

GREAT WAR STAINED GLASS WINDOW MEMORIALS IN KENT

No. 1: St John the Baptist, Swalecliffe, Kent

Captain Maurice FLETCHER

2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers

DOW 9 September 1916, mortally wounded in trenches at Bazentin-le-Grand, Somme

Window: St John the Baptist, Swalecliffe, Kent.

Kent Links: School, St Edmund's, Canterbury; father former Rector of Swalecliffe.

Medals: 1914-1915 Star, MC

War Grave: Millencourt Communal Cemetery Extension



Maurice Fletcher wearing the cap badge of the Royal Munster Fusiliers

Maurice Fletcher was born on 15 March 1885, one of twins, the sons of Rev. William Harry and Sarah Helen Fletcher.¹ He had one other older brother and an older sister. His father was an Anglican curate at the parish church of Barkway in Hertfordshire, but later was elevated to the position of Rector of St John The Baptist, Swalecliffe, a small village about six miles from Canterbury in Kent. Maurice was just seven when his father died in 1892, leaving only a small legacy of £1242 to his widow.² Fortunately, Maurice was given a place at St Edmund's School, Canterbury that catered for the 'orphan' sons of deceased clergymen. Although his headmaster described him as 'very sensitive', Fletcher's school career was successful. He was captain both of the school and of the 1st XI cricket team, served for two years as Corporal with the Cadet Corps and won an open scholarship at Selwyn College, Cambridge. There he captained the college cricket team and on graduating with a degree in Classics went to France to learn the language.³ On his return he became a schoolmaster, first at Merchant Taylor's, Crosby and then at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Wakefield. He remained unmarried.

¹ Service Record, Captain Maurice Fletcher, TNA PRO WO 339/19221.

² Probate Records, Ancestry.Co.

³ Service Record, Captain Maurice Fletcher; Andrew Renshaw (ed), *Wisden on the Great War: The Lives of Cricket's Fallen 1914-1918* ((London 2014), p.226.

Fletcher enlisted on 4 September 1914 in the 21st (Service) Battalion (4th Public Schools) Royal Fusiliers. This was one of four battalions raised for Kitchener's New Army that were formed in Epsom under the auspices of the Public Schools and University Men's Force. These battalions were to supply so many men to other regiments as commissioned officers that most were subsequently disbanded. Fletcher was commissioned into the Royal Munster Fusiliers in January 1915, but not before he had spent a month as Corporal with the 7th Leinster Regiment. He was posted to the 9th Royal Munster Fusiliers, a Service battalion raised in October 1914 and attached to 16th (Irish) Division. It trained in Ireland until September, when it moved to England. Fletcher embarked with the battalion for France on 19 December 1915, having been promoted to Lieutenant a few weeks earlier.⁴

The 9th Battalion was to serve less than six months on the Western Front before being disbanded, in order to fill the depleted ranks of the 1st, 2nd and 8th Battalions of the regiment. Fletcher was transferred to the 2nd Battalion, arriving for duty on 31 May 1916.⁵ By now he had been promoted to Captain. The 2nd Battalion was part of 3rd Infantry Brigade, 1st Division and fought in some of the most intense fighting around High Wood on the Somme in August and September 1916. In August Fletcher won the Military Cross, for directing a working party near the German lines while under fire.⁶ Before the award was promulgated, however, he was dead. The battalion was in the trenches at Bazantin-le-Grand on 8 September preparing for another attack on High Wood when he was mortally wounded. He died the next day.⁷ He was thirty-one years of age.

Fletcher was buried at Millencourt Communal Cemetery, about two miles from Albert. This was a graveyard belonging to the local commune and after the Armistice the bodies of the British military servicemen buried there were relocated to a separate extension of the cemetery.⁸ His relatives did not take up the opportunity to have a special message carved on the headstone.

They did, however, erect a special memorial for Fletcher, a single-light stained glass window representing St George. The site chosen was his father's former parish church in Swalecliffe (even though Fletcher's mother no longer lived in the county). Sited in the nave, it was dedicated on 25 May 1919.⁹ The window (see below) is a conventional representation of St George, encased in medieval armour, holding a lance with the pennant of England attached in one hand and a shield with the three lions of England in the other. Behind him on the ground, with one baleful eye open, lies a vanquished dragon of deep red. Above St George is a small saintly figure with the inscription *Laus Deo* (Praise be to God). The dedication reads: *To the memory of Maurice Fletcher MC, Captain Royal Munster Fusiliers, son of William H Fletcher, sometime Rector of this parish, who fell in the battle of the Somme, 9th Sept: 1916, this window is dedicated.*

Rev W. F. Burnside, headmaster of St Edmund's, led the dedication service on 25 May. In the congregation was Fletcher's mother and elder brother, a Paymaster in the Royal Navy. In his address Burnside quoted from a letter sent to Fletcher's mother by a soldier in his company: 'I have lost a good master, and the company has lost a good commander. I feel I have lost a brother'. Burnside also meditated on the meaning of the memorial's subject. St George, he said, was the ideal of chivalry, the brave knight who was ready to defend the weak and

⁴ *London Gazette*, 25 November 1915, p.11470.

⁵ War Diary, 2nd Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers, 31 May 1916, TNA PRO WO 95/1279.

⁶ War Diary, 2nd Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers, 30 September 1916; Renshaw, *Wisden*, p.226.

⁷ War Diary, 2nd Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers, 8 September 1916. For the Munsters' attack on High Wood on 9 September see Terry Norman, *The Hell They Called High Wood: The Somme 1916* (Barnsley 2007), pp.206-7, 210.

⁸ Commonwealth War Graves Commission website, <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/4605/MILLEN COURT%20COMMUNAL%20CEMETERY%20EXTENSION>

⁹ *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, 17 May 1919.

destroy the wicked. Although mythical, he always appealed to the best aspects of the English character.¹⁰ Burnside's sermon thus propounded a conventional conservative and patriotic narrative within which Fletcher's death was classed as a worthy sacrifice by a Christian Englishman.¹¹

The sermon also contained another common conservative theme: that English society had become too materialistic before 1914 and that the war was partly a consequence of the decline of traditional values and the rise of industrial modernism. But if the competitive nature of the contemporary industrialised, urbanised and mass-market world was one cause of the war, it had been won by a reliance on trusty traditional Christian and patriotic values. Fletcher the classicist is represented as having died in defence of Old England. In one sense, therefore, the blood red dragon lying defeated at the feet of the English patron saint St George may represent not just the evil of Prussianism but also the evil of modernity. This is the way that much of middlebrow middle-England tried to come to terms with its grief, seeking solace in the past.

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¹⁰ *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, 31 May 1919.

¹¹ Burnside quoted John 15:13: 'Greater Love hath no man than this: that he lay down his life for his friends'.



Go the memory of
Captain, Royal M
William H. Fletcher
Parish, who fell in
the Battle of the Somme
Sept. 1916, this
window is dedicated. *