

GREAT WAR STAINED GLASS WINDOW MEMORIALS IN KENT

No. 14: St Martin's, Brasted

Lt Leonard Comer Wall

**A Battery, 275 Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, 55th (West Lancashire) Division
TF**

DOW 9 June 1917, Wyttschaete

Window: St Martin's, Brasted

Kent links: Fiancée born in Folkestone and lived in Brasted; RFA training in Kent

Medals: 1914-1915 Star, Mentioned in Despatches

War Grave: Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery



Lt Leonard Comer Wall
Source: Courtesy of Dick Florey

Although Leonard Comer Wall's short life appears very conventional, there are three singular features that arose from his death. The first is that he is possibly unique among those commemorated by stained-glass war memorials in Kent, in that he had no personal connection with the county. His family links were with Lancashire and Cheshire and he was educated in Gloucestershire. He undertook his training, however, as an artillery officer in Kent and there met a young lady to whom he became engaged before joining the BEF in 1915. It was his fiancée who organised the memorial in Kent, but being so far from his place of origin, it seems to have been forgotten by his biographers. His claim to fame rests on two other factors: a poem he wrote that gave

him a place in the pantheon of War Poets;¹ and the horse that he was riding when he was mortally wounded in 1917.

Wall was born in West Kirby, Cheshire on 11 September 1896, being baptised one month later.² He was the only child born to Charles and Kate Wall. His father was a provision merchant who became increasingly successful and left £52927 in his will when he died in 1928.³ His mother was born in Canada but went to school in West Kirby. Both sides of the family were in trade and there is no evidence of any connection to the military. If the war had not intervened Wall would probably have joined the family grocery business.⁴

Wall was educated at Terra Nova School, a private preparatory school founded in 1897 in Cheshire, and Clifton College, a public school founded in 1862 and modelled on Rugby School. Clifton was one of a number of new private schools founded in the middle decades of the nineteenth century to cater for the sons of the prosperous business and professional classes. It had an ‘army class’ to prepare pupils who wished for a career in the military forces.⁵ Like all public schools in that era, Clifton focused its pedagogical attention on the teaching of gentlemanly, chivalric and Christian ideals and the formation of ‘character’, a combination of values that crucially infused the leadership of the officer class (Regular, Territorial or Temporary) during the war. Among its alumni were characters as varied as Sir Douglas Haig, in 1914 in command of the BEF’s 1st Corps; Charles Bean, who was to write the official history of the Australian Imperial Force; and Sir Henry Newbolt, the author of the patriotic and imperialist, but nowadays much satirized, poem *Vitai Lampada*. In another of his poems, on Clifton Chapel, Newbolt advised the boys:

To set the cause above renown,
To love the game beyond the prize,
To honour, while you strike him down,
The foe that comes with fearless eyes.⁶

¹ See ‘Forgotten Poets of the First World War’, <http://forgottenpoetsofww1.blogspot.com.au/2016/03/leonard-comer-wall-1879-1917-british.html>

² Cheshire, Select Bishops’ Transcripts, 1576-1933, Ancestry.Co.uk.

³ National Probate Records, February 1928, Ancestry.Co.uk.

⁴ Victoria Doran, ‘Leonard Comer Wall’, *An Imperishable Record: The People of North-West Wirral and the Great War*,

<https://grangehill1922.wordpress.com/2017/11/15/leonard-comer-wall/>; Mike Royden, ‘Leonard Comer Wall and Blackie the War Horse’,

http://www.roydenhistory.co.uk/halewood/warmemorial/wargraves/blackie/blackie_leonard_comer_wall.pdf

⁵ Anthony Seldon & David Walsh, *Public Schools and the Great War: The Generation Lost* (Barnsley 2013), pp.11, 39. Clifton also was the only public school to have a boarding house for Anglo-Jewish boys who could continue practising their faith. *The Jewish Chronicle*, <https://www.thejc.com/education/education-features/clifton-college-s-jewish-family-1.446832>

⁶ Quoted in Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven 1981), p.171. The cult of games at Clifton ‘was carried to extreme limits’. *Ibid.*, p.172. The first Headmaster named two of his children Arthur and Lancelot.

Whether such gentlemanly behaviour *on the battlefield* could survive *minenwurfer*, gas, flamethrowers and intense and prolonged artillery bombardments is moot. Certainly, an officer in the artillery in the middle years of the war would usually never be close enough to see the enemy's eyes, fearless or not.⁷ Wall entered the school in September 1910 and left in July 1914. While there he 'held a high rank in the Officers' Training Corps', which suggests that he had a more than passing interest in the army and may well have been in the army class.⁸

As soon as war was declared, Wall sought a commission in the Territorial Force. On 29 August 1914 he was commissioned in the 1st West Lancashire Brigade, Royal Field Artillery TF.⁹ He was posted to the 1st Battery and was to remain with it until his death. The 1st West Lancashire Brigade had its headquarters at Windsor Barracks in Liverpool and was part of the West Lancashire Division, at least until the division was broken up and its infantry battalions sent to France piecemeal as reinforcements. The divisional artillery was then placed under the orders of the 2nd Canadian Division whilst it completed its training.¹⁰

After initial training at Crosby and Aintree, Wall's brigade moved south, still honing its skills on the obsolescent 15-pounder gun. Between December 1914 and March 1915 they were based at Dunton Green and Brasted, both small villages close to Sevenoaks in Kent, before moving into billets in Ash and Eastry, about three kilometres from the coastal community of Sandwich. Their final destination was a hutted camp close to Canterbury.¹¹ While in Brasted one of Wall's fellow officers was married in St Martin's. According to one girl living in the village, 'The bride and groom, in an open carriage drawn by a team of six gun horses, were driven at full gallop along the street to the White Hart ... The other officers of the Regiment formed an escort and rode hell-for-leather with drawn swords on either side of the carriage'.¹²

On 1 October, finally equipped with 18-pounders, the brigade landed at Le Havre with the 2nd Canadian Division. According to his Medal Index Card, however, Wall arrived in France on 9 September. It is possible, therefore, that he was part of an advanced party preparing for the arrival of the brigade.

Later in the year the old West Lancashire Division was re-formed as the 55th (West Lancashire) Division. The Artillery re-joined it at Hallencourt in Picardy between the 2nd and 4th of January 1916. Four months later Wall's brigade was given the number 275 (CCLXXV) and his 1st Battery re-named as A Battery.

Wall was to spend twenty-one months in France. 275 Brigade was heavily involved in the Somme campaign, especially in September 1916 during the battles of Guillemont,

⁷ Unless he was a Forward Observation Officer (FOO), a role as risky as an infantry officer's.

⁸ *Liverpool Scroll of Fame: A Memorial of Soldiers and Sailors who gave their lives for their country* (1919). I am grateful to Dick Florey for this reference.

⁹ *London Gazette*, 11 September 1914, p.7228.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Chris Baker's *Long, Long Trail* website, <http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/>, for this information.

¹¹ I am very grateful to David Porter of the Great War Forum for supplying me with this information.

¹² Edna V. Shorey, 'A Kentish Child's Life in World War I', <http://www.brasted.co.uk/History/AKentishChildsLifeinWorldWarI.htm>

Ginchy, Flers-Courcelette and Morval. It is likely that the Mention in Despatches that Wall received was for his actions during this period.¹³ The Brigade then returned to the Ypres Salient. No doubt Wall had several periods of leave during his service overseas (one was from 1 January 1917) and between 10 May and 1 June 1917 he was with A Battery when it was temporarily Depot Battery at the 2nd Army School at Tilques.¹⁴ Wall returned to the Brigade, which was in the Wieltje section of the Salient, on the day he was promoted to Lieutenant.¹⁵ He was in time for Second Army's 'bite and hold' attack on Messines Ridge on 7 June where, learning from the success of the Canadians' plans at Vimy Ridge, the British Artillery made a very significant contribution to the outcome.¹⁶ Unfortunately, Wall was not to survive.

On the night of 8-9 June Wall and another A Battery officer, 2nd Lieutenant William Smith, a twenty-year old son of a colliery agent in Astley, Lancashire, was supervising the unloading of an ammunition wagon convoy in a nearby orchard.¹⁷ Most of the wagons had already left when 'quite unexpectedly the enemy's guns opened out on them with peculiar savagery'. Wall and Smith, on horseback, 'were caught in the very midst of the bombardment, and both were killed'.¹⁸ The unit's war diary reported this as occurring at 12.30am on the 9th: 'Lieut. L.C. Wall and 2/Lt W. Smith A/275 Bty RFA killed in action. 1 OR killed and 2 ORs wounded A/275 Bty RFA'.¹⁹ In the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records, Smith is reported as dying on the 8th and Wall on the 9th. The former was probably killed outright, but the latter was mortally wounded and taken to a Casualty Clearing Station, where he died a few hours later.²⁰ Wall and Smith were buried next to each other at Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery.

After the war Smith's parents added an inscription to his gravestone in Belgium: 'Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord' (Revelation XIV:13). The Walls added a less biblical inscription to their son's gravestone: 'They win or die who wear the rose of Lancaster'. They had also used this line of verse in the death notice they placed in the local newspapers in 1917.²¹ It came from a poem, slightly amended, written by Wall in Flanders and first published in the *Liverpool Daily Post* in April 1917. It was reprinted again in 1918 to mark the fourth anniversary of the outbreak of the war.²² This poem led to the second unusual feature of Wall's death.

¹³ *London Gazette*, 4 January 1917. I am grateful to Dick Florey for this reference.

¹⁴ War Diary, 275 Brigade RFA, 1 January, 10 May, 1 June 1917, TNA PRO WO 95/2914.

¹⁵ *London Gazette*, 11 May 1917, p.4623.

¹⁶ Paul Strong and Sanders Marble, *Artillery in the Great War* (Barnsley 2013), pp.133-34; Brian Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars against Germany: Myth, Memory and the Distortions of Hindsight* (Cambridge 2014, e-Book edition), pp. 333-334 of 484. The 55th Division's artillery was involved in the battle, but its infantry brigades were not.

¹⁷ For Smith, see 1911 Census, Ancestry.Co.uk.

¹⁸ W.W. Wadsworth, *War Diary of the 1st West Lancashire Brigade, RFA* (Liverpool 1923), pp.68-69. I owe this reference to Dick Florey.

¹⁹ War Diary, 275 Brigade RFA, 9 June 1917.

²⁰ Royden, 'Leonard Comer Wall and Blackie the War Horse'. It is possible that both were taken to the CCS, but Smith died *en route*. In that case he would have been declared Killed in Action, unlike Wall, who was still alive when he arrived. This would explain their burial together.

²¹ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 15 June 1917; *Liverpool Echo*, 15 June 1917.

²² *Liverpool Daily Post*, 5 August 1918.

The poem is called *Red Roses* and overflows with patriotism—local, national and regimental—and a grim determination (perhaps worth remembering as Wall had been with the BEF for nearly twenty-one months in April 1917 and had gone through the struggles on the Somme).

Red Roses

*When Princes fought for England's Crown,
The House that won the most renown,
And struck the sullen Yorkist down,
Was Lancaster.*

*Her blood-red emblem stricken sore,
Yet steeped her pallid foe in gore,
Still stands for England evermore,
And Lancashire.*

*Now England's blood like water flows,
Full many a lusty German knows,
We win or die – who wear the rose
Of Lancaster.*

It was signed L.C.W.

Unlike Wilfred Owen's poems, so central today to the popular view of the Great War but almost totally unknown during and immediately after it,²³ Wall's short verse, or at least its last two lines, had a significant impact at the time, especially in the 55th Division. In 1939 *The Liverpool Scottish Regimental Gazette* published an article on the story behind the 55th Division's motto. The Division had adopted the red rose of Lancaster as its identification device early in the war, but the accompanying motto only appeared in 1917.

Early in June 1917, a young officer of the 275th Brigade RFA was killed by a shell in a battery position at Ypres. He was Lieut. Leonard C. Wall, of Liverpool ... About a week after his death an officer of the divisional staff saw the announcement of Lieut. Wall's death in a newspaper and beneath it the words "We win or die who wear the Rose of Lancaster". He mentioned the quotation next day to General [Hugh] Jeudwine [GOC 55th Division], who was so impressed by it that he gave orders forthwith that the motto should henceforth encircle the divisional sign, and his orders were at once carried out.

It was generally believed at the time that the words were a quotation from Shakespeare, but, although most people were quite confident that Shakespeare was the author, no-one could determine in which play the words were to be found, and many letters were sent home during the next few months to friends and relatives urging them to search their Shakespeare and

²³ Owen's poems sold in their hundreds in the 1920s, while Rupert Brooke's book went through 'edition after edition'. K.S. Inglis, 'The Homecoming: The War Memorial Movement in Cambridge, England', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.27 (1992), p.601.

solve the problem. But nothing resulted. ... The origin of the motto remained a mystery.²⁴

Knowledge of the author must have become known in the Division by the middle of 1918, for the divisional journal "Sub Rosa" reproduced the poem from the newspapers in June of that year. The motto now surrounds the insignia on every gravestone of the 55th Division's dead in the cemeteries of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, possibly making Wall second only to Rudyard Kipling among contemporaries for having his words commemorated so widely along the Western Front. In his book recounting his journey through the battlefields of the Western Front between August and November 1920, Stephen Graham, the pre-1914 Russophile writer and Scots Guardsman, noticed Wall's words on discs attached to the wooden crosses of two soldiers, together with 'bright red roses', in the small hamlet of Hinges. 'Some devotee of his county', he wrote, 'has placed this disc on thousands of the graves of the Lancastrians'.²⁵

The third unusual feature resulting from Wall's death concerns the horse that he was riding when he was mortally wounded. Its name was Blackie and it suffered severe wounds when the shell that killed Wall exploded. Although permanently scarred, the horse survived the war. It has been suggested that in his will Wall had made the strange request that his war medals be buried with Blackie. His mother Kate fulfilled the request by buying the horse from the army after the war. He was placed with the Territorial Army Riding School in Liverpool until retiring in 1930. Blackie lost his sight and eventually died at the age of thirty-five in 1942.²⁶ He was buried, with the medals, at the RSPCA Horses' Rest at Hunts Cross, Liverpool.²⁷ In 2017 the grave was given Grade II listed status by Historic England.²⁸ It was the first war horse grave to be given such protection (see Fig. 2).

Wall was himself commemorated in a number of places, mostly in Cheshire: on the Clifton College War Memorial in Bristol; on the Grange Hill War Memorial, West Kirby; and in the West Kirby churches of St. Bridget and St. Andrew. What appears to have been forgotten today, however, is that he was also commemorated in St. Martin's, Brasted, Kent, at the instigation of his fiancée, Irene Dorothy Bryan (known as Dorothy). This is probably partly owing to the fact that the stained-glass window dedicated to him was destroyed by bomb blast in 1944 and when restored was dedicated to someone else. The Imperial War Museum's War Memorial Register mentions 'L. Wall' but that, after restoration, it was dedicated in memory of 'Edward Venn'.²⁹

²⁴ *The Liverpool Scottish Regimental Gazette*, Vol.10, no.3, July 1939. This extract was shared by Richard Daghish on the Great War Forum in 2007 and I am grateful to him, and the late Major David Evans of the London Scottish, for making it available.

²⁵ Stephen Graham, *The Challenge of the Dead* (London 1921), p.56. For Graham, see Michael Hughes, *Beyond Holy Russia: The Life and Times of Stephen Graham* (London 2014).

²⁶ Doran, 'Leonard Comer Wall'.

²⁷ *Gloucester Citizen*, 16 December 1942.

²⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 18 December 2017.

²⁹ Imperial War Museum War Memorial Register,
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/73700>

Dorothy would have been devastated to hear of her fiancé's death in June 1917. She was three years older than Wall, having been born in Folkestone on 25 October 1893. Her father was Rev. Edward Venn Eustace Bryan (1863-1938) and her mother was Edith Dora Bryan, née Whitaker (1861-1936). Coincidentally, both Dorothy and Leonard had Canadian mothers, Edith being born in Toronto. In 1911 Dorothy was the second eldest of six sisters and had one brother. Her father had been Vicar of Sandgate, Kent, in 1901; a Vicar in Canterbury in 1911; and in 1915 was Rector of St Martin's, Brasted. Evidently, Dorothy and Leonard met while he was stationed in the village and quickly fell in love. It is possible that they became engaged at some point while he was home on leave. That Wall's parents acknowledged the match is shown by their death notice placed in the newspapers in June 1917, where they referred to him as 'the affianced husband of Irene Dorothy Bryan, Braxted (sic) Rectory, Sevenoaks, Kent'.³⁰ The families, moreover, kept in touch for at least ten years after Wall's death, for his mother sent a wedding present when Dorothy's sister married Henry Eberli, of Brasted House, Brasted in July 1927.³¹ Dorothy herself was to marry in 1934, to a stockbroker nineteen years her senior. When she died in Eastbourne in 1985, aged ninety-two, she left £395182 in her will.

The stained-glass window memorial to Leonard Wall was part of a bigger war memorial within St Martin's Church that was decided upon in 1918. Unfortunately, it did not go ahead without some local disagreement. The issue of how to memorialize the war, its dead and its survivors dominated every community, large and small, both during and immediately after the war. The result was thousands of monuments that punctuate rural and urban landscapes and embellish churches and public buildings in Britain today. Nearly every community in England established a war memorial committee, charged with deciding the type and place of the memorial, as well as raising the money to pay for it. The composition of the memorial committees, some of which appear to have been self-selected, could cause local grumblings and their decisions were not always accepted easily. Often compromise, even if it meant the opposing sides going ahead with their own plans, was the only solution.³² This appears to have been the case in Brasted.³³ Rev. Bryan and his Parochial Church Council saw a war memorial as a way of renovating the Stocket Chapel, a very old part of his church that had fallen into disrepair, with Wall's stained-glass window as the centrepiece.³⁴ Other villagers and members of the parish council, including Rev John Smith, the local Baptist minister, whose youngest son had been killed in June 1918, wanted a more inclusive memorial in a public open space.³⁵ Compromise was not found and Bryan went ahead with his own plan. On 24 July 1919 the war memorial within St Martin's, including the stained-glass window, was dedicated, with

³⁰ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 15 June 1917; *Liverpool Echo*, 15 June 1917.

³¹ *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*, 8 July 1927.

³² Keith Grieves, 'Investigating local war memorial committees: demobilised soldiers, the bereaved and expressions of local pride in Sussex villages, 1918-1921', *The Local Historian*, 30 (2000), pp.39-58; Catherine Moriarty, 'The Absent Dead and Figurative First World War Memorials', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 39 (1995), p.7.

³³ There was also considerable controversy in Brasted over plans to have a Peace Party in July 1919. *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*, 18 July 1919.

³⁴ The Stocket Chapel was a Chantry chapel formerly owned by a succession of prominent local lay families. It had only recently been bought for the church with an anonymous donation.

³⁵ *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser*, 14 June 1918.

the ceremony led by the Bishop of Rochester.³⁶ The parish council's memorial, a Portland stone tablet built into the wall opposite the school, where 'no visitor going through the village could fail to see it', was dedicated on 7 February 1920.³⁷

The stained-glass window in the Stocket Chapel in St Martin's dedicated initially to Leonard Wall and now to Rev. Bryan is known as the *Nunc Dimittis* window, referring to the biblical story that Simeon would not die until he had seen the Messiah, his salvation (Luke 2:25-32). It is believed that the window's restoration followed the original pattern as closely as possible.³⁸ It is a three-light window (see Fig. 1) with the Virgin Mary in the left and another female saint—'S E', possibly the seventh-century Saint Ethelburga of Kent—in the right. In the centre is the Tree of Life with blue doves of peace and with the eternal city in the background. The phrase "my soul doth magnify [praise] the Lord" comes from Luke 1:46, Mary's response to learning that she shall become the mother of the Messiah. There are no military allusions at all, just the Christian messages of peace and salvation, with the angels above holding the scroll on which is written 'My spirit doth rejoice in God my saviour'.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid, 25 July 1919.

³⁷ Ibid, 13 February 1920.

³⁸ There appears not to be a photograph of the window in its original form.

³⁹ I am very grateful to Pamela A. Day and Christine Lewis, of Brasted, for their help. See also the website, www.stmartinsbrasted.org.uk



Fig. 1: The *Nunc Dimittis* Window, Brasted
Source: Courtesy of Catherine and Frank Lewis © of Brasted

Fig. 2: Blackie's Grave



Source: Alan Bull/Historic England

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