

**The story behind the First World War memorials on the  
walls of St Johns**



**“Their name liveth for evermore”**

*---- from the St Johns Second World War Memorial*

World War I had an enormous impact on St John's. The plaque beside the door to the foyer nearest the chapel lists 215 people – almost all men – who served in the war. In 1913 the St Johns communicant roll was 790, so over a quarter of the congregation, or more realistically, over half of all the men served in the war.

A second plaque, on the street side of the pulpit, is to the 38 men who died - almost 10% of all the men in the congregation. The Kelburn parish's losses are recorded on a plaque now on the other side of the pulpit, and the 12 names on it, out of a 1913 communicant roll of 123, implies that Kelburn lost almost 20% of the men of its congregation.

New Zealand lost almost four times as many men relative to the population in the First War as in the second - 3% as opposed to 0.7% of all men. However, the memorials suggest that losses were high for both congregations. At St John's this may have been because their minister, Dr James Gibb, was very vocal in his supporting the war.



**PTE. G. H. WESTON,  
14th, South Otago, Co.,  
Killed in action.**

By chance, this may have protected the congregation from early deaths, as many of the earliest volunteers went on the relatively safe operation of wresting Western Samoa from German clutches. As a result relatively few members were at the first real blood-bath at Gallipoli, and only two from each congregation were killed.

Private George Weston (aged 20) was the first from St John's, killed in action on 8 May 1915, and Trooper Stuart Tennent (27), died from wounds in the middle of the Mediterranean en route to hospital in Egypt. Kelburn lost Private Gordon Hay (25), who had moved to Wellington from Otago to work in the telegraph office, and Private Sydney Burt (20), whose family lived at Upland Road. All were single, so neither parish had yet experienced the grief of widow and children.



*1/178 2nd Lt. William Spottiswood Hopkirk.  
Killed in Action, France, 1/6/16.*

1916 was not to be so benign. The contingent in Samoa was largely re-deployed to France, and within months of landing many of them were dead. On 12 June 1916, a mere six months after leaving for France, St John's lost Private Percy Wilson (24) and two days later Second Lieutenant William Hopkirk (23) was killed in action at the Somme. Hopkirk's death would have particularly affected the congregation. His father, also William, had been an elder at St Johns since 1888, and he had for decades run a successful Sunday School of over 700 children. (William senior has his own memorial on the courtyard side of the church). William junior was, at the time of his enlistment, the secretary of the Young Men's Bible Class, and his name is the first of three war dead

recorded on their memorial (found on the stairs leading up to the bell-tower).

Barely had the congregation adjusted to these losses when the "month of hell" began. Between 15 September and 16 October 1916, St John's lost six members, including Private William Jennings (23) whose father was on the Board of Managers, Private Donald Rosie, whose brother returned from the war and took over the leadership of the Bible Class, and Riflemen William Drummond, whose family had been heavily involved in the Boys Institute.

These were major losses for the congregation and had a big effect on Dr Gibb. From late 1916 onwards he began to question, at first quietly then later publicly, the morality of war, and by 1920 he was one of the leaders in the peace movement aligned with the League of Nations.

Kelburn also lost three members over this time: Privates Eardley Aston (21), who lived in Karori, Rifleman James Comrie (21), whose minister father worked at the Presbyterian Church national office, and Corporal Samuel Downard (31), the first married man from either parish to die.

While the congregations were never again faced with such a bleak month, deaths continued to mount. St John's lost 13 members during 1917 including their youngest war death, Cadet Leon Massey (18) of the Mercantile Marine who died when his ship, the *Aparima*, was torpedoed in the English Channel.

Another ten names were added in 1918, including the oldest to die, Rifleman James Williamson (38), a stereotyper who left New Zealand in April 1918 to be killed in action at Le Quesnoy that November. His was the last name to be added to the St John's memorial. Kelburn lost 7 additional members over the two last years, including brothers, Gunner Graham Vial (23) an ex-civil servant who died in 1917, and Lieutenant Alan Vial (31) who died in 1919. Another brother, Robert, returned safely after four years of war service.

All of the medals received were awarded to men killed in these latter years. Sergeant Samuel Forsyth (St Johns, 25) was awarded the Victoria Cross; Sergeant Charles Still (St Johns) and Captain Kenneth Tait (Kelburn) the Military Cross; and Sergeant Joseph McRae (St Johns, 27) and Lieutenant Alan Vial (Kelburn, 31) the Military Medal. Lieutenant William Arcus (St Johns, 24) was mentioned in dispatches.



1/104 Lt. Allan Herbert Vial (M.M.).  
Died in England of Sickness, 19/6/19.

The end of the war did not end the effects of the war. The Young Men's Bible Class centennial booklet noted that the Bible Class struggled to find both members and leaders over the next decade, and given the higher death rate in the wider congregation, this was probably true of the church as a whole.

But even many decades later, the effects were still evident. When I was a child in St Johns in the 1970s, there were a whole contingent of older women known as Miss X – Miss Brodie, Miss Johnston, Miss Chappell, and the three Misses McKenzie - to name but a few. I gave it no thought until I overheard one of them explaining to my mother that she had not married because her husband-to-be was “one of those names” pointing to the memorial by the pulpit. The war was still casting its long shadow.

Prepared by Margaret Galt for ANZAC day 2009.