

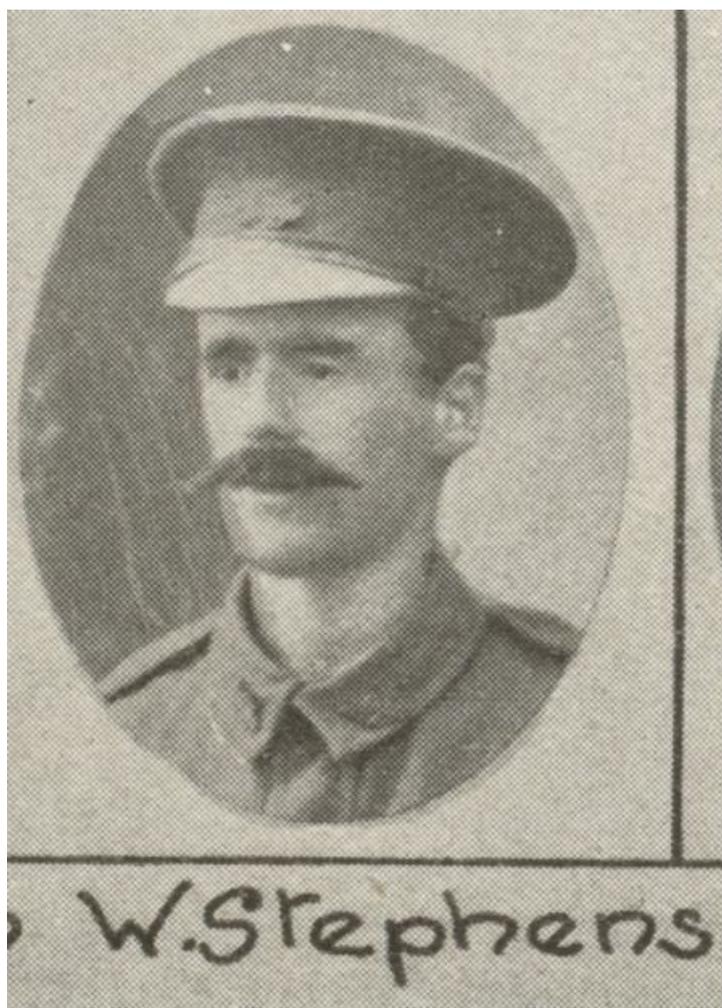
Stories from the Honour Boards

Stories of those who served and are remembered on the Honour Boards in the Merrington Anzac Memorial Peace Chapel at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church

Booklet Number 221

WILLIAM STEPHENS

1883-1922



This booklet remains the property of Saint Andrew's Uniting Church.
Please see a Guide if you would like a copy.

The portrait on the front cover is from The Pictorial Supplement to *The Queenslander*,
18 August, 1917.

©Saint Andrew's Uniting Church
Corner Ann and Creek Streets
Brisbane QLD 4000
2021

Go to <http://heritage.saintandrews.org.au/>
for an online copy of this booklet and more pictures.

Private William Stephens

William Stephens was born on 4 September 1883 at Penrith in the English Lakes District of Cumberland, third son of Samuel and Jane Stephens. The family lived at Dacre Lodge, home of Lieutenant Andrew Blackett-Ord, JP and his wife and family. Other servants were employed at Dacre Lodge including William's father Samuel who was the groom.

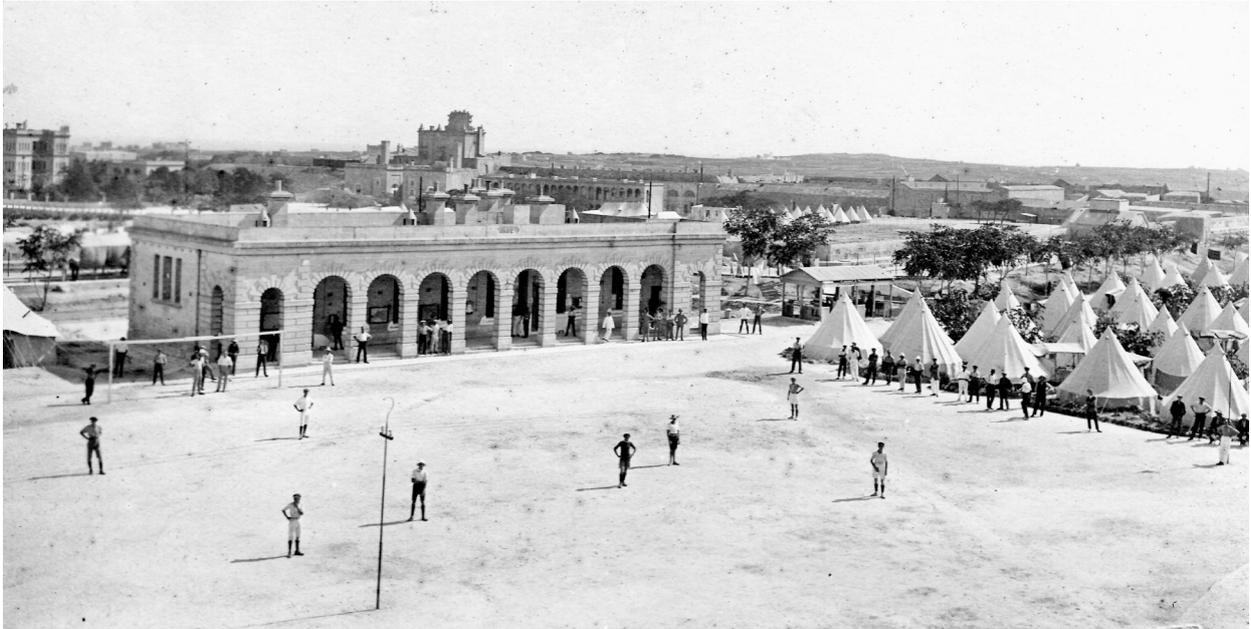
Soon after William's birth, the Stephens family moved to Preston Candover in Hampshire where William's father was appointed Head Coachman at Preston House Stables. Their home was Coach House on the same historic site. A governess taught William and his brothers on the property and as they grew older they also became servants – yard labourer, milk boy, grocer's errand boy, labourer. William served as groom and was a gardener before he left to join the British Army.



Preston House

Richards, Stephen (2011)

William Stephens enlisted in the Hampshire Regiment on 18 February 1903. After a short period of training, Hampshire Regiment embarked at Southampton on the ship *Soudan* and arrived at Malta on 16 September 1903. The regiment was quartered at Verdala Barracks Cottonera for the duration of their posting to Malta.



SMC Secondary (Verdala)

Verdala Barracks, Malta

With the 2nd Battalion William Stephens embarked for Bermuda on the *Soudan* on 2nd December 1905. The battalion's next posting was to South Africa from September 1907 till early February 1911.

While on leave, Private Stephens travelled by sea to Brisbane, Australia. William Stephens, labourer, 27 years of age was a passenger on the ship *Torilla*, departing London in August 1911 and arriving in Brisbane on 10 October 1911. William obtained work as a labourer and became acquainted with Florence Maria Bennett, daughter of William Bennett of Nudgee, whom he married on 12 May 1914 in the People's Evangelistic Mission House in Leichhardt Street, Brisbane. The marriage was conducted by the Rev WHW Lavers, a missionary of Fortitude Valley. On the outbreak of war in Europe the British Army recalled troops urgently and the Hampshire Regiment joined the British Expeditionary Force in France.

William Stephens' battalion landed at Le Havre on 23 August 1914. The 1st Battalion saw its first combat against the German Army at Le Cateau. The battalion served on the Western Front for the rest of the war, participating in many battles in 1914 alone such as the First Battle of the Marne, the First Battle of the Aisne, and the Battle of Messines.

In 1914, on Christmas Day, men of the 1st Battalion participated in the legendary Christmas Truce of 1914 where British and German soldiers fraternised in No Man's Land. In 1915, the battalion took part in the Second Battle of Ypres, famous for its use of poison gas. William Stephens was relieved in February 1916, allowing him to return to England.



Football during the Christmas Truce of 1914 The Independent. UK (2014)

British Army records noted the birth on 7 March 1915 of Florence and William's son William James at a private hospital in Eagle Junction, Brisbane.

William Stephens' military service in the British Army concluded on 17 February 1916. At some time after the termination of his British Army service, and by an unknown means, William Stephens returned to Brisbane. He would have seen his baby son for the first time. But his sojourn in Brisbane was brief. He enlisted to serve in the Australian Imperial Force in Adelaide Street, Brisbane on 31 October 1916. His attestation paper recorded his wife Florence of Lucy Street, Nudgee as next-of-kin, also details of William's thirteen years' infantry experience in the Hampshire Regiment.

Appointed to the 42nd Battalion with registration number 2930, William Stephens embarked for active service abroad from Sydney per HMAT *Demosthenes*, bound for Plymouth, England where he disembarked on 3 March 1917. After a brief period of training and a stay in Fargo Hospital with influenza, Private Stephens proceeded overseas to France on 25 June 1917.

Transferred to 42nd Battalion, Private Stephens¹ was highly commended for acts of gallantry on 31 July 1917: "East of Messines during the consolidation of our advanced position in No Man's Land, the enemy shelled it very heavily and cut up two sections. The men became badly raffled (sic) and showed tendencies to vacate the job. This man took command on his own initiative, organised the two sections into one and started them again on their work and kept them going until good cover was secured. During the whole of the operation this man shone out not only did he attend to the organisation of the section above referred to but lent valuable assistance to Sergeant Murray. His courage and splendid example to the men around him had the effect of holding them together and finishing the task under the most trying conditions."

Meanwhile, Florence and William's second son, Gordon Charles was born in Brisbane on 17 March 1917.

It is noted W Stephens' rank is shown as sergeant (SGT) on the honour board in the Merrington Peace Chapel. No reference is made to such a promotion in military service records of the British Army and the AIF. In the latter, an annotation dated 17 September 1917 with reference to a previous appointment to the rank of corporal, says, "Reverts to Private at own request".

William Stephens was granted furlough in England in February 1918 and returned to his unit in France. The following months were difficult. The 42nd battalion helped blunt the German spring offensive, repelling a German attack around Morlancourt. During the lull that followed, the battalion was subsequently involved in the Battle of Hamel on 4 July 1918.

1. Wording of commendation by Divisional Commander, 42nd Battalion, AIF, 15 August 1917

When the Allies launched their own offensive in August, the 42nd Battalion was involved in the initial attack around Amiens and then the subsequent advance that followed as the Allies attempted to penetrate the Hindenburg Line. Its final involvement in the fighting came during the battle at St Quentin Canal during the period 29 September to 2 October. After this, the Australian Corps was withdrawn from the line for rest and reorganisation, and the 42nd Battalion was disbanded on 22 October 1918 to provide reinforcements for other AIF units. William Stephens rejoined the 41st Battalion prior to The Armistice.

William's eldest brother Joseph of Cheshire Regiment was killed in action in France in August 1918. William probably heard this sad news while in service himself – in the field. William was granted leave in England in January 1919. It would have seemed a long wait for return to Australia per *Thermistocles*. He disembarked at Sydney and was discharged from the AIF in Brisbane on 19 September 1919.

William returned to his wife and children in Nudgee. He worked as a labourer. A third child, a daughter named Doris was born on 9 June 1920. Sadly, William Stephens died on 14 July 1922 at the age of 38. His funeral was held at his Nudgee home and he was buried at Nundah Cemetery. Another daughter Florence Mary was born the following October. Mrs Florence Stephens remained at Nudgee for the rest of her life. She died in September 1952 at the age of 61 and was buried with her husband at Nundah Cemetery.

Bibliography

Ancestry on line

Australian Electoral Rolls, 1919 – 1952

Australian War Memorial – unit histories

Brisbane City Council, cemetery records

British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914 – 1920

England & Wales Civil Registration Birth Index 1837 – 1915

English Census Records, 1881, 1891, 1901

National Archives of Australia – military records

Queensland Government, Births, Deaths, Marriages and Divorces

Queensland State Archives, Immigration Records

Brisbane Courier, 15 July 1922

The Queenslander, 22 August 1914, page 4

Compiled by NE Adsett OAM

Brisbane. June 2021



Lest we forget