

**A SOLDIER'S LETTERS
BY BARRY WILLIAMSON**

Chasing red herrings has always been one of my problems. But you never know where a red herring will lead! In the Spring Term of 2001 I was more weary than usual of teaching the Causes, Course and Consequences of the First World War to my Year 9 class at Bristol Grammar School. I therefore decided we should take a diversion from the main syllabus and investigate one name chosen at random from the 121 names on the War Memorial in the Great Hall. The aim was to write the story of that soldier's life. We chose Stanley Charles Booker. It was fairly easy to collect a wallet of material about Booker from the school archives, the Central Library and the Worcestershire Regiment Museum. There were obviously many gaps but the pupils made a good job of the task and appeared to enjoy it.

There it should have ended but some pupils insisted that we ought to search for any Bookers still living in Bristol who might be related to Stanley and have 'things about him stored in a cupboard.' I did my best to pour cold water on such a time-consuming enquiry but was won over when one pupil said optimistically: 'It's all on the internet Sir; my Mum gets loads of family history from there.' In fact, the internet was unhelpful and we began a long search by letter and telephone that lasted over 6 months. None of the family survives in Bristol and every enquiry produced a blank until we discovered that an old neighbour of the Booker family from Chesterfield Road, St. Andrews, still lives in Bristol. We asked her if she knew what had happened to the family. She remembered there were three Booker brothers, of whom two survived the war and that Mrs. Booker had moved as an old lady to live with one of them in a big house in Easton. Big houses in Easton did not seem to ring true but she insisted: 'I was taken by my father to visit Mrs. Booker in her new home. My clearest memory is of going by train from Montpelier Station to the next stop at Stapleton Road and then we walked to a large house not too far away.' Could it be the Vicarage? Street directories showed that a Rev. Walter Booker was living at St. Mark's Vicarage, Easton from 1939 to the early 1950s. This was a breakthrough. A search in Crockford's followed, we had details of his career and then another blank wall. We needed to know if Walter had left children who might have kept family papers.

I then turned to an old friend who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the 20th century Anglican church in Bristol. He said that a Miss Dorothy Mills remembered Mr Booker and she suggested we contact the Rev. Bryan Jones who worked in Easton in the 1950s. He knew that Walter was Stanley's brother (he had talked about a brother killed in the Great War), had also been at BGS and had been a bachelor. When he died in the early 70s he left some books to Mr. Jones who remembered that the Executor of his will was a distant cousin from somewhere in Devon, possibly Exeter. Could we find a copy of the will? A visit to the Bristol Probate Office produced the most efficient service of any public office I've ever visited - a search on microfiche for the exact date of death of the Rev. Walter Booker (14 April 1974) and a reference number; then a copy of the will was produced within 8 minutes.

The letter of administration attached to the will gave a Bristol solicitor as executor and John Bosanko of St. Luke's College, Exeter: luckily an unusual name. Was he still alive and living in Exeter? The telephone directories in the Central Library revealed nothing for the Exeter district but a J. Bosanko in Paignton. The last enquiry ... yes, he was a distant cousin of the Booker brothers, none of whom had any children. He had the family papers and these included:

Stanley's letters home from training and from the front
Family photos
School magazines

Official army papers

Letters from Cyril Norwood, ex Headmaster of BGS, to the family

Postcards

Cap badges

A visit to Paignton quickly revealed that these were not normal bread and butter letters, mentioning only the weather and food and family matters. Stanley wrote long, descriptive letters to his mother almost every week from the time he became an officer in the Worcestershire Regiment in March 1915 until the week before he was killed at Richebourg-l'Avoue on the Western Front on October 10th 1916. After Stanley reached France in May 1916 he spent a total of 57 days in the front trenches, on 11 separate occasions and the rest of the time training, marching, bathing and resting behind the lines. He won the MC and was recommended for the VC. The total number of words was 75000. They are the letters of an ordinary soldier, weary with the long months of training but keen to do his duty and convinced that a man's place was at the front, in order to teach Germany that the strong should not bully the weak. There is none of the weariness or cynicism that we recognise as the norm after the Somme disaster. How far Stanley was self-censoring the news to protect his mother, we cannot tell.

John and Mary Bosanko very kindly agreed to deposit all the papers on permanent loan to the School Archives office and although they came too late to be used by the class of 2001, they have been an invaluable resource with other classes. In November 2003, an edited collection of the letters was published: *Dear Mother ... Great War Letters from a Bristol Soldier* (Redcliffe Press, ISBN 1904537073), £7.99.