



## Local History Collection

### 24 - Private James Shurley, 12th Army Cyclist Corps

Autumn 2024

Researched & written by Sarah Grace

A few months ago I mentioned that I would investigate the soldiers whose names are on the Memorial plaque in the Braywood Memorial Hall.

There are a few surnames I recognised as possibly having descendants still living in the local area and I personally know Geoff Shurley who played, volunteered, and was President of Braywood Cricket Club for many years.

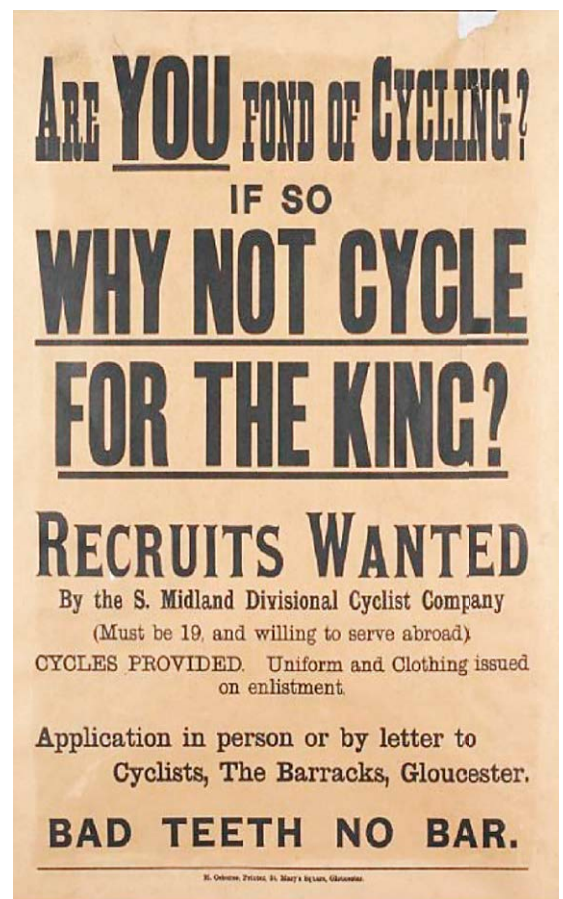
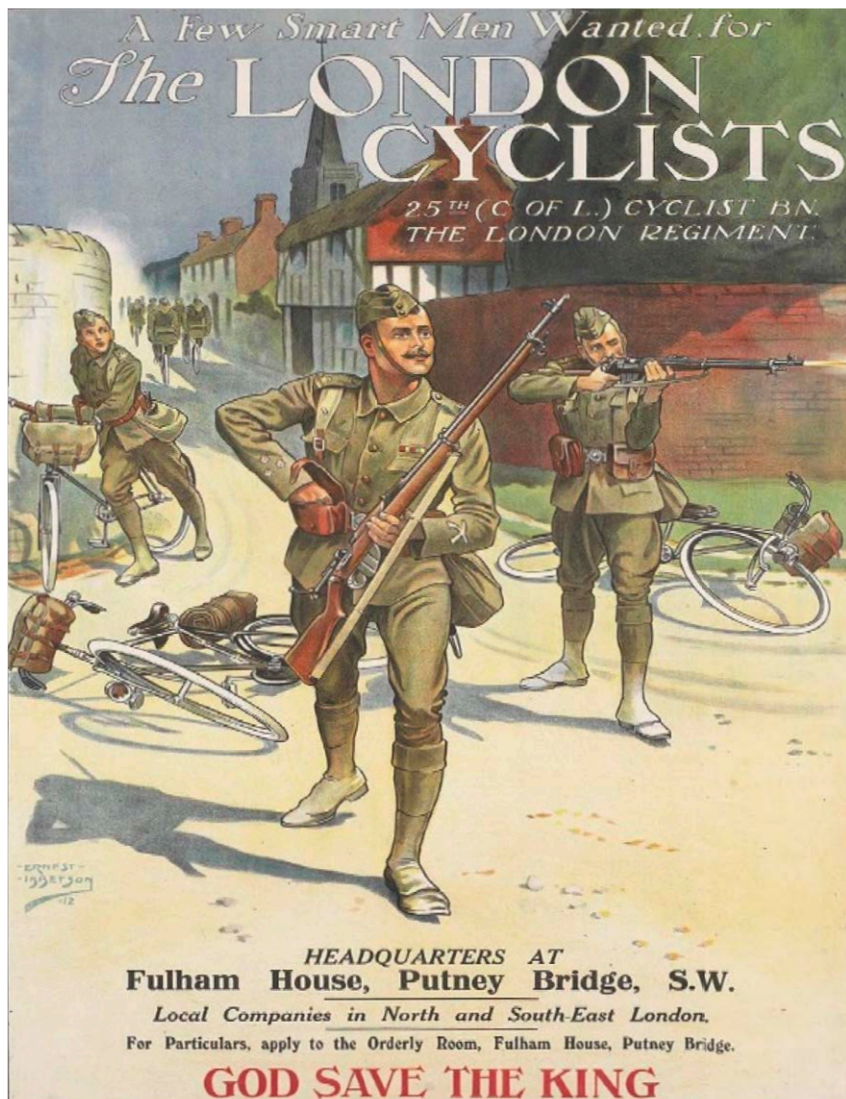
I have been able to trace the Shurley family living at Oakley Green in 1861. Henry Shurley was head of the family working as a labourer with his wife Rosina and they had 11 children.



The 5th child, born in 1862, was named Thomas (Private James Shurley's Father). The 9th child was John Shurley who is Geoff's Great Grandfather. Certainly by 1891 7 of the 11 children had left home and were employed locally as gardeners, under gardeners, and farm servants.

Private James Shurley was born in 1891 in Oakley Green and his occupation was a Carter (someone who transported goods by cart or wagon by pony or horse). Less than a month after the start of WW1 James enlisted on the 1st September 1914 in the 5th Battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment in Reading. He was 22 years old, weighed 111lbs (just under 8 stone) with a chest size 36" and chest expansion of 2.5", he was considered very fit with 6/6 vision.

By November 1914 James had spent a brief spell in Bristol General Hospital and was given 8 days furlough leave back home to Oakley Green. He transferred to the Divisional Cyclists Corps in January 1915 and was posted the same day to the 26th Division.

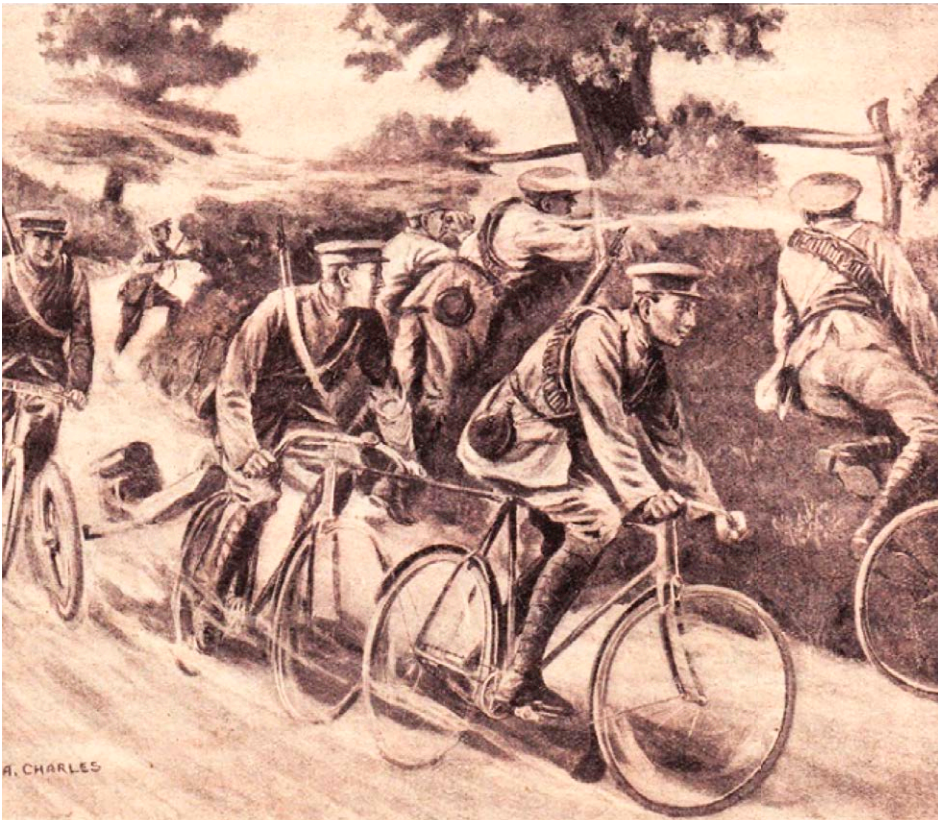


A month later he was serving in the 8th Royal Berkshire Cyclists Corps and spent the 1st year in England.

The Official Army Cyclists Corps was only formed in 1914, merging a number of pre-existing cyclist battalions from the Territorial Force which was a number of volunteer units from 1885 who were used as Coastal Patrols and became a Territorial force in 1908.

There were 15 cyclist battalions mobilised in August 1914 which was about 14,000 men, rising to 20,000 by the end of the war. Duties of a Cyclist included scouting, courier work and security patrols.

The Cyclists' training manual included how to salute while standing by, sitting on, and riding the bicycle !



***Bringing up the machine gun***

By September 1915 James was sent to France for 55 days and then on to Greece for the Salonika Campaign where he spent the next 2 years 7 months.

James arrived in the port of Salonika (now known as Thessaloniki) as part of an Anglo-French force to provide military assistance to the Serbs who had found themselves under attack from German, Austro-Hungarian, and Bulgarian armies.

The weather that November was bitter.

A British Captain wrote -

*“Very bad night, no shelter from the cold and wet. I had a rotten passage around the line, falling and stumbling about in the snow drifts up to my shoulders in some places. This morning everything is frozen hard and every track is too slippery to walk on ... our overcoats are frozen hard and when some of the men tried to beat theirs to make them pliable to lie down in they split like matchwood. The men can hardly hold their rifles and their hands freeze to the cold metal. There are many cases of frost bite in hands and feet”.*



***The Cyclists Corps in France***

Soldiers on both sides faced each other for almost 3 years across challenging terrain and extremely harsh climate conditions with searing heat in the Summer months and bitter cold winters. Most soldiers were living in bivouac tents or dug outs and disease, particularly malaria, was endemic throughout the campaign. Of the 228,355 peak strength of the British Salonika Force soldiers around 167,517 suffered from malaria.

On 22nd June 1918 James Shurley of the 12th Battalion Army Cyclists Corps died in Salonika. He had previously suffered from Malaria and Dysentery in 1916 and 1917 and suffered again from dysentery in June 1918. His cause of death was registered as PUO (Pyrexia of unknown origin). James' family were informed of his death by telegram at Tarbay Farm, Oakley Green, on the 2nd July 1918.

After 3 years of stalemate the Bulgarians were routed in 16 days and the campaign was completed and on 30th September 1918 an armistice was signed. At that time Thomas Shurley (James' Father) had three of his children still living at home. One of his sons was serving with the Worcester Regiment in France and two further children were living in Eton and Oakley Green. The list of James' belongings returned to the family were: Five coins, ring, photos, letters, metal notebook, pocket wallet, postcards and notebook. James had been awarded the British War Medal 1914-1919, the Victory Medal, and the 1914-1915 Star Medal.

### **For The Fallen by Laurence Binyon -**

*With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,  
England mourns for her dead across the sea.  
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,  
Fallen in the cause of the free.*

*Solemn the drums thrill; Death august and royal  
Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres,  
There is music in the midst of desolation  
And a glory that shines upon our tears.*

*They went with songs to the battle, they were young,  
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.  
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted;  
They fell with their faces to the foe.*

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.*

*They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;  
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;  
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;  
They sleep beyond England's foam.*

*But where our desires are and our hopes profound,  
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,  
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known  
As the stars are known to the Night;*

*As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,  
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain;  
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,  
To the end, to the end, they remain.*

Anyone interested in learning more about the Salonika Campaign can watch a 14 minute video

[HERE](#)



I contacted the Salonika Campaign Society and their member John Taylor visited the grave in Salonika (now Thessaloniki) and felt it was a great honour to place the cross on the grave with the wording chosen by Geoff and Mary Shurley on behalf of their family.

