Harold Gaunt





Rank: - Deck Hand

Number: - 3680/DA

Regiment: - Royal Naval Reserve H.M.M.L."511"

Died of Pneumonia/Influenza: - 17 October 1918

Cemetery: - Batley B 36

Batley News, 26 Oct 1918. Batley Reporter, 25 Oct 1918 (photo)

Harold was born in Batley on 3 March 1890, the son of William Preston and Mary Ann Gaunt. His mother was Adwalton coal miner's daughter, Mary Ann Webster and they had married at St. Peter's Church, Birstall in 1874.

Harold was the sixth of seven children, his siblings were: -Tom Sykes (born in 1875); Sarah Sykes (born 1877); Lucy Webster (born in 1881died in 1884); Ethel (born 1884); James Herbert (born 1886); Percy (born and died in 1888); Annie

(born in 1893 and who died the following year). His mother passed away in September 1899. William Preston Gaunt never remarried.

His father was a rag merchant, whose shoddy and mungo warehouse was located in Caledonia Road. The job involved the wholesale buying of rags, including importing from abroad. These would be sorted, graded, and prepared at his warehouse, in readiness for onward sale to shoddy and mungo textile manufacturers. Those deemed totally unusable for the textile industry, along with the sweepings from the floor, would be sold to fertiliser manufacturers. It was a recycling case study, literally turning rags to riches. Harold's paternal uncles were also in the textile as employers. Ephraim Preston Gaunt, James Garforth and Samuel Sykes Gaunt operated as rag and mungo merchants in the Healey area of the town, taking over the former business of their father, James Gaunt and Sons. They went their separate ways in 1892.

Harold was baptised at the Methodist New Connexion Chapel, Adwalton in 1891 and attended Sunday School at Batley's Zion Chapel. He went to Park Road School. Harold grew up in the Cheapside are of Batley, with mills and rag warehouses, a stone's throw from his father's warehouse.

By 1911 William Preston Gaunt was living alone at 7, Hamburg Street (later renamed Devon Street) and Harold was living at 152, Grange Road, Soothill in the household of his unmarried brother James Herbert, and sisters Sarah Sykes and Ethel. Harold had a job as a labourer at a patent manure manufacturing works, but this was not a long-term career choice and before long he too became a rag merchant.

A 1914 London Gazette announced; -

NOTICE is hereby given, that the Partnership heretofore subsisting between us, the undersigned Tom Gaunt Sykes and Harold Gaunt. Carrying on business as Rag Merchants at Caledonia Road, Batley under the style of "W.P. GAUNT AND SONS "has been dissolved by mutual consent *as and from the first day of January, 1914; and the said business is now carried on solely by the said Tom Sykes Gaunt on his own behalf, under the style of "W. P. Gaunt and Sons." — Dated this 19th day of June, 1914.*

TOM SYKES GAUNT

HAROLD GAUNT

He then went on to form a new business with his brother James Herbert, Messrs H. and J. H. Gaunt. rag merchants, based in Bar Street.

The outbreak of war did not help their new business. Harold joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve RNVR and his first allocated number was Y 2698, the "Y" indicating he had volunteered. Called up on 10 November 1916, he was then allocated his first service number J 61835.

His surviving records of service give his physical description. With a fresh complexion, grey eyes and brown hair, he stood at 5'8", with a 38" inch chest. This height and chest measurement was above average for the time period, possibly reflective of the better nutrition of his socio-economic class as compared to those from a working-class background.

When he was formally drafted into service on 25 November 1916, it was with the Royal Naval Reserve Trawler Section and Deckhand Gaunt received another number 13680/DA.

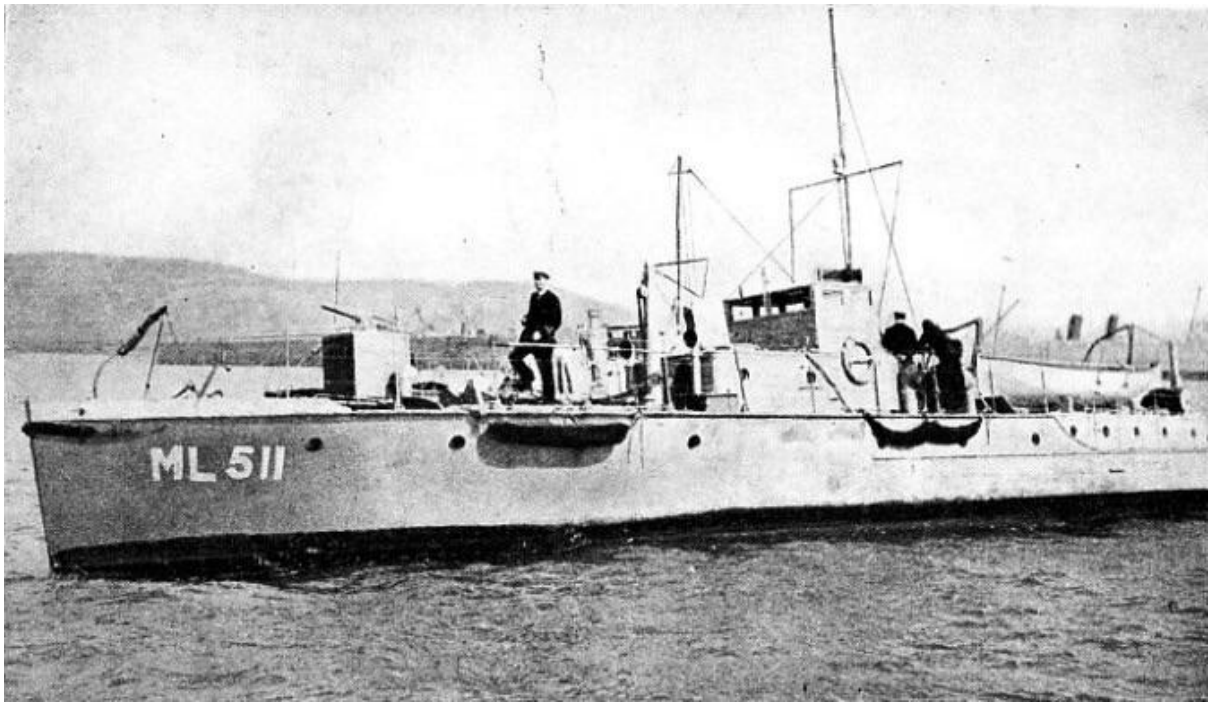
Part of the Auxiliary Patrol of home water, their role included mine sweeping and anti-submarine work. It was a dangerous job on small vessels in often rough seas, without the glamour associated with the Royal Navy. But it was essential, keeping the coastal waters open for trade and troopships. Initially, civilian fishing vessels were requisitioned, and many east coast fishermen volunteered to serve. So vital proved the contribution of these craft to war effort that purpose-built Admiralty trawlers were subsequently constructed, with the Trawler Section growing to over 55,000 RNR personnel, plus other sailors from other branches of the Navy.

On 5 April 1917, Harold finally received an onboard posting. He was to serve as deck hand on Motor Launch (ML 511). This was a relatively new service, specially requisitioned vessel. ML 511 operated in-home waters out of Portsmouth.

Their varied roles included as scouts, anti-submarine craft, inshore mine sweepers, smokescreen layers and hydrophone vessels.

Built of wood, weighing 37 tons, and measuring 80-88' in length, with a beam (width) of 12'2 ", draught (distance between the water line and bottom of a boat's hull) of only 3'10", and a speed of around 19 knots, its crew comprised of two officers, two motor mechanics, two leading seamen and four seamen. One of the seamen was detailed as the cook, and each ML had two seamen trained in the use of the hydrophone, an underwater microphone used to track

submarines. When located the ML crew dropped depth charges. With its equipment, depth charges, fuel (with its two petrol engines going through around 45 gallons per hour), and stores, conditions on MLs were cramped, uncomfortable and wet. Those on board these pitching and rolling vessels need cast iron stomachs. At least their low draught meant they were virtually safe from a torpedo and their speed and small size made the difficult targets for submarines. Though storms, enemy action and fires were always hazards.



On 17 October 1918, Harold died at the Haslar Royal Naval Hospital, Gosport as a result of pneumonia, a complication of the influenza, which struck him. His sister Sarah Sykes Gaunt, who he had named as his next of kin despite his father still being alive, was notified of his death.

Harold's body was returned to Batley for burial in the Gaunt family plot on 24 October 1918, in a Catholic service conducted by Fr John Joseph Lea of St. Mary's. It is not known for certain when Harold became a Catholic, but Fr J J Lea added his name to be those placed on Batley War Memorial as well as at St. Mary's.

Following his funeral his family placed the following thank you in the local paper:

GAUNT--- *The family of the late Harold Gaunt, H.M.M.L desire to thank all friends for their kind expressions of sympathy in their sad bereavement; also, for floral tributes.*

On his return from the war, his brother, James Herbert, continued the business under the unamended name of Messrs. H. and J.H Gaunt.

Harold was awarded the Victory Medal and the British War Medal.

He is remembered at St Mary of the Angels RC Church, Batley; Hanging Heaton War Memorial (St Paul's) and Batley War Memorial.



Thanks to Jane Roberts, and for more information please see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk