



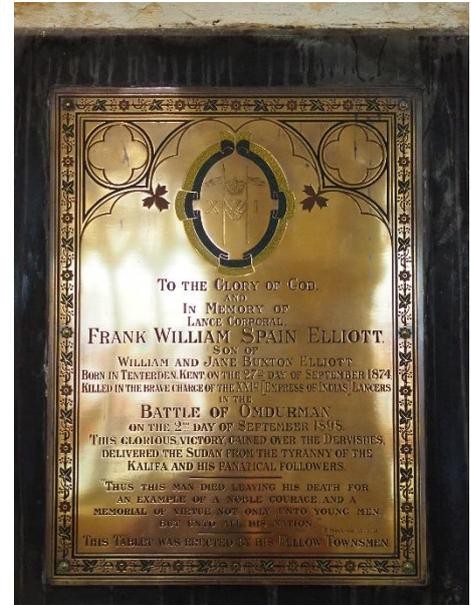
L Cpl Frank William Spain ELLIOT

There is a brass memorial tablet between the bookshelves and the servery at the back of the North Aisle of St Mildred's Church which you may have seen but never read. It commemorates a Tenterden lad who died in the Sudan, and reads:

To the Glory of God
and
In Memory of Lance Corporal
Frank William Spain Elliott
son of
William and Jane Buxton Elliott
Born in Tenterden Kent on the 27th day of September 1874
Killed in the brave charge of the XXIst (Empress of India's) Lancers
in the
Battle of Omdurman
on the 2nd day of September 1898
This glorious victory gained over the Dervishes.
Delivered the Sudan from the tyranny of the
Kalifa and his fanatical followers.

“Thus this man died leaving his death for
an example of a noble courage and a
memorial of virtue, not only unto young men
but unto all his nation” 2 Macc ch VI. V. 31

This tablet was erected by his fellow townsmen



This campaign is not one usually taught in school history, but you may be more familiar with the many references in Dad's Army by Corporal Jones to his time in the Sudan fighting the Mahdist troops, variously called the Ansar (by the Khalifa), the Dervishes, and the Fuzzy-wuzzies (by the British soldiers). They don't like it up 'em!" was one of his phrases, referring to bayonet action (though the Dervishes were mostly mown down in the battle at long range).

Frank ELLIOTT was the fourth child (second son) of Tenterden plumber and later builder, William ELLIOTT and his wife Jane Buxton ELLIOTT née SPAIN, whose business was run from 11, East Cross, in the premises now occupied by the Bathroom Shop, next to Baldwin's (previously Travelux) Travel Agents. He no doubt was in competition with Mr Thomas AVERY, plumber, at Little Danes Court at the beginning of the Ashford Road a few doors away.

William Elliott & Son

It is not certain when the family plumbing business started. Frank's grandfather, also William, was already a plumber in East Cross by the 1841 census, but William Senior's father George was a farmer at his children's baptisms at St Mildred's up to 1815. William Senior moved to Biddenden between 1861 and 1871 and carried on plumbing. He and his wife have a gravestone still legible in the churchyard there. Frank's father, William junior, took over the East Cross premises. Frank's brothers Charles and Harry initially both worked in plumbing and building with the firm. Charles was still working for his father in April 1911, but died in July 1912 in Chartham asylum from exhaustion due to melancholia leaving a wife and five children. It is interesting to speculate whether working with lead was a contributory factor to his illness. Harry married in 1905 and by 1911 had moved to Edenbridge where he was the landlord of the Star Inn. He served in the RAF at the end of the Great War. By 1924 the firm, now run by Harry, also advertised services as decorators, undertakers, bell hangers, acetylene gas engineers and electricians. William probably died in 1925, and a few years later Harry retired to Bexhill, although he was only just over 50.

Harry seems to have sold the business to WIGGINS & Co in 1928/9. Philippa WIGGINS is now the proprietor of the Bathroom Shop. One of our Great War dead, Herbert William WEAVER (d 3 5 1917), worked for Elliott's before joining up in 1914. Also, when WIGGINS & Co bought the business, they didn't want to take on the undertaking side, and so another employee of Elliott's, one Thomas William FUGGLE, took that on and established the current firm at 20 Ashford Road in 1930. He is described in the 1911 census at 2, Beacon Oak View, Beacon Oak Road as a painter and paperhanger and in the 1939 register at 28, Ashford Road as a Master builder. [The current firm is at 20, Ashford Road]

Frank is found with his parents in the 1881 census age 6, but in 1891 is a grocer's assistant age 16, lodging in 11 Temple Street, Brighton, with a family named MIMUS. He must have joined up in the next few years, because he served in the 21st (Empress of India's) Lancers, D Squadron, probably from 1896-1898 as no 3615 rising to the rank of Lance Corporal. He (posthumously) was awarded the Queen's and the Khedive of Egypt's "Sudan" medals with "Khartoum" clasp. His unmarried elder sister Florence died in a private asylum in Denmark Hill in 1915 from "softening of the brain". The other sister Mary married a travelling salesman Arthur JERRARD, and probably lived till age 85.

THE CHURCH WEEKLY, September 16th, 1898: “Corporal Frank William Spain ELLIOTT, son of Mr. W. ELLIOTT, of East Cross, Tenterden, near Maidstone, was among those killed at the battle of Omdurman in the charge of the 21st Lancers. The family, who were not aware on Monday that young ELLIOTT was killed on the previous Friday, received a letter from him on that day descriptive of the journey of the regiment to Atbara (215 miles northeast of Omdurman). The following is an extract from this letter: ‘I hope that shortly you will read in the papers of a brilliant charge of the 21st Lancers. This affair would be the making of the regiment, as up to the present time we have no honours to our credit.’”

Context of the charge

In 1884, contrary to orders, the governor of the Sudan (General Gordon) had remained in Khartoum with a small force rather than evacuate as Gladstone had ordered, to oppose the revolutionary forces of the Sudanese “Mahdi” (a kind of Islamic messiah figure). After holding out against siege for a year and with the whole city starving, he was defeated and he and all his 7,000 men were killed. This caused a national outcry.

Subsequently government policy slowly altered, partly because of not wanting the French to establish a continuous line of territory from west to east across Africa (disrupting the British Cape-to-Cairo vision) and it was decided to retake the Sudan, now under the control of the Mahdi’s nominated successor, the Khalifa. Initially a victory was won in the Battle of Atbara on 8th April 1898, after which the army went into summer quarters near that town while substantial reinforcements arrived, including the 21st Lancers. They then moved south to Wad Hamed before the final advance on the city of Omdurman. The army comprised around 8,000 British and 17,000 Egyptian/Sudanese under the overall command of Major General Kitchener. They had 44 artillery pieces and 20 Maxim machine guns, supported by 10 steamers on the nearby River Nile, mounting 36 guns and 24 Maxims. The 21st Lancers were the only British cavalry regiment though the Egyptian force had both cavalry and camel corps. The Khalifa had about 50,000 troops, mostly armed with sword and spear but some with captured rifles and Maxims, and one tribe supplied cavalry. After repulsing the first Mahdist attacks inflicting enormous losses on the enemy for very few British casualties, Kitchener was anxious to occupy Omdurman before the remaining Mahdist forces could withdraw there. He advanced his army towards the city, arranging them in separate columns for the attack. The British light cavalry regiment, the 21st Lancers, was sent ahead to clear the plain to Omdurman. Their leader, Lieutenant Colonel Martin, was keen to bring glory to his regiment which had not previously seen action, and knew that the presence of Lieutenant Winston Churchill in his force would guarantee publicity. He took the opportunity to do so when he was given reports of around 700 of the enemy lying in wait. However by the time the charge began their number had been swelled by 2000 reinforcements, unbeknown to Martin.

“The last full cavalry charge by the British Army”

This charge of the 21st Lancers in 1898 has been often described as the last full cavalry charge by the British Army, possibly because of the publicity from Churchill’s presence and his subsequent book. However the last British cavalry charge was actually executed in Turkey during the 1920 Chanak Crisis, when the 20th Hussars successfully charged a body of Turkish infantry. The charge at Huj in Palestine in November 1917, by Warwickshire Yeomanry and Worcestershire Yeomanry against Turks and Germans has also been described as “The Last”, but even at the time of Omdurman the whole idea of cavalry charging was outdated because of improvements in rifles, machine guns and artillery, and the 21st Lancers could much more readily have destroyed the Mahdist forces by rifle fire from a safe distance, with few if any losses.

The 400-strong regiment charged what they thought were only a few hundred dervishes with spears and swords, but in fact there were 2,700 infantry, many of whom had rifles, mostly hidden behind the visible enemy in a 5-foot deep depression. After a fierce clash, the Lancers drove them back (resulting in three Victoria Crosses being awarded to Lancers who helped rescue wounded comrades). Churchill reports his surprise at seeing the size of the enemy force when it was far too late to stop the charge, and having burst through their line, how he shot at anyone he could with his 10-round Mauser pistol, apparently killing several. Many British cavalrymen received horrendous injuries from the enemy’s razor-sharp swords, as did their horses.

In the charge the 21st Lancers lost 22 men including one officer, and 50 wounded; also 119 horses died. Forty percent of British casualties in the entire battle were suffered in this charge, as the total casualties in Kitchener’s forces were only 47 men killed and 382 wounded. This in contrast to the Khalifa’s losses estimated at 10,000 dead, probably around 12,000 wounded and some 5,000 prisoners. The battle showed the superiority of disciplined troops with efficient rifles, machine guns and artillery over a larger force displaying any amount of fanatical fury. The Lancers’ 22 dead, including Frank Elliott, are commemorated on an obelisk still standing in Omdurman (now a suburb of Khartoum). The regiment was given its title “Empress of India’s” as a direct result of this action.

Paul Ryley

Acknowledgement: Colin Young

Further reading:

1. <https://www.britishbattles.com/war-in-egypt-and-sudan/battle-of-omdurman/>
2. “The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan” Winston Churchill, available free at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4943/4943.txt>
3. National Archives Reference: WO 100/80 for campaign medals list (Download available free online, Elliott in both part 1 and part 2 of download)