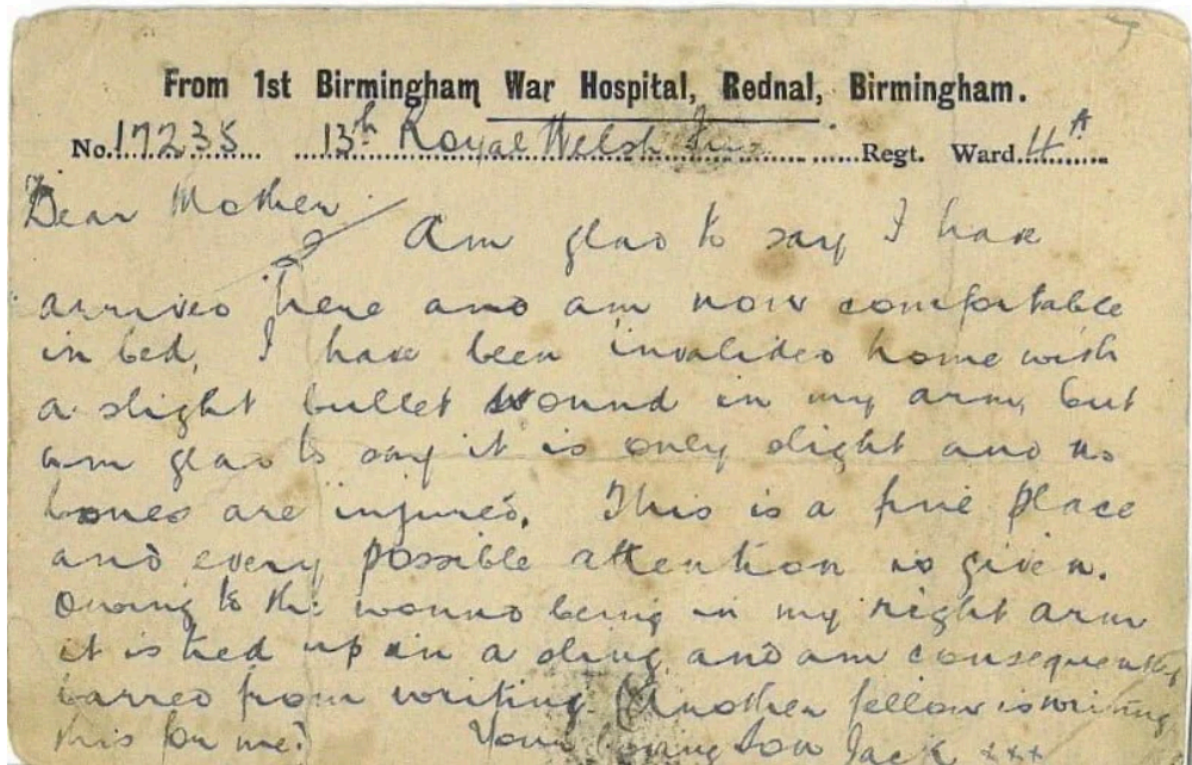
"They (rats) are still worse in the trenches and I expect there will be a plague of them soon."

we get a wet shirt. We are billeted
in a large barn which is swarming
with rats, and at night they come out
in full force walking over the chaps
and some are cheeky enough to sit
on one's face and even nibble at
your big toe if it is poking out
of the blanket. Last night then



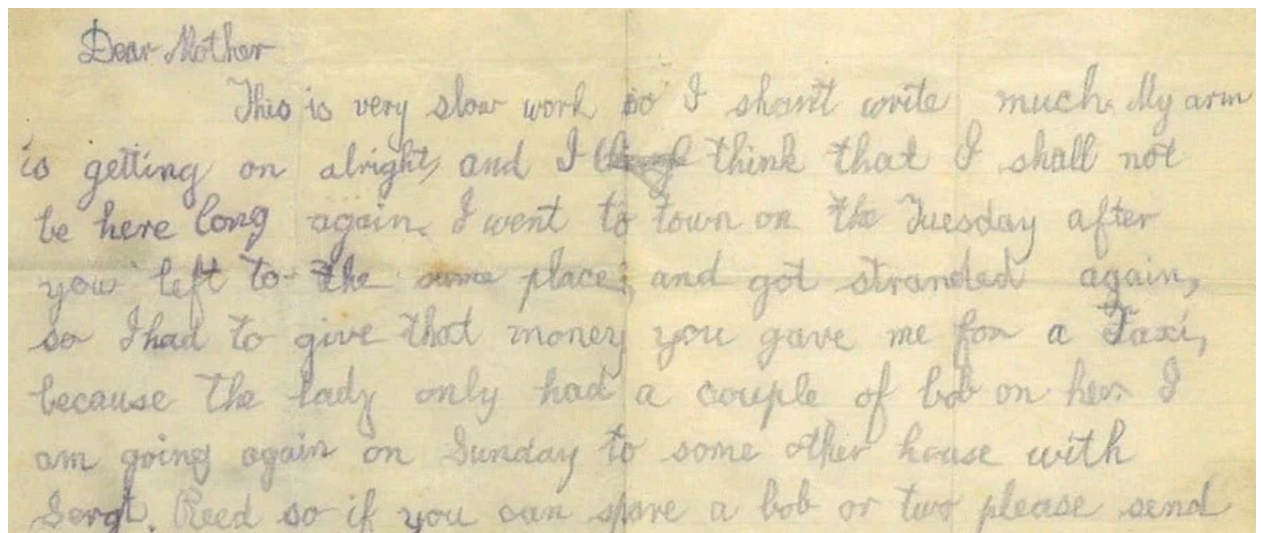
As mentioned earlier, Jack would sustain a bad injury to his right arm in the trenches. He was sent various war hospital's back in Britain during his long recovery, most notably in Blackwell, Rednal and Hollymoor. His postcards and letters home did not stop however, and we have many

that provide us a great insight into life for wounded soldiers in war hospitals. The first postcard addressed to Minnie James from the 1st Birmingham War Hospital, Rednal, Birmingham, has clearly been scribed by someone else; a nurse, doctor or friend perhaps, as Jack was clearly unable to pen it himself. However, it is still addressed from Jack himself, with it stating that he has sustained a bullet wound in his arm and has arrived in hospital where he is comfortable.



Jack later began writing his own letters again, beginning to use his left hand as a substitute for his writing. Early on in his stay at hospital, he was given a Copy Book 'for Teaching the Disabled to write well with The Left Hand.'

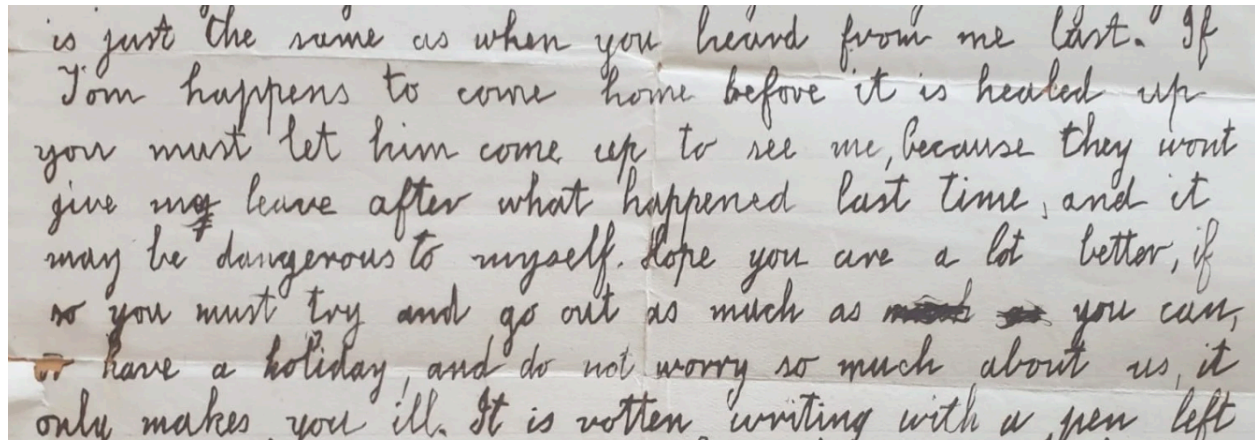
Jack James Letter 1.6 in The Minnie James Collection is potentially one of the first letters he wrote back home using his left hand. Within it, he discusses how this is slow work, but he is



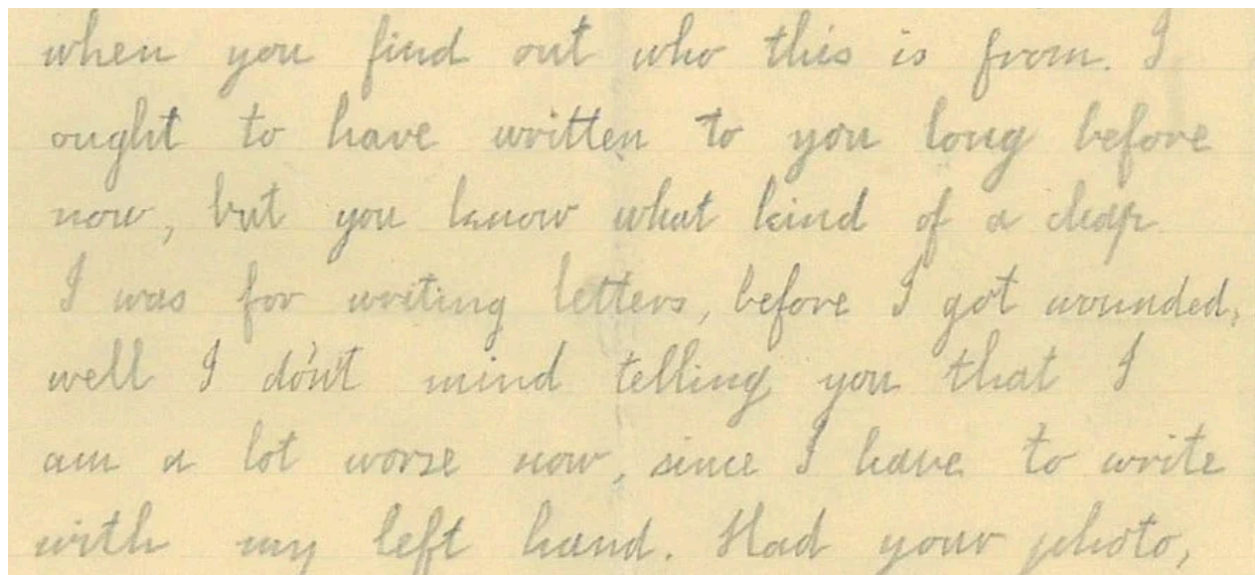
beginning to adapt to this new manner of writing. As we go through Jack's letters from here onwards, you will notice a clear progression in Jack's handwriting with his left hand, which is one of the best ways that we can date these later without any address line.

In another letter, Jack asks after his younger brother, Tom, stating;
"If Tom happens to come home before my arm is healed up, you must let him come up to see me."

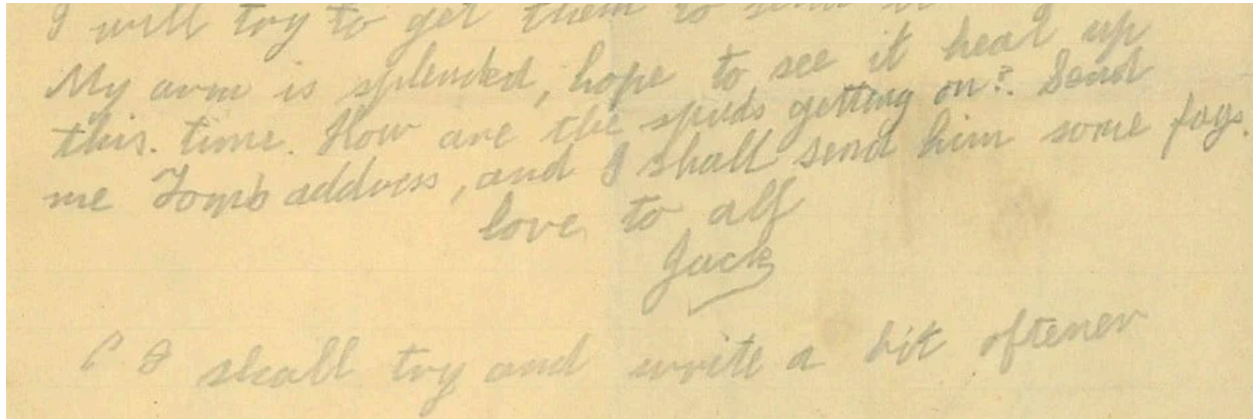
We are unsure of exactly how often the brothers got to see each other while serving in the army, but we can deduce from their letters that they would have had multiple occasions to meet during their service.

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The text is written in cursive with a left hand. The visible text reads: "is just the same as when you heard from me last." If Tom happens to come home before it is healed up you must let him come up to see me, because they won't give me leave after what happened last time, and it may be dangerous to myself. Hope you are a lot better, if so you must try and go out as much as ~~much~~ you can, have a holiday, and do not worry so much about us, it only makes you ill. It is rotten writing with a pen left

In another, addressed to his sister Letty, Jack jokes;
"You know what kind of chap I was for writing letters before I got wounded, well I don't mind telling you that I am a lot worse now, since I have to write with my left hand."

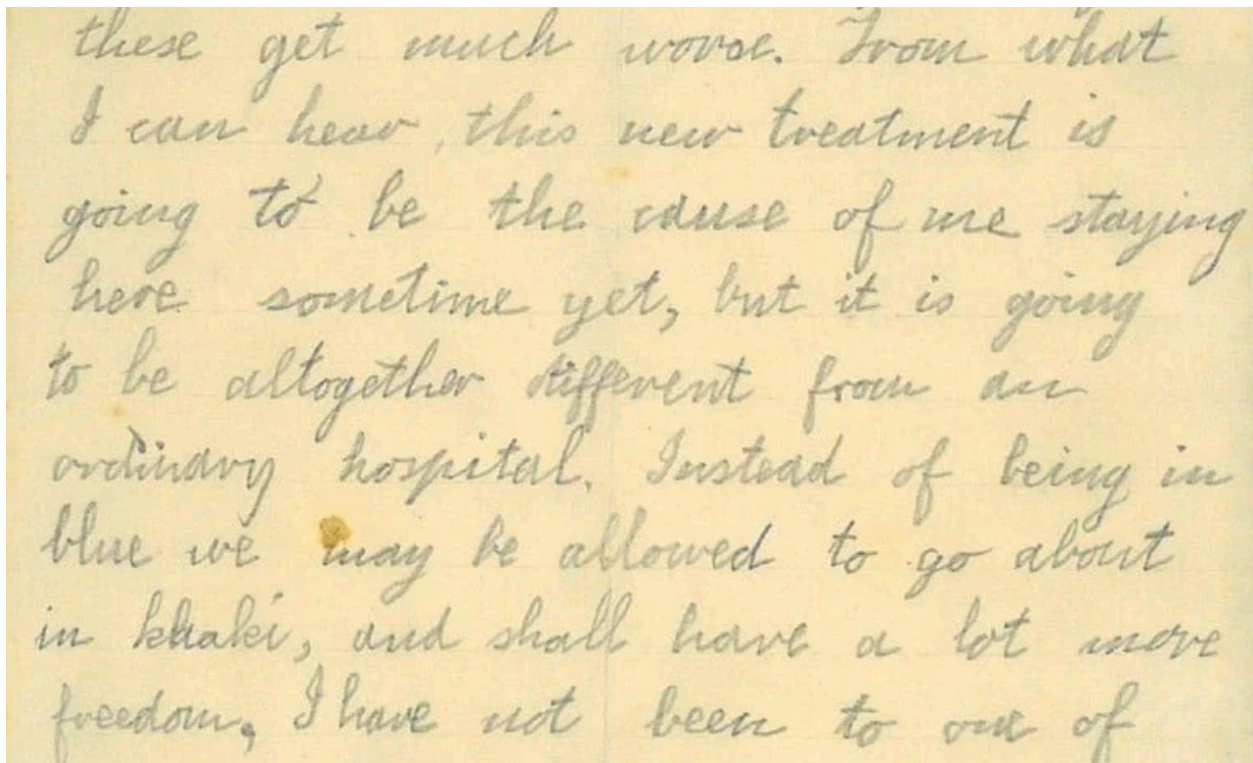
A photograph of a handwritten letter on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in cursive with a left hand. The visible text reads: "when you find out who this is from. I ought to have written to you long before now, but you know what kind of a chap I was for writing letters, before I got wounded, well I don't mind telling you that I am a lot worse now, since I have to write with my left hand. Had your photo,

In Jack James Letter 1.7 we can see the definite improvement made to Jack's handwriting as his time spent at hospital increases. This letter was most likely quite late in his new writing development. Within it, he also writes of how his right arm is 'splendid,' and how he 'hopes to see it heal up this time' after addressing the treatment which has continued to help him along the road to his recovery.



I will try to get them to see
My arm is splendid, hope to see it heal up
this time. How are the spuds getting on? Send
me Tomb address, and I shall send him some fags.
love to all
Jack
P & shall try and write a bit oftener

Letter 1.11 again shows just how far Jack has come when writing with his left hand. Here, he writes before being moved to a new hospital, where he is excited about the prospect of being able to wear the khaki colours once again rather than the blue of a patient.



these get much worse. From what
I can hear, this new treatment is
going to be the cause of me staying
here sometime yet, but it is going
to be altogether different from an
ordinary hospital. Instead of being in
blue we may be allowed to go about
in khaki, and shall have a lot more
freedom, I have not been to one of

Aided by his long stay in hospital, Jack James would survive the war, being awarded the British Victory and War medal along with the 1915 Star and the Silver War Badge for his wounds and was discharged from hospital on the 28th of January 1919. Tragically however, he would

nevertheless contract tuberculosis and die far before his time, eighteen months after Tom and four years after David, on the 23rd June 1920, at 8 Cross Francis Street, age 24. His father was by his side at the end.



David

Before the war, a young David James worked as a draughtsman at Dowlais Colliery. Within this collection we have highly detailed photographs of his tool kit which he used for this job.

May – August 1915: David enlisted into the British army in 1915, where he travelled from his home village of Dowlais to complete training in White City, London. He would spend only a few months here, however despite this relatively short stay, he would write many letters to his family back home, especially to his beloved mother, Minnie and within these letters, David's vibrant personality shines through. He clearly was a protective young man, truly embodying the temperament of an elder sibling within a large family of children. He constantly asked after his brother's, who shared a similar experience fighting on the front lines, as well as his much younger siblings, Billy and Winnie, who he persistently sends beautifully embroidered postcards and presents.

Through the correspondence he sent back home, we learn much surrounding the day to day of his life during training. In one letter, he writes of how he was coincidentally stationed in a room with another man named David James, resulting in the apt nicknames D. James 1 and D. James 2 being distributed. He himself was lucky enough to receive the D. James 1 moniker amongst the two. Another fascinating aspect of his letters from London, comes when he mentions receiving multiple vaccinations during his stay, remarking on how unwell one in particular made him feel. This is a feeling that will resonate strongly with many of us in today's post-COVID world.



By a strange coincidence,
I have been put in a room, with another
sleep who came up the same time, by the
name of David James. I know him very
well at Caterham. He is an old
Bournemouth Policeman. I am D. James W.
and he is D. James W. 2. We have pluck
of fine over it.

I have been very ill the last three
days. I was inoculated last Tuesday, and
suffered very badly from the effects. I had a
terrible pain in my right breast, where I received
the injection. It felt like having a rusty pin
stuck in it.

In a letter to his brother Jack, he describes how he enjoyed his time in White City immensely, despite it being a highly strict and regimented routine. In his own words;

“You have to pluck the dust out of your ears, as they say.”

Guards and a jolly fine regiment it is. They are very
strict here and our work is very hard, though we
have only 4 parades a day. (each lasting an hour, with an
hour spell in between) They don't half put us through it,
and I feel like lying down to sleep as soon as we have been
dismissed for the day. I have been here over a fortnight now.

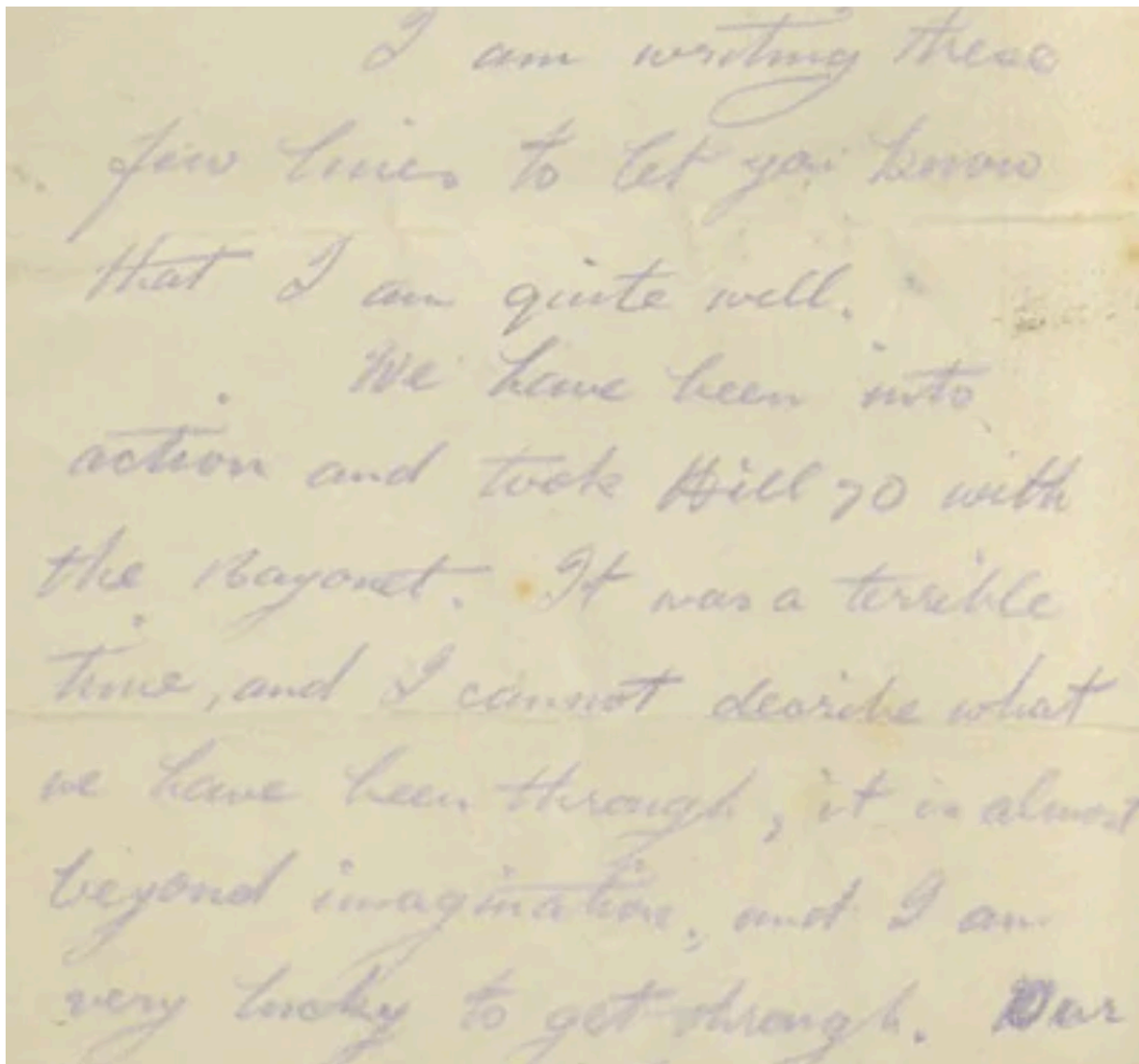
August 17th 1915: Once David's training was complete, he would be sent to the frontlines in France, beginning a year-long journey fighting on the frontlines. Tragically, he would never make it home to Dowlais after the war, experiencing first hand just how cruel life and death within the trenches could be.

The Thunder Of The Guns Never Seems To Cease

September 30th 1915: In a letter to his mother, David writes of how he was met with horrible gases and machine gun fire in an engagement within the trenches. He is quite clearly shaken by this experience and vents about how he must be careful with what he writes as;

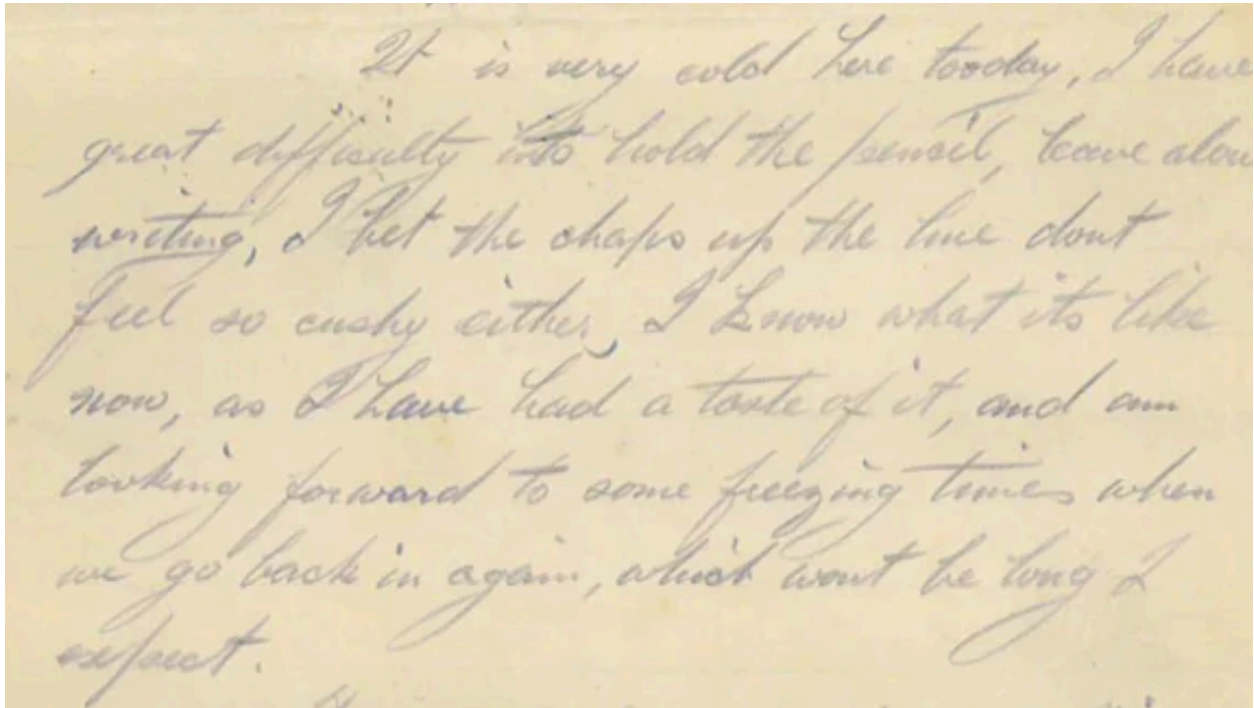
“The censors may erase a lot of what I have said...”

It is important to remember that letters sent back to Britain were often censored for security reasons, hence why many of the letters included within this collection have had the top of the page, housing the address, torn out. The psychological effect of not being able to truly express the pain of your experiences that this would have on a soldier was clearly immense.



“I am suffering a little from the hardships which I have just been through.” November 6th, 1915: In a letter to his father, he writes;

“I know what it (battle) is like now, as I have had a taste of it.”

A photograph of a handwritten letter snippet on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads: "It is very cold here today, I have great difficulty to hold the pencil, leave alone writing, I bet the chaps up the line don't feel so cushy either, I know what its like now, as I have had a taste of it, and am looking forward to some freezing times when we go back in again, which won't be long I expect."

November 15th, 1915: In a letter to his mother, he gives his thoughts on his youngest brother Tom, who has recently enlisted himself into the armed forces. He writes;

“I received Tom’s letter yesterday, and was greatly surprised to hear that he has enlisted. I would much rather that he had not done so, he is not of age for one thing, and surely two of us out of the house is quite sufficient.”

July, 1916: After hearing about his other brother Jack’s recent injury, David writes;

“I’m glad to hear that Jack’s wounds are not too serious...”

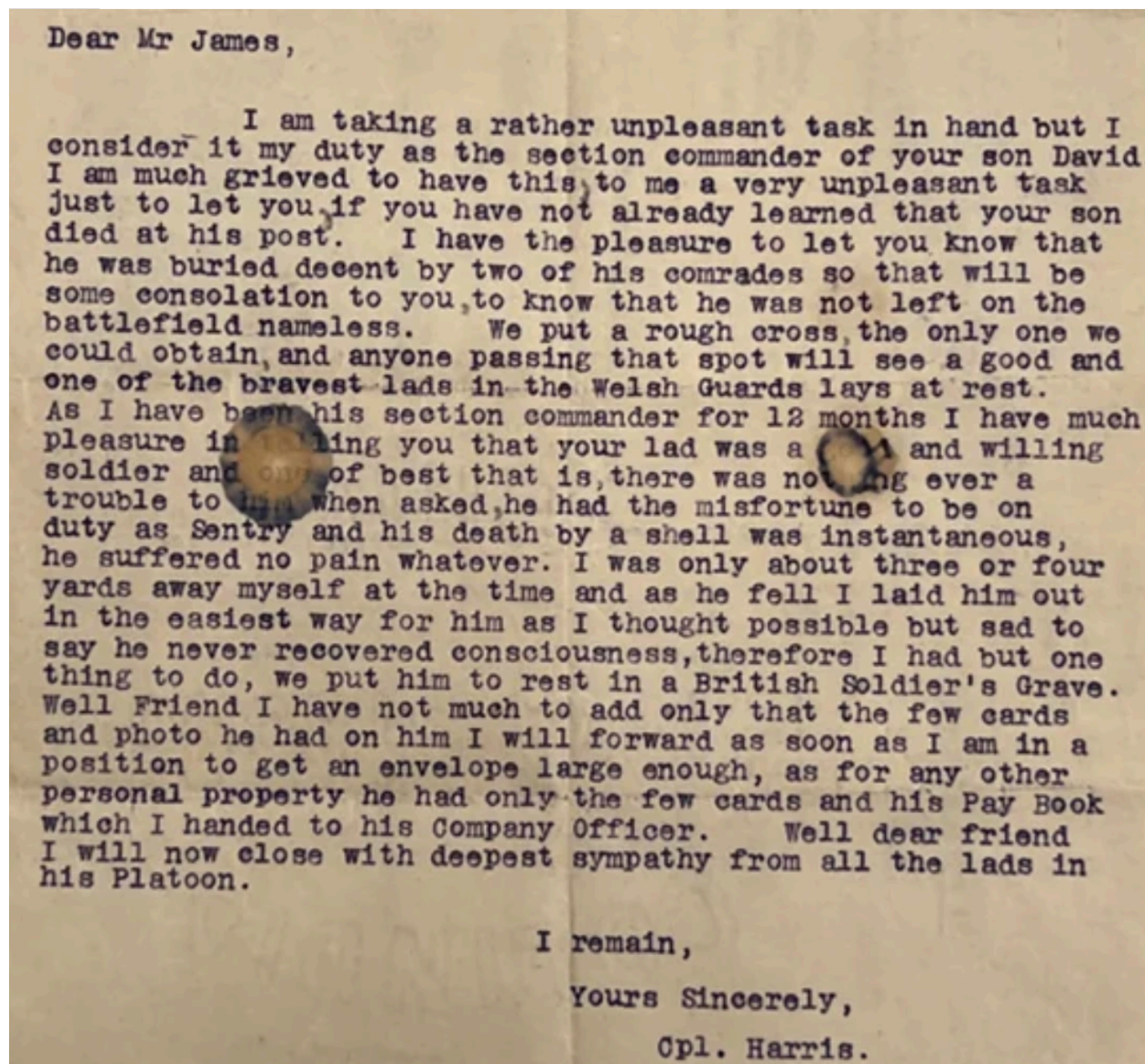
January 17th 1916: David finally has time to pen a letter to his youngest brother, Tom, to catch up on the comings and goings of the family. David is troubled as he tells Tom that he has not heard from Jack in a while, and is unsure as to the whereabouts of his battalion. In other, happier news, David discusses how their sister, Letty, has become engaged. He reaffirms how he hopes to one day have the chance to meet her new fiancé.



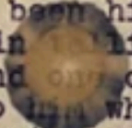
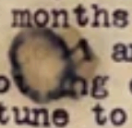
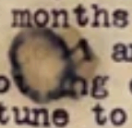
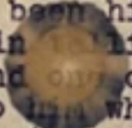
September 1916: David took part in the Battle of Flers–Courcellette, part of the 5-month Battle of the Somme. This battle was the first ever to see the deployment of tanks on a European battlefield. On the 19th of September, six days before his death, David wrote his final letters within this collection. One he addressed to his mother, describing how he had charged through gunfire and somehow once again come through unharmed. Nevertheless, the horror of the battle had taken its toll. He writes plainly;

“It is a terrible day today.”

September 25th, 1916: David is killed in action at the age of 24. A telegram is soon sent home to his parents, detailing the manner of his death. Tear stains blot the paper in a poignant reminder of the terrible cost of war. This would be the James family’s first loss from the Great War, but sadly, not the last.



Dear Mr James,

I am taking a rather unpleasant task in hand but I consider it my duty as the section commander of your son David I am much grieved to have this, to me a very unpleasant task just to let you, if you have not already learned that your son died at his post. I have the pleasure to let you know that he was buried decent by two of his comrades so that will be some consolation to you, to know that he was not left on the battlefield nameless. We put a rough cross, the only one we could obtain, and anyone passing that spot will see a good and one of the bravest lads in the Welsh Guards lays at rest. As I have been his section commander for 12 months I have much pleasure in telling you that your lad was a  and willing soldier and  of best that is, there was no  ever a trouble to  when asked, he had the misfortune to be on duty as Sentry and his death by a shell was instantaneous, he suffered no pain whatever. I was only about three or four yards away myself at the time and as he fell I laid him out in the easiest way for him as I thought possible but sad to say he never recovered consciousness, therefore I had but one thing to do, we put him to rest in a British Soldier's Grave. Well Friend I have not much to add only that the few cards and photo he had on him I will forward as soon as I am in a position to get an envelope large enough, as for any other personal property he had only the few cards and his Pay Book which I handed to his Company Officer. Well dear friend I will now close with deepest sympathy from all the lads in his Platoon.

I remain,
Yours Sincerely,
Cpl. Harris.

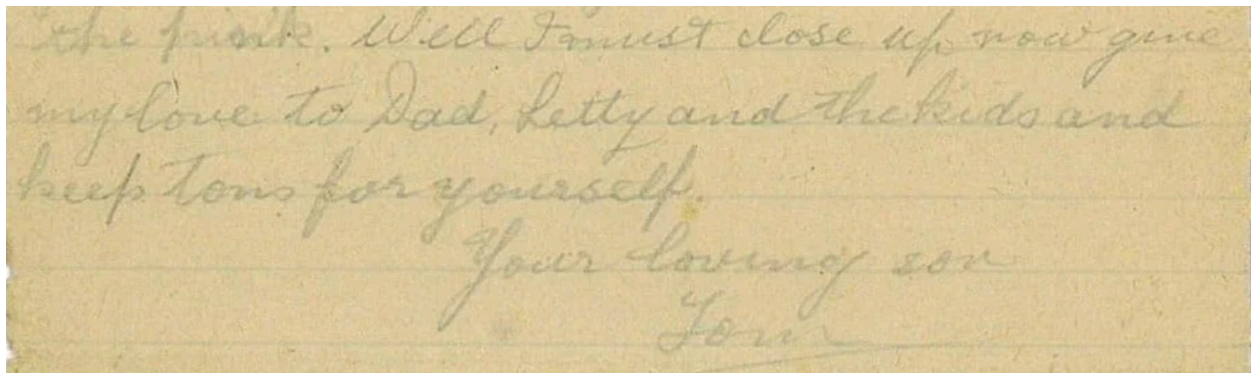
Tom

Before the war, Tom James was still attending school in his home village of Dowlais. As the youngest amongst his brothers, he was the last to enlist into the British army. In one of David's letters, he mentions how Tom was underage when he did this and so he represents a large number of British young men who also enlisted illegally to fight in the Great War.

In a letter to his father, Tom states that while training at Kimmel Park, he was confused with another soldier and subsequently allotted excused duty, as opposed to light duty, in his place. Instead of reporting the mistake, Tom admits to having taken advantage of the situation and accepting the benefits of said mistaken identity. Nevertheless, he admits to feeling 'a little bad' about this, but stuck to the act until he was found out and punished.

In an early letter from the trenches, Tom describes being shelled by the Germans, before signing off with the touching line;

"Give my love to Dad, Letty and the kids and keep tons for yourself. Your loving son, Tom."



Later, in a letter to his friend Davy, Tom states;

"They shelled us one night until I thought my number was up, a few of my pals that came up with the same draft as me have gone under..."

As well as stating that although he has seen Jack in the trenches before, they have now been stationed in the same division;

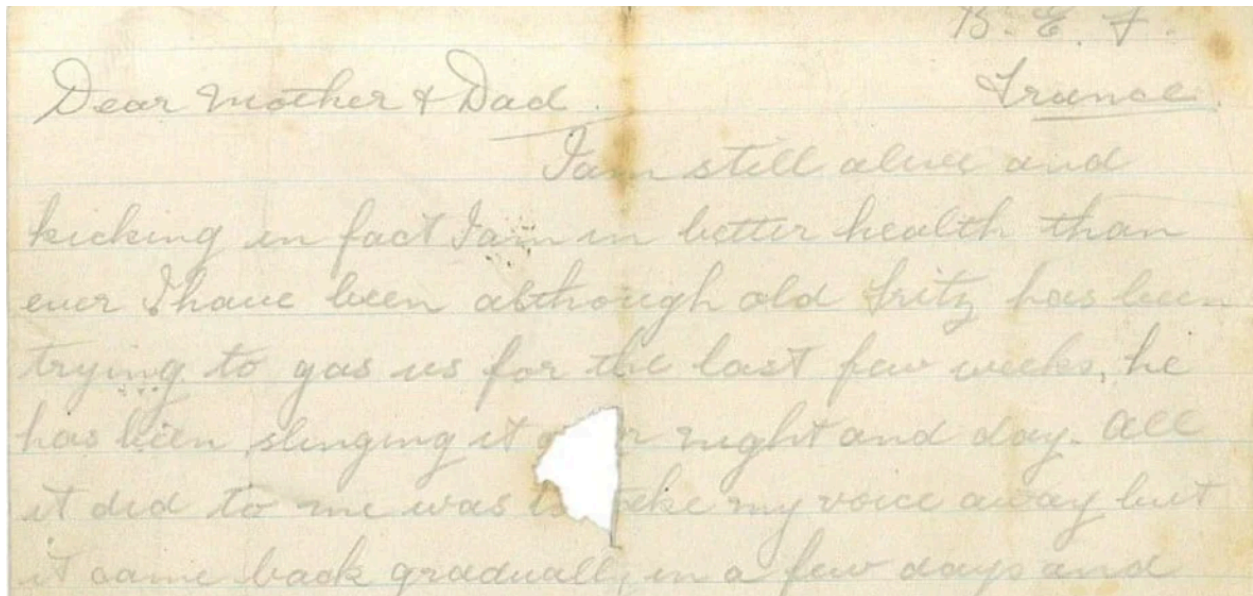
"I haven't seen Jack since but I may drop across him any time as we are in the same division."

In a letter addressed to both his mother and father, Tom describes the horrific experience of being exposed to mustard gas.

"The Germans have been trying to gas us for the last few weeks."

Luckily for Tom, he was only partially exposed and suffered very minimal side effects. Showing the true extent of his bravery, Tom remarks;

"All it did to me was take my voice away."



September 13th, 1918: Tom is suffering mentally. In his own words;

“I have had some terrible experiences during the last few days and have had remarkable luck’. I hardly thought I would come out of it alive.”

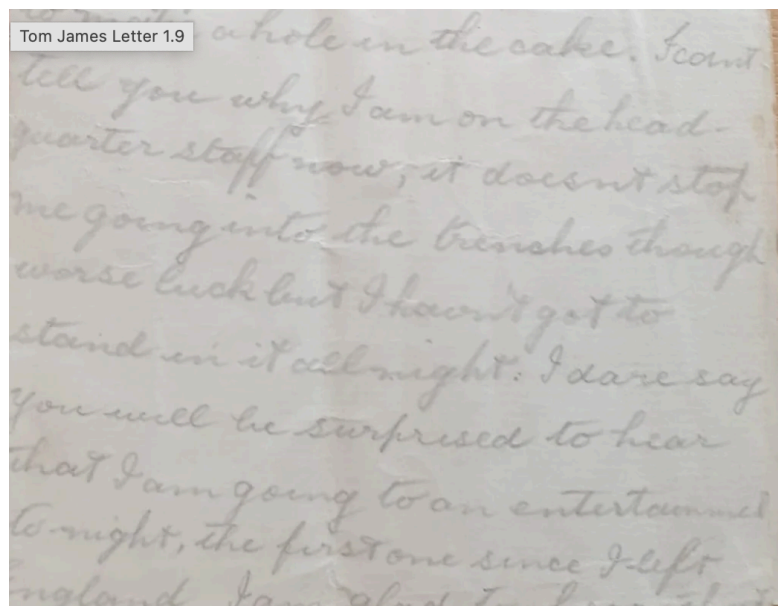
He laments over the death of his friends and brothers in arms, who have perished in recent battles.

“We have had many casualties and some of my best pals are among the killed.”

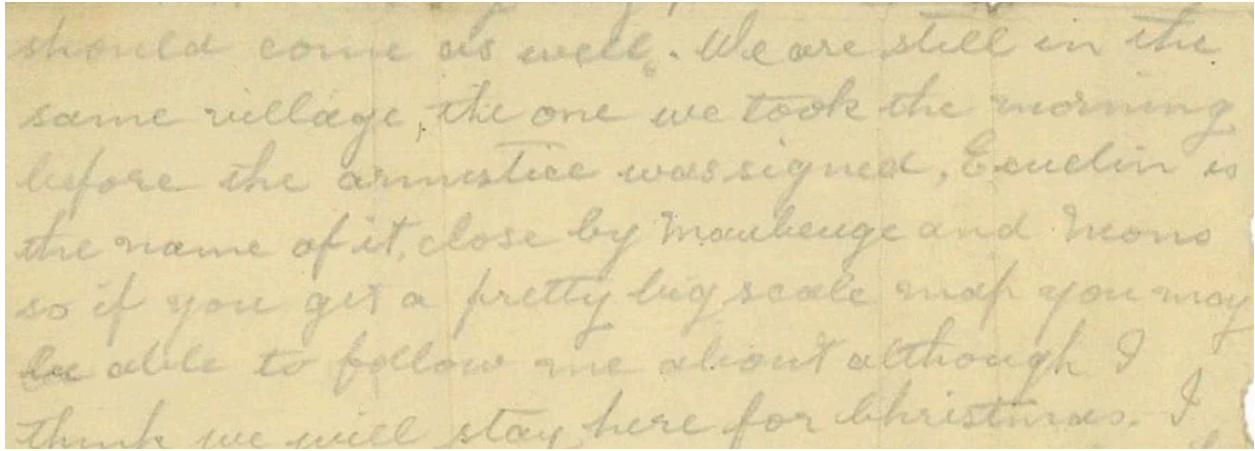
He even states that because of a number of factors, the British accidentally fired upon their own soldiers;

“We came under our own shell fire as well as the enemies.”

In the haze of battle, this eventuality was sadly more common than one would expect. Later, in a letter to his mother, Tom states that he has been appointed as one of the headquarters staff members. However, unfortunately this doesn't stop him from going into the trenches as many would think. Around this time, Tom is severely injured in battle, through which complications would later arise which would result in his untimely passing.



Unlike both his brothers, Tom would live to see the armistice signed and peace restored across Europe. However, rather than returning home, Tom would remain in France until his death. Stationed in a small village by Mons, Tom wrote back home describing his whereabouts when the armistice was signed.



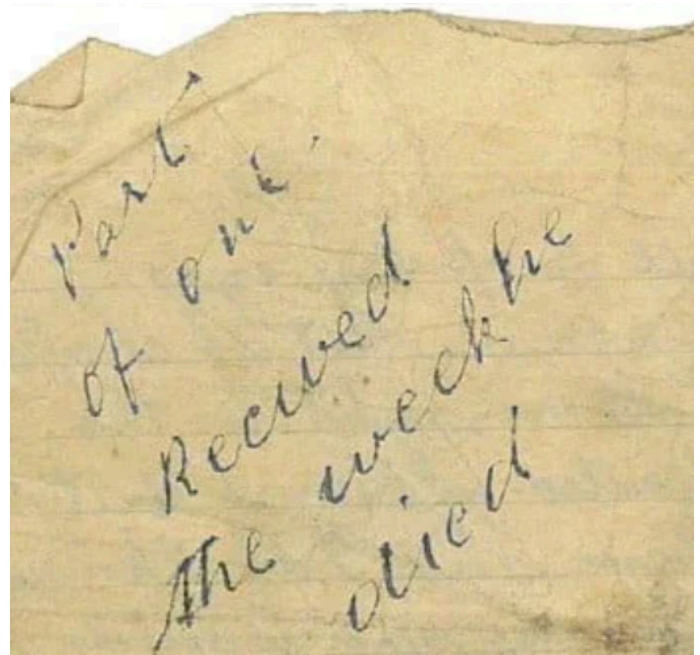
While stationed here, he writes a final letter to his mother. He signs off with;

“Well goodnight and God bless you all.”

On the back it reads ‘Past of one. Received the week he died.’ It is unknown as to who wrote this or when.

On Christmas day 1918, Tom sadly passed away, dying from his wounds, age 21. He was the second son of Minnie James to die as a result of WW1. He was awarded the British Victory and War medal.

December 29th, 1918: The last letter in The Tom James’ Collection is written and addressed to Minnie James, but not by Tom. Instead, a friend writes to her in an attempt to provide his mother the details of Tom’s death and bestow her with some sort of closure.



“He was buried with full military honours. on the 27th (of December, 1918.)“

“A large number of his friends attended to pay their last tribute to a hero.”

“May God comfort you in your sorrow.“

Dec 29/1918.

Dear Mrs James/
Just a line to
let you have a few further
particulars regarding dear Tom.
He was buried, with full
military honours, on the
27th, in the churchyard of
St. Michael's, Ecucliv.



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About the Author



Sam completed a work experience placement with the WCIA, then became a digital heritage officer, and finally a placement supervisor in 2024. During his time at the WCIA, he curated and digitised the Minnie James Collection for future generations.

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