

Sidney Hazel Alderbury's youngest First World War fatality

Of the twenty-nine men from the village commemorated in *Alderbury War Memorials* as having died in the First World War only one was serving at sea. This is perhaps not surprising as Alderbury has no real connection with the sea. His name was Sidney Hazel, he was aged just 18 at the time of his death and he died in illustrious company for the ship of which he was one of the crew – **HMS Hampshire** – was carrying the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, on a mission to Russia when it struck a mine and sank.

Sidney Hazel was born in Romsey in 1898, the second son of William and Alice. On his father's side the family had been in the village since at least the 1700s, living at Shoot End and operating the ferry crossing over the River Avon to Britford. William had originally been a tailor but much of his working life was spent on the railway as a platelayer and fencer and within a few years of Sidney's birth the family had moved back to Alderbury, living close to William's widowed mother, Jane. At the time of the 1911 Census the family consisted of the parents, three sons – William, Sidney and Thomas – and a daughter, Gwen. The three youngest children were still at school at this time whilst William was a milk boy on a farm.

Sidney joined the Royal Navy in June 1914 for a 12-year period. Prior to signing-on he was a garden boy. What prompted this move it is impossible to say. As noted above, the village had no real connection to the sea, although interestingly his younger brother Thomas subsequently also joined the navy and served on **HMS Venus**. In the latter case it could have been the wish to serve the country during times of war that led to his enlistment, although when Sidney joined up the crisis that was to result in the First World War had not even occurred. It seems a bit far-fetched to suggest that operating the ferry across the river ignited an interest in the sea but it is always possible. Having joined the navy he spent eight months on **HMS Impregnable**, a static training ship for boys at Devonport. From February to October 1915 he was assigned to **HMS Agincourt**. This was a battleship which had originally been built in a British shipyard for the Turkish navy but had been seized under the orders of Winston Churchill – then First Lord of the Admiralty – upon the outbreak of war.

After being based in Portsmouth at the Royal Naval Establishment on **HMS Victory** for several months on 8 March 1916 Sidney was assigned to **HMS Hampshire** as an ordinary seaman. This ship, which had started the war on the China Station, was now an armoured cruiser forming part of the Second Cruiser Squadron and so a unit of the Grand Fleet based at Scapa Flow. As such the warship took part in the Battle of Jutland on 31 May 1916 and, as far as we know, Sidney Hazel was aboard at the time. According to letters from officers and men of the crew a three-funnelled German cruiser steamed straight towards **Hampshire**, apparently intending to make a torpedo attack. **Hampshire** opened fire on its opponent, missing with the first salvo but hitting with the second, which caused a great explosion. The German vessel was hit again but she disappeared into the mist, apparently badly damaged. **Hampshire** was then said to have encountered five German submarines and to have rammed one of them but this was never verified.

Along with the rest of the surviving vessels of the Grand Fleet (three battlecruisers, three armoured cruisers and eight destroyers had been sunk) **HMS Hampshire** returned to Scapa Flow on 1 June but she was already scheduled for a new assignment and it was to be her last. On 26 May the Cabinet had approved a mission by Lord Kitchener to Russia. Lord Jellicoe, the C-in-C of the Grand Fleet chose **Hampshire** for the task of carrying him to Archangel, his initial destination. On 4 June

Kitchener took the night train from King's Cross to Thurso, on his way to Scapa Flow. Originally it had been planned that he would board the **Hampshire** in Thurso Bay and proceed at once to sea on his mission to Russia. However, the day after Jutland he decided to visit Jellicoe and the Grand Fleet first. This was just one of a series of events which sealed his fate and that of Sidney Hazel. On 29 May the German submarine U75 laid twenty-two mines between the Brough of Birsay and Marwick Head in the waters off Orkney. This was not a route the major units of the Grand Fleet normally used and it is believed that the U-boat captain mistook his position. Jellicoe had originally planned that **HMS Hampshire** should sail north-east from Scapa Flow into the open sea but the extreme force of the gale then raging meant that the escorting destroyers would not be able to keep up. The best alternative route was through the Pentland Firth, then westward to Cape Wrath and finally north but it was reported (falsely as it turned out) that an enemy submarine was in the area. So the fatal decision was taken to send the **Hampshire** via a route only normally used by fleet colliers and storeships as Kitchener did not wish to delay any longer.

At 4.45pm on 5 June the **Hampshire** set sail with her escorting destroyers but the latter were soon ordered back to port by the cruiser's captain. At about 7.50pm watchers on shore at Marwick Head saw a small cloud of black smoke at the water-line under the ship's bridge followed by a sheet of flame and yellow smoke from under the forward gun. Within a quarter of an hour the ship had sunk and although many of the crew survived the initial explosion only twelve reached the shore alive. Lord Kitchener and Sidney Hazel were not amongst them. They probably drowned or were killed by the intense cold, as were so many others, 643 in total. Many of the bodies were never recovered.

A memorial to Lord Kitchener paid for by public subscription was set up on Marwick Head and on the centenary of his death a low granite wall around it, containing the names of all who died on the **Hampshire**, organised by the Orkney Historical Society, was unveiled. The wreck is now an official war grave. In addition to being commemorated on Orkney Sidney Hazel is remembered at the Portsmouth Naval Memorial and by a monument and Book of Remembrance in Winchester Cathedral. He was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal whilst his family received a memorial plaque. His brother Thomas survived the war and the Hazel family continued to live in the village until about 1937.