

## The Becks of Swineshead

The 1871 census shows that there were no Becks residing in the Parish of Swineshead, but by 1911 there were 32 Becks in and around the village mostly at North End. The youngest was less than a month old and the oldest was his grandfather, Richard Clay Beck.

Richard Clay Beck was the original Swineshead Beck having arrived in the village from the West Midlands in 1876. He was born in Coventry and like his father before him he was a brickmaker. Quite what brought him to the village is unclear. There is evidence of brickmaking in the Swineshead area but Richard's first job was working on the renovation of Wigtoft church. He evidently wasted little time in setting in and in the autumn of 1876 he married Mary Elizabeth Vines. He was 19 years of age and she was just 16. Mary had been born in the hamlet of Mount Pleasant which is now part of Frithville parish, but her family had moved to Swineshead where her father found work as a farm labourer.

It wasn't long before the young couple were parents and by the time of the 1881 census they were living at North End. Second son John Richard was aged 2 and living with his mum and dad while first born George Alfred was 4 and living nearby with his grandparents George and Mary Vine. Richard gave his occupation as a brickmaker and it was this trade that earned him the nickname "Bricky" Beck.

Whatever his brick making ability, it seems that he found his true vocation in land drainage. According to his obituary, *"he was undoubtedly a past master in this kind of work. In fact it is said that he was the finest exponent of the art of fen draining in this district. For 7 years in succession he won the premier award in the draining competition held in Lincolnshire"*. The testimony continues, *"In addition to this remarkable aptitude with the implements of draining, he was a truly wonderful all-round man and it is said that there was no branch of work he could not turn his hand and accomplish successfully."* In an era that judged a man by his ability to work that was high praise.

Richard and Mary continued to live in their small cottage at North End and their family continued to grow. In all they had 11 children but one sadly died in infancy. It was with good reason that the cottages at North End were named Baby Row.

It is something of a custom in Swineshead and no doubt in surrounding villages too, that young men acquire nicknames and with the exception of William Frederick it seems that the Beck boys maintained the tradition. George Alfred Beck's obituary tells us that *"as a young man (he) was a great athlete being known as Britton Beck"*. John Richard was unsurprisingly known as Dick and James Albert was always known as Ampy. Arthur Edwin became Podgin and Charles Ernest was Zambuck which was the trade name of a medical treatment advertised prominently in the Boston Guardian of the time. Herbert Henry was called Springer and the youngest son Thomas Wilfred became known to all as Tanic.

Britton Beck's physical prowess would have stood him in good stead when he decided to become a soldier. At 18 he was labouring in the village for a Mr Lunn. But on the first day of February 1894 Britton signed up to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment. The big military engagement of the late Victorian era was the Boer War and Britton and his regiment were stationed at Parkhurst Barracks on the Isle of Wight in readiness for deployment to South Africa. Disappointingly for

Britton, the Isle of Wight was as near to Africa as these particular 'Poachers' got. He was however distracted by another type of engagement when he met local girl Alice Mabel Cant. She in turn was the daughter of another soldier who had found himself stationed on the island.

Britton Beck married Alice Mabel Cant at the St James Street Chapel in Newport on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1900. By the time of the 1901 census he was no longer a soldier but was a watchmaker living with his wife and in-laws. Later that year Alice gave birth to their first child, a daughter. Sometime between 1902 and 1903 Britton moved back to Swineshead with his new wife. We know this as their daughter died in Newport in 1902 and their son George Henry was born in Swineshead in 1903. George Henry was followed by Alice Mary Mabel in 1906 Edith Annie Elizabeth in 1908 Charles Edwin in 1911 and Florence Caroline in 1913.

In 1905 Britton re-joined the Lincolnshire Regiment as a part time militia man. His surviving Attestation Papers show he was working as a farm labourer for Mr H Brackenbury of Swineshead at the time. William Frederick Beck and Ampy Beck served with the militia in the pre war years too.

Dick Beck also married young when in 1899 he wed Fanny Coddington the daughter of a farm foreman at West Low Grounds, Swineshead. In the 1901 census Dick was an agricultural labourer and the young couple were living at North End where over the next few years they added to the growing Beck clan with Richard, Grace Ivy, Gladys, Leslie, Evelyn and Harold. Dick had obviously learned from his father as he too was engaged in the drainage profession. The 1911 census shows us that he and his brother Podgin were both working away from home in a small village outside of Kings Lynn and both were employed as "Practical Land Underdrainers".

The third of the Beck children to marry was William Frederick. He married Mary Ellen Gertrude Line of Bicker who had been working as a general domestic servant for the Wilson Family at The Ivy on Villa Lane in Swineshead. The couple married in 1904 and by the time of the 1911 census they had three children; William Frederick aged 6, Violet Edna Mary aged 3 and Bertha Elizabeth just 1. They too lived at North End.

The fourth son Ampy followed in Britton Beck's footsteps when he joined the Lincolnshire Regiment in February 1904. He was 17 years 4 months old then and working as a farm labourer for Mr John Thorpe of Swineshead. In May 1907 Ampy married Martha Simpson the daughter of a blacksmith whose work had taken him to Lincoln, Nottingham and Swineshead. By 1911 Ampy and Martha Beck were living in North End with two year old James Albert and new born Thomas. Ampy was a general farm labourer.

So by April 1911 we know that the four eldest boys were all married with families and living close to their parents. We also know that the fifth born Podgin was working away with his brother Dick. Three of the children remained at home; Zambuck was 17 and a general farm labourer and Tanic was 12 and like Florence May (Flo) aged 11, he was still at school. That leaves Mary Elizabeth (Lizzie) and Springer who were 21 and 15 respectively. Both could be found 12 miles away in Billingham working for a Doctor Chambers and his family. Lizzie was a general domestic servant and Springer was a groom.

No event in recent history affected the nation like the Great War of 1914-18 as the Beck family knows well. But heartache had hit the Becks before a shot was fired in anger. In the summer of 1913, weeks after giving birth to her fourth child, Mary Ellen Gertrude Beck wife of William Frederick died aged 33. Less than eight months after the family laid her to rest in St Mary's churchyard they were back again to bury Alice Mabel wife of Britton Beck. She was even younger at 31 having succumbed to rheumatic heart disease. Her mother had travelled up from the Isle of Wight and was at her bedside when she died. These two deaths left nine children without a mother.

Having raised ten children of her own it now fell to Mary Beck to look after William Frederick's children. We do know that Britton's eldest daughter, Mabel, went to live with her Grandmother on the Isle of Wight and that when Britton remarried in 1915 the other children lived with their stepmother. But it is safe to assume that "Grandma Beck" was the interim carer for these children too.

We can only imagine how these motherless children felt when in 1914 their fathers marched off to war, but when the call came the Beck boys were not found wanting.

In 1915 the local newspaper published a rousing article under the heading "*Six Swineshead Brothers in the Army*". It carried the sub-title "*Two others willing to serve, but not eligible*". It reads: - "*There are at present about 70 Swineshead men in the Army and Navy, and others are constantly offering themselves. Whether or not this is a fair proportion, certainly the charge of "slackers" cannot be applied to the Beck family of Swineshead North End. Mr & Mrs Richard Clay Beck have eight sons, six of whom are in the Army. The seventh offered himself, but was rejected through some slight physical defect, and the eighth is anxious to go but is not old enough.*"

The article tells us that having served two terms with the Lincolnshire Militia, Britton Beck joined the Lincolnshire Regiment in 1914 aged 37 and was subsequently sent to the front. It continues, "according to his letters (he) has seen very active service at Ypres and other places, out of all of which he came through unwounded, but not unaffected, for through the wet condition of the trenches and the severity of the frosts he sustained serious chilblains and rheumatic fever. He was in consequence invalided home and is now progressing favourably in a convalescent home at Buxton."

The Devonshire Hospital in Buxton was where Vera Britton started her nursing training and features in her account of the Great War, "Testament of Youth" which went on to become a modern classic. It is not known whether Vera and Britton crossed paths. Neither is it known if he featured in the newsreel film of the treatment at the hospital that can be found on YouTube;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTfDUcDOtns>.

The British Film Institute comments "*The individuals shown are all youngish and cheerful looking, so that presumably the intention was both to reassure the audience that 'our boys' were getting the best possible treatment using modern methods and equipment. The reality, however, may have been less cheery. Anecdotal evidence suggests that debilitating rheumatic disorders were rife, particularly among those who spent long periods in the trenches during winter or in the underground tunnels of the sappers, and it seems likely that there were many less pretty cases than are seen here.*"

Britton remarried in 1915 and was discharged from service on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1916. He was awarded three medals, The British War Medal, The Victory Medal, The 1914/15 Star and the Silver War Badge. Britton settled in Boston where he went on to have a further seven children. He died in 1937 aged 59 and his obituary said *"Mr Beck was well known in Boston where he lived for twenty years and in Swineshead as an expert in the repairing and overhauling of clocks and watches"*, it also suggests that he had been in indifferent health ever since the war and seriously ill for the previous eight and a half years.

The 'Six Brothers' newspaper article related that *"Bombardier Charles Ernest Beck (Zambuck) enlisted in the Royal Garrison Artillery about four years ago. At the outbreak of war he was stationed at Gibraltar."* He was sent to France where the article noted he *"so far has escaped unwounded"*. He served with the 114 Heavy Battery. These units were equipped with heavy guns, firing large calibre high explosive shells. Zambuck was made a Corporal, survived the war and returned home after the conflict with The British War Medal, The Victory Medal and the 1914 Star. He lived to be 85.

The newspaper concludes with, *"James Albert and William Fredrick Beck both did service in the Militia some few years ago, and both joined the Lincolnshire Regiment when the war broke out. The former is stationed at Grimsby and the latter at Alton Park, daily expecting to be called to the Front. Arthur Edwin and Herbert Henry Beck both enlisted in the Lincolnshire Regiment last March and are now in training."* The reference to Alton Park where William Frederick and the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment was stationed was a misspelling, William Frederick was actually at Halton Park in Hertfordshire which was where units of the 21<sup>st</sup> Division initially concentrated before winter necessitated a move into local billets.

We know that William ended up in Leighton Buzzard through a surviving post card that Britton Beck sent to him on New Year's Day 1915. It read, *"With a brother's love wishing you a happy and prosperous New Year, from George. Hoping you are quite well and in good health. I wish you Good Luck, from George."*

The post card was a studio photograph of Britton in military uniform. Significantly it was sent C/o Mrs Leach and eight months later it was a Lilian Leach of Leighton Buzzard that Britton married in Swineshead church.

The War Diaries for William Frederick's battalion reads, *"The newly formed Battalion concentrated in Halton Park near Tring". It goes on to say "The Battalion moved into billets in Leighton Buzzard for the winter of 1914 and more arduous training began" then "In the spring of 1915 the Battalion moved to Halton Park Camp, Wendover, and miniature rifle practice began"*.

The optimism of the soldiers in training was encapsulated in verse by one recruit:

### The Boys from Halton Park

*There are five and twenty thousand  
Bold recruits who have made a start  
To train to fight for their country  
In this spacious Halton Park.*

*When they are trained and ready  
To the front they will embark.  
Then you will hear the people say  
There's the lads from Halton Park*

*And when Berlin is taken,  
The Kaiser will remark  
"Where did those fearnoughts come from?"  
Why, of course, from Halton Park.*

*And when we come home victorious,  
And each man has made his mark  
Where will the honours go to?  
Why the lads from Halton Park.*

A further newspaper item about the brothers was published in 1915 titled "*The Beck Brothers*", which said that it had been brought to the attention of George V that six brothers from Swineshead were all fighting for their King and Country. The King sent his congratulations and appreciation in the form of a letter from Mr F W Ponsonby, the Keeper of the Privy Purse, which was dated 28th September 1915. It was followed by a letter sent by Mr E G Holmes, the son of Canon Holmes, who had been the Vicar of Swineshead for many years. He also wished the boys well and hoped they all returned with their health intact.

William Frederick arrived in France on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1915 and became a Corporal in the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment but the luck that Britton wished his brother ran out on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1917 when he was killed in action. His body was never recovered but he is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial in France. He was posthumously awarded The British War Medal, The Victory Medal and the 1915 Star.

This was the second loss for the Becks as Herbert Henry or Springer as he was known had been killed a year earlier. Initially the local paper reported him missing: "*He is one of the six sons of Mr Richard Beck who joined the Army all of whom have fought, and four still are fighting in France. Herbert Joined the Colours in March 1915 and was engaged in the Great Push of July 1<sup>st</sup>*".

The Great Push is now better known as the First Day of the Somme and Springer was just one of the 19,240 British soldiers killed on that day. The newspaper tells us that Richard and Mary Beck received "*a letter from a comrade a few days after that date conveying the fear that their son was dead. The writer seems to have been in deep sorrow and speaks of him as his favourite chum.*"

Springer's comrade continued, *"We were engaged together taking a wood. We had got about half way through when Herbert fell and I feared he was dead as he did not move. I regret that I could not stop to see more of him but in such a rush as that we may not stop for anything, and indeed to do so would almost certainly mean the cost of one's life"*.

The article concludes by saying, *"His parents still hope for better news, but that hope is very faint."* Herbert Henry Beck was just 21 years old and a Lance Corporal. His remains were never recovered and he too is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial. He was posthumously awarded The British War Medal, The Victory Medal and the 1915 Star.

Thankfully, both Ampy and Podgin survived the war and made it back to Swineshead. Ampy had served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment as a private and won The British War Medal, The Victory Medal and the 1915 Star. His Medal Roll Index Card shows he also won the Military Medal which was awarded to warrant officers, non-commissioned officers and other ranks for gallantry in action against the enemy. He was discharged as a Class Z Reserve after the Government decided it would be wise to be able to quickly recall trained men in the eventuality of the resumption of hostilities and so soldiers like Ampy returned to civilian life but with an obligation to return if called upon. Needless to say, the call never came and Ampy lived out the rest of his life in the village dying in 1971 at the age of 85.

Podgin served with the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment and his first posting in a theatre of war was at Gallipoli on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1915 just three months before the British evacuation. He left the Army a Lance Corporal and like his brother Ampy was a Class Z Reserve. He returned home with The British War Medal, The Victory Medal and the 1915 Star. He lived to be 81.

Dick Beck who tried to join up in 1914 but was turned down lived at Drayton Road Swineshead until he died in 1956 aged 77. Tanic was similarly keen to serve but did not. He was living in Townfield Lane when he died in 1966 aged 68.

That accounts for the eight Beck brothers, but of course there were two sisters; Lizzie, and Flo who was the youngest of them all. Two years after the war ended, Lizzie married Wilf Middlebrook and lived to be 81 and Flo married Joseph Horner in 1930 and lived to be 88.

Richard and Mary and their children ensured that the Becks had a story to tell. Richard Beck, the original Swineshead Beck died in March of 1928 and was laid to rest in St Mary's churchyard. His widow survived him by fifteen years. Her obituary stated that, *"For the past sixty-five years the deceased lady had resided in the same house in Baby Row, North End and brought up a family of eleven. She had twenty-five grandchildren and fifty great grandchildren."*

It would take a mathematician rather than a genealogist to calculate how many descendents Richard and Mary now have, but they can surely all be proud of the contribution these first Becks made.

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