

GREAT WAR STAINED GLASS WINDOW MEMORIALS IN KENT

No. 15: St Peter-the-Apostle, Thanet (Broadstairs)

2nd Lt Mervyn NOOTT

1st Battalion The Buffs (East Kent Regiment)

KIA 20 October 1914, Radinghem near Armentières

Window: St Peter-the-Apostle, Thanet

Kent links: Home, School

Medals: 1914 Star

War Grave: None, commemorated on Ploegsteert Memorial



Fig.1: 2nd Lt Mervyn Noott

Source: *Illustrated London News*, 7 November 1914

Mervyn Noott was born in Kensington on 17 May 1890, the youngest son of William and Louisa Noott.¹ His father was a surgeon and his mother the daughter of the industrialist and Conservative MP Sir Alfred Hickman. The family was wealthy. When Louisa died in 1936 she left £126858 in her will. They lived in Upton Lodge, Broadstairs, now a rather beautiful Grade II listed home in the parish of St Peter's. Mervyn was to be educated at three schools: a small prep school in Llandudno; Fauconberg Grammar School in Beccles, Suffolk; and Eltham College. Noott had intended an army career and hoped to apply to Sandhurst, but illness in his late teens prevented him and by the time he had recovered he was too old. In 1911, therefore, he joined the Special Reserve and two years later transferred to the Regular Army, being commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant in his local regiment, The Buffs, on 23 May 1913.²

¹ A copy of Noott's birth certificate is in the Service or Personal Record [SR] of Mervyn Noott, TNA PRO WO 339/8102.

² Col. L.A. Clutterbuck, *The Bond of Sacrifice*, Vol.1, ([1916] reprint Uckfield, n.d), p.284; *London Gazette*, 23 May 1913, p.3671.

At the same time he was training to become a pilot and in June received his aviator's certificate from the Royal Aero Club.³ This, together with his membership of the United Sports Club in Whitehall and the North Foreland (Kingsgate, Broadstairs) Golf Club suggests that Noott was a sociable and enterprising young man.

Noott intended to transfer to the fledgling Royal Flying Corps but the outbreak of war intervened. He was stationed with his battalion in Fermoy, County Cork, on 4 August 1914. As part of 16th Brigade, 6th Division, III Corps, 1st Buffs was not part of the original British Expeditionary Force (BEF) that left for France in August. Thus Noott missed the Battles of Mons and Le Cateau and the retreat to the Marne. The battalion only arrived in France on 11 September. It then took part in operations on the Aisne, which ended in stalemate. When II and III Corps of the BEF secretly transferred to the north, 1st Buffs, with the rest of 16th Infantry Brigade, remained temporarily on the Aisne. The battalion did not arrive in the Armentières region until 13 October, re-joining 6th Division three days later. On the 18th, together with 2nd York and Lancaster Regiment, 1st Buffs advanced and took Radinghem and the Chateau du Flandre, but under severe German counterattacks were forced to withdraw on the 20th.⁴ Casualties had been heavy, totalling 144, including four officers killed and four wounded. Among the officers killed was Noott.⁵

Noott's parents received the devastating news by telegram from the War Office on 24 October.⁶ Three days later a Death Notice from Louisa Noott was placed in *The Times*, giving a short biography.⁷ Over the next few months the Nootts received letters of condolence that gave details of his death. Beatrice Beevor, for instance, asked the War Office to forward a letter to Louisa from a wounded soldier who had been with Noott when he was killed. 'I think she would like to hear about her boy', Beatrice wrote, rightly believing that most families were anxious to hear the exact circumstances of their relatives' deaths.⁸ It is possible that the wounded soldier was Lance Corporal Kisby, for the Nootts received a letter from him in which he wrote that 'The platoon would have followed him anywhere. Yes, every man was devoted to him. He won this by his many acts of kindness and cheerfulness, and, above all, they had great respect for him as brave man, for undoubtedly he knew no fear'.⁹ This suggests that Noott was a model regimental officer, showing a paternalist concern for his men and an exemplary personal bravery that was admired in the ranks, although their flamboyant display in dangerous situations was not always thought to be sensible or necessary.¹⁰

³ *Flight Magazine*, 5 July 1913. His certificate number was 527.

⁴ Mark Connolly, *Steady the Buffs! A Regiment, a Region, and the Great War* (Oxford 2010), pp.47-49; Ray Westlake, *British Battalions in France and Belgium, 1914* (Barnsley 1997), E-Book Version, 58 of 382; T.O. Marden (ed), *A Short History of the 6th Division Aug. 1914 – March 1919* (London 1920), Chap. 3.

⁵ War Diary, 1st Battalion The Buffs, 20 October 1914, TNA PRO WO 95/1608. None of the officers' bodies was recovered. The other three officers were: Lt J.D. Philips; Lt R. McDougall; and Lt R.S. Glyn. All are commemorated on the Ploegsteert Memorial to the Missing.

⁶ SR, Noott.

⁷ *The Times*, 27 October 1914.

⁸ Beatrice Beevor to War Office, 13 March 1915, SR Noott.

⁹ Quoted in Footsteps... 1914-1918, <https://www.yrpres-salient.com/uk-ireland-no1.html>.

¹⁰ John Lucy, *There's a Devil in the Drum* (1938: Uckfield 1992), p.94.

In her study of letters of condolence during the war Jessica Meyer has argued that two features were highlighted in military correspondence: ‘the fact that death was instantaneous and without suffering and the fact that death occurred in action’.¹¹ These tropes can be found in the letter that Captain R. Bright sent to Noott’s parents. ‘Your son was killed in action on the 20th’, he wrote, and continued, ‘He was gallantly leading his men under heavy fire, and everyone who was near him cannot speak too highly of his conduct ... [H]e died gallantly and knew nothing of being hit, being killed instantaneously’.¹² Major E.H. Finch-Hatton, who later commanded 1st Buffs, was effusive in his letter of condolence to the Nootts, drawing on the tropes of chivalry that dominated the ethos of public schools and gentlemanly conduct at the time.¹³ ‘There is one thing I can bear witness to’, Finch Hatton wrote, ‘and that is a more noble and more chivalrous boy has never fallen on the field of battle. His enthusiasm and his sense of duty and chivalry were quite out of the ordinary. He was more like a knight of old and it is such as he who have made the glory of the British Army to be what it is today – the wonder and the admiration of the world’.¹⁴ Noott must have made a strong impression on Finch Hatton, for such a panegyric was unusual from senior officers.

The Nootts appear to have mourned their son in private. There is no evidence to suggest, for example, that they used *In Memoriam* notices or a memorial service as public expressions of their bereavement. This absence of commemoration was a common response of families who could not accept the loss of a son or husband who had been presumed dead by the War Office. Only once the prisoners of war had returned after the Armistice did many families finally and reluctantly accept the inevitable. Yet in Mervyn Noott’s case, except for the fact that his body had not been recovered, all the evidence pointed conclusively to his death. The War Office had officially recorded him as killed in action. The fact remains, however, that it was not until December 1919 that family efforts began to commemorate his death.

The Nootts worshipped in the ancient church of St Peter-the-Apostle (see Fig. 2) and it was here that they decided to remember their son by installing a stained glass memorial window.¹⁵ Their favoured position for the window was in the east wall, but there already existed a four-light memorial window in the site, dedicated to a young daughter of the Crampton family who had died in 1857. Before the war this window had caused controversy, for it was regarded as an inferior piece of workmanship with the vicar, Rev Charles Matthews, claiming that the parishioners thought it ‘truly terrible in colour and design’. The proposal of the Nootts gave Matthews the opportunity to replace it. It required the permission of the Crampton family to do this, which was, perhaps reluctantly, forthcoming in January 1920. It now became possible

¹¹ Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (London 2011), p.85.

¹² *De Ruvigny’s Roll of Honour*, Vol.1, p.270.

¹³ Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven 1981), pp.163-176.

¹⁴ *De Ruvigny’s Roll of Honour*, Vol.1, p.270.

¹⁵ For the history of the church, see Jill Hogben, *History*

for Matthews, with the blessing of the parish council, to seek a faculty from the Archdeacon of Canterbury Cathedral to change the fabric of the church.¹⁶

Included among the documents sent to the Archdeacon was a draft sketch, now in poor condition, of the proposed memorial window (see Fig. 3), drawn by the artist whom Rev. Matthews called ‘the best ... in England’.¹⁷ This was Louis Davis (1860-1941), one of the finest Arts and Crafts stained-glass artists of the time. Davis was an anti-historicist ‘imbued with a particular spirit of romantic idealism’, who admired fourteenth-century painters and whose design principles were strongly influenced by the mystical poet William Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites.¹⁸ Famed for creating some of the finest stained glass windows in Scotland, by 1920 Davis’ most creative period was over. He and his wife had nearly asphyxiated in 1917 from the effects of a faulty anthracite stove and he never fully recovered.

The four-light window that Davis designed for St Peter’s possessed many of the characteristic features of the style and techniques displayed in his best work (see Fig. 4). Prominent is the pot metal blue paint that James Powell and Sons—the firm which executed Noott’s window—made especially for Davis. It is often displayed in swirling and spiralling motifs, here encasing a flight of birds in one place and in another representing the sea as a ship enters safe harbour (symbolically, Christ is the safe harbour). Davis also tended to show adults as young people, as with the two figures of a sailor and a soldier in the second light, praying for the soul of Noott.¹⁹ Opposite them are four female martyrs, SS Margaret of Antioch, Cecilia, Barbara and Dorothea. All of these saints are legendary; there is no evidence that any of them existed. But all were revered in the Middle Ages, the historical period in which Davis was most interested.²⁰

The ship and the four martyrs show that Noott is represented in the window as having died for Christ, a Christian martyr. The rabbits are symbolic of rebirth and resurrection and the deer of piety and devotion. Between these animals are, possibly, two stoats, representative of purity. In the bottom panel of the third light are two monks displaying their grief, one a Benedictine in a brown habit and the other possibly representing St Francis of Assisi.²¹ Within this obvious Christian iconography, however, there is another tradition to be seen. Noott is represented in the window by Sir Galahad, sword inverted and rising through the clouds towards Christ in Heaven.²² This is an acknowledgement of the sense of duty and chivalrous behaviour mentioned by Finch-Hatton in his letter to the Nootts.

Nothing in the window suggests that Noott had died as a soldier, except in the simple dedication that refers to his rank and regiment and that he died in the Great War. The

¹⁶ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, Faculties, DCb-E-F/St Peter in Thanet/15. The old window was replaced by a brass plaque in another part of the church.

¹⁷ Rev. Matthews to Archdeacon of Canterbury, 5 May 1920, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Peter Cormack, *Arts and Crafts Stained Glass* (New Haven 2015), p.171.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.172, 176.

²⁰ David Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford 2011), pp.35, 84, 127, 289-90.

²¹ St Francis of Assisi is suggested, without any clear reference, in the Imperial War Museum War Memorials Archive,

<http://www.ukniwm.org.uk/server/show/conMemorial.41219/fromUkiwmSearch/1>

²² That this is Sir Galahad is confirmed by Davis’ comment on the draft sketch in Figure 3.

iconography of the window is without any military context (for example, the martyrs are female, not warrior martyrs as in many other stained glass memorial windows). On Noott's brass memorial plaque, however, the crest of the Buffs is displayed, together with the inscription seen on so many military memorials dedicated to individuals: *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his Friends* (John XV:13). The Christian and the military messages are thus kept partly separate, although both window and plaque emphasise willing sacrifice. Noott's name is also on the parish war memorial, one of 118 names carved in alphabetical order by year of death, and on the plinth of the family memorial cross in the churchyard. As with most stained glass memorial windows dedicated to individuals, family grief can be seen to be mitigated by the certainties and consolations of Christianity.

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Fig. 2: Porch of St Peter the Apostle Church, Thanet



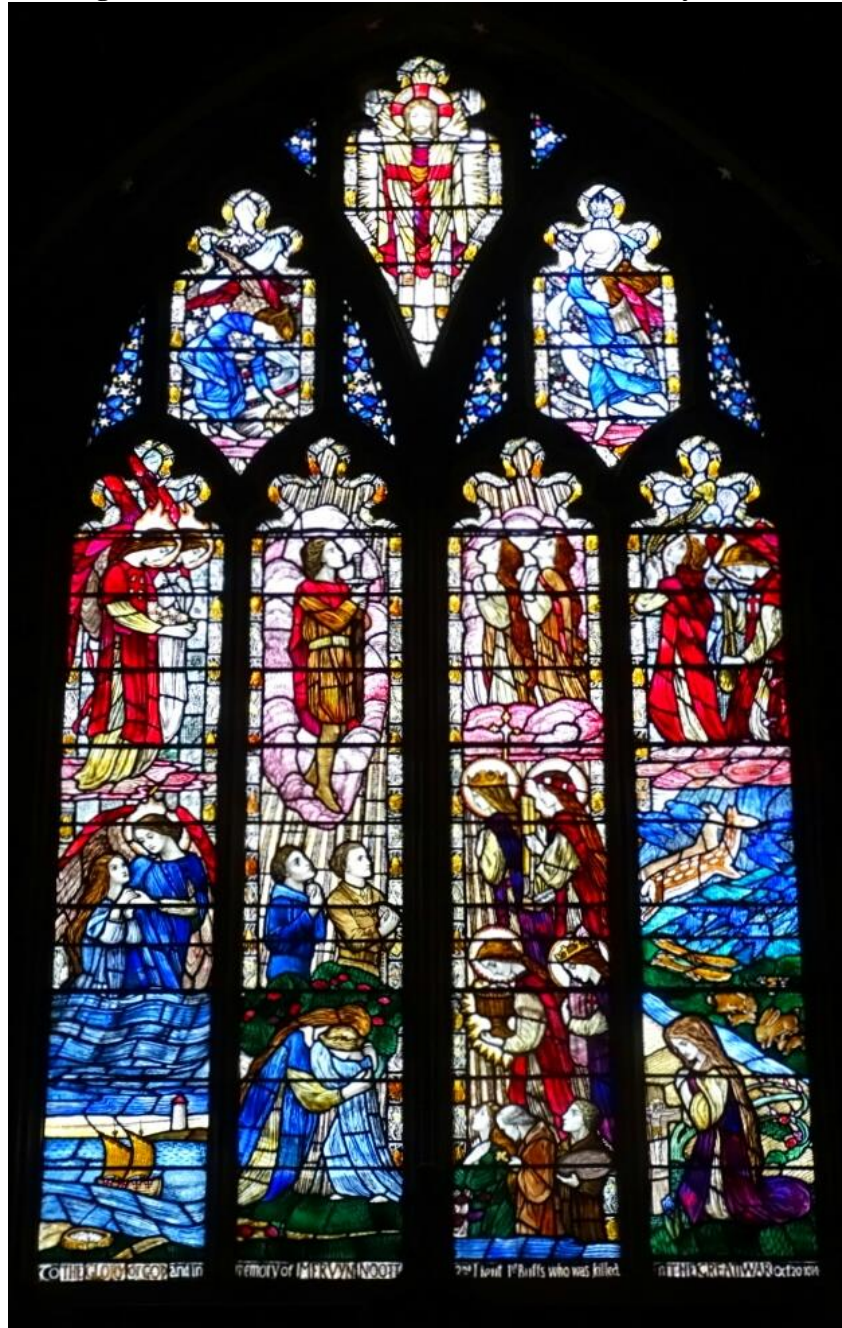
Source: © ellesmerecollective.co.uk & M. Durey

Fig. 3: Sketch of the Noott's Proposed Window



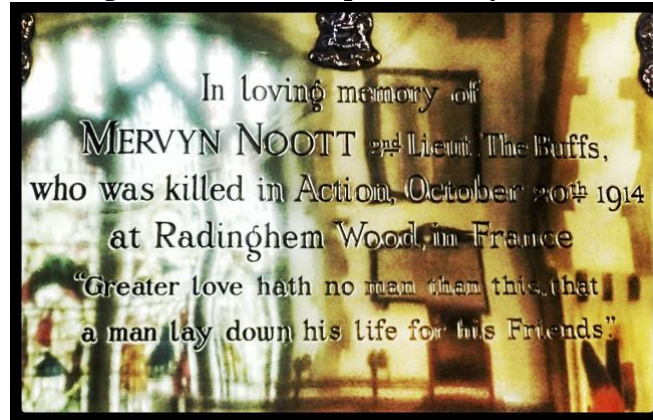
Source: Canterbury Cathedral Archives, Faculties, DCb-E-F/St Peter in Thanet/15.

Fig. 4: Stained Glass Window Dedicated to Mervyn Noott



Source: © ellesmerecollective.co.uk & M. Durey

Fig. 5: Memorial Plaque to Mervyn Noott



Source: ellesmerecollective.co.uk & M. Durey