William Frederick Townsend



Photo courtesy of Jane Roberts

Rank: - Able Seaman

Number: - Tyneside Z/5695

Regiment: - H.M.S. “Pembroke”

Date of Death: - 6 November 1918

Cemetery: - Batley R 208

William Frederick Townsend’s Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) papers give his birth as 3 April 1882, but his place of birth is left blank. According to his death certificate and the Batley cemetery burial register he was 39, equating to a birth date between 7 November 1878 to 6 November 1879. Another newspaper report gives his age as 37. As yet, and despite other information unearthed, I’ve not located any definite birth registration, nor found him on any census in England, Wales or Ireland.

There are even discrepancies over the number of children he had—two or three. There are tantalising hints in other records and sources and there is information he had connections with Sheffield and his wife was called Jessie. There are snippets showing Jessie remarried in 1919 to a man with the surname of Johnson and she travelled to Canada before settling in the USA.

It appears William Frederick Townsend used other names. He was known as Fred Townsend, Frederick William Townsend but he was a music hall artist known by the stage name of Fred Fosco.

In the pantomime season of the winter of 1902/03, he was touring provincial theatres with Gus Levaine's company. He played Abanazar in Aladdin and also in the cast were Lizzie and Jessie Lindsay. He married Jessie, who was born in Sheffield in February 1885, on 3 July 1903 at St. Bartholomew's Church, Sheffield. He gave his age as 24 and living at Kelvin Street, Sheffield.

They had two children, Florence Edna born 3 February 1904 in Sheffield and Charles Frederick on 4 March 1905, born in Worksop. They did appear in pantomime together in the winter season of 1905/06 as Robin Hood and Weary Willie.

Their work in music halls were irregular and to make a living they appeared in hotel entertainments. It appears in 1906 he obtained a position at Vickers, Sheffield but after a fortnight he left both his job and his wife. Jessie met a chauffeur, Ezra Shaw and in December 1911 they had a son Ronald Shaw born in Barnsley. The Townsend children were living with their Lindsay grandparents in Sheffield in 1911. By the summer of 1912, William Frederick had set up home at Holder's Square, S. James Street, Nottingham with Ivy Lea and they were living together as Fred and Ivy Fosco. She died in September 1912 aged 19.

In October 1913 Jessie filed for a divorce, citing her husband's cruelty towards her and his misconduct with Ivy Lea. Robert Lindsay described his son-in-law as a "*disgrace to humanity*" and said he would not work. The divorce was not granted.

In June 1915 William Frederick enlisted with the RNVR. His religion was given as Roman Catholic and described as 5'5¾" tall with brown hair, grey eyes and a fair

complexion. He had a tattoo on each forearm and his occupation was stated to be a labourer. His address was given as 13, Orange Street, Sheffield.

According o his service papers William Frederick served on H.M.S. Victory 1; H.M.S. Vanguard; H.M.S. Pembroke; H.M.S. Prince George and H.M.S. Pembroke. Only H.M.S. Vanguard was at sea and he served with her between 11 November 1915 to 30 April 1916. According to newspaper reports William Frederick took part in the Battle of Jutland in which he went through the terrible ordeal of being in the water for several hours before his rescue. However, according to his records he had left HMS Vanguard by the time of the Battle of Jutland on 31 May to 1 June 1916. At the time of the battle, according to his service records he was back at the shore-based establishment Pembroke.

William Frederick was discharged from naval service on 9 May 1917 as a result of the lungs. He was awarded the Silver Badge (SWB) upon discharge. This badge was given to those military personnel who had served at home or overseas during the war and who had been discharged because of wounds or illness.

His naval records show his conduct was either good or very good and his ability was satisfactory.

After being discharged from the Navy, according to newspaper reports at the time of his death he worked as stage manager at the Batley Hippodrome. The description of the responsibilities and tasks associated with the job of stage manager is:

.... responsible for smooth running of performance, satisfies himself that scenery, lighting, properties etc. are in order, sees that all artistes are on premises prior to the performance and if they are not, instruct understudies to take parts of absent performers, sees that intervals are not prolonged, is in charge of everybody and everything on stage, receives reports from master carpenter, property master and electrician that everything under their charge is in order.

It is a role which would not seem to fit someone who had been a labourer although it would certainly suit someone with previous stage experience and knew how the industry worked.

Batley Hippodrome has long since gone but it stood on the corner of St. James Street, Batley and started life as the Theatre Royal became the Hippodrome and then the Empire Cinema but known as the Super Cinema.

William Frederick died on 6 November 1918. His death certificate gives the cause of death as pulmonary tuberculosis is 15 months - although newspaper reported the cause of death as double pneumonia. The occupations given on his death certificate are music hall artist/naval pensioner AB RNVR and the informant was his widow, Jessie Townsend of 23, Henrietta Street, Batley.

He was buried at Batley cemetery on Saturday 9 November 1918. The burial register merely mentions his occupation as *RNVR discharged*. The graveside service was in two parts, the Rev. Fathers Lee and Kestelyn from St. Mary's conducted the interment service. The Rev. D.F. Jones of Soothill Road performed the graveside rites of the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes (RAOB).

William Frederick was awarded the 1914-15 Star, Victory Medal and the British War Medal.

He is remembered with Honour at Batley War Memorial.

Thanks to Jane Roberts and for further information and references see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk