

GREAT WAR STAINED GLASS WINDOW MEMORIALS IN KENT

No. 5: Rochester Cathedral

Private Cecil FEARNLEY

1/15th London Regiment (Civil Service Rifles) TF

KIA 12 May 1915, Festubert

Window: Rochester Cathedral

Kent links: Family home; School

Medals: 1914-1915 Star

War Grave: Brown's Road Military Cemetery, Festubert

Cecil Fearnley was born in Rochester, Kent in 1892, the younger son of Joseph Bate and Ann (née Crowther) Fearnley. His father was a lay preacher at Rochester Cathedral, his older brother Percy became a schoolmaster and his sister, Mary Anne, a milliner.¹ The children needed to supplement the family income, for Joseph's occupation—a lay preacher or lay clerk was a professional singer in the choir—was not well paid. Cecil's family, therefore, was of the respectable lower-middle class by income, living at 173 Eastgate in the cathedral town in 1911. He was educated at a local grammar school, Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School, a seventeenth-century foundation that focused on the teaching of navigation and mathematics. At the census of 1911 Cecil, aged 19, was a clerk for a firm of sand and clay merchants.

Cecil was quick to enlist in the army when war broke out. Judging by his regimental number (2764), he took the King's shilling towards the end of August 1914, travelling to London to do so. The unit he chose to join was a territorial formation, with the rather longwinded official name of the 15th (County of London) Battalion the London Regiment (Prince of Wales' Own Civil Service Rifles). This unit had a long history stretching back to 1860 as the 21st, then 12th Middlesex (Civil Service) Rifle Volunteers and was rebranded only in 1908, when the army reforms of R.B. Haldane created the new Territorial Force to defend the realm from invasion. The unit had always been exclusive, recruiting only government civil servants, Bank of England employees and their friends, but in the years before the war it began to accept clerks from London banks and insurance offices. With its HQ at Somerset House, the Civil Service Rifles remained exclusive in 1914, but with many pre-war members reluctant to serve overseas when asked to do so by Lord Kitchener, the ranks had to be filled by white-collar volunteers from outside the usual charmed circle, offering young men like Fearnley the chance to enlist in a prestigious battalion.² That his parents were proud of his achievement is suggested by their decision to include the Battalion's crest in the stained glass window memorial to their son.

The Civil Service Rifles was initially part of the 2nd London Division and spent nearly eight months in training before embarking at Southampton for France on 17 March

¹ I have been unable to confirm if Percy Fearnley served in the war, but if he did he survived, dying in Sittingbourne in 1962.

² Jill Knight, *The Civil Service Rifles in the Great War: 'All Bloody Gentlemen'* (Barnsley 2005), pp. 9-18.

1915, where it served in the 4th London Infantry Brigade. From Havre the battalion made its way by train north to Cauchy à la Tour and completed its training. After each company had been introduced separately to the trenches for twenty-four hours at Givenchy, under the watchful eye of the 4th (Guards) Brigade, on 13 April the complete battalion took its place in the line for the first time. For the next month the Civil Service Rifles either interchanged with the 1st Hertfordshire Regiment in the front line, or continued its training while in rest billets.

Fearnley was the sixth Civil Service Rifleman to be killed. On 12 May, the first day of the Battle of Festubert, the battalion was in the trenches just to the south of where the main attack took place. The War Diary's account is brief and laconic: '12 May 1915. Festubert trenches. A and C Coys relieved by B and D Coys at night. 1 man killed, 1 wounded'.³ The man killed was Fearnley, probably the victim of shellfire. He had spent less than two months in France. He was buried in Brown's Road Military Cemetery, Festubert and when the Imperial War Graves Commission erected headstones after the war, his parents added the simple phrase on Cecil's: *Rest in Peace*.

Joseph Fearnley's connection with Rochester Cathedral made it an obvious place to raise a memorial to his son, despite the cost of stained glass windows. The window is a single light, with a central figure unusual for a war memorial. The war is not excluded, of course. As mentioned above, the regimental crest is prominent and the dedication includes the classic *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. There are two dominant motifs here. The first is royalty. The crest of the Civil Service Rifles includes the Prince of Wales' feathers (in this case, of the future Edward VII) and the tracery, in the form of an arch, mirrors the crown and the feathers. The second is the window's domination by a figure in rich medieval clothing playing a lyre. The blue halo suggests saintly characteristics. Above him is an angel holding a musical score. The inscription reads: *David took a harp and played with his hand*. This is from the Old Testament, 1 Samuel XVI.23, and refers to David's ability to banish the evil spirit from Samuel by playing his instrument. There is an obvious meaning in this for the Fearnleys, given the father's occupation. It suggests that the evil spirit—in this case grief at the loss of a son—can be overcome by reliance on the beauties of the Christian faith. Taken overall, the window leaves a positive impression, including a pronounced loyalty to and pride in the monarchy.

³ War Diary, 15th London Regiment, 12 May 1915, TNA PRO WO 95/2732.



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