TALES OF OLD BAILBROOK

When young men from Bailbrook swopped the mud of the market garden for the mud of Flanders!

ANOTHER BAILBROOK MAN KILLED.

Bath Chronicle 30th September 1916

The very large Branch familiy posing outside Roseland Nursery , Bailbrook in 1907. EC (Charlie) Branch and his wife Mary Jane (Polly) with their 11 children. William Fern Stanley Branch who died in Flanders is standing next to his father. Immediately on his right is Mabel who was the mother of John Pillinger. In the background can be seen the houses known as Bath View. All this property is now under the Swainswick Bypass.

Exactly one hundred years ago World War 1 had lasted just over 18months and neither side was making significant progress. Since 1914 the Government had relied on its standing army and the three million eager recruits who had flocked to the colours in the early days of hostilities but losses were so obscenely high in the trenches of The Western Front that they decided to introduce conscription. An Act was passed in January 1916 that specified that all single men between 18 and 41 were liable for military service. The act came into effect in March 1916 and call up papers were sent out from that date. It was possible to appeal to a local Tribunal on grounds of conscience or in terms of usefulness to the local economy. This latter justification was particularly relevant in areas where the main occupation was agriculture. Bailbrook was such an area. Set in the heart of Bath's 'market garden' belt many of its young men worked on the gardens producing the fruit and vegetables for fashionable Bath.

Bailbrook lost six young men to the carnage that was World War One. Five are recorded on the war memorial outside Batheaston Church but the other is to be found on the memorial in Swainswick Church. This is because his father, EC Branch, known as Charlie operated Roseland Nursery which was demolished for the new by-pass and although firmly in Bailbrook it was just outside the parish of Batheaston. His name is William Fern Stanley Branch and until January 1917 he worked on the nursery. Tragically he was killed at Passcheddaele on 14th October 1917 and is recorded on the Tyne Cot memorial in Belgium together with 35,000 others with no known grave.

The very large Branch family originally lived in Larkhall but came to Bailbrook to run Roseland Nursery. Very much a family business Charlie employed his youngest son William on the land. When conscription was introduced Charlie applied to the Somerset Tribunal for exemption for his son in November 1916. He said that although he had had two women working during the summer they had recently left because they now found it too wet. The Chairman's response to his plea was simply to ask "What wages do you pay" and when Charlie replied "Threepence an hour" the Tribunal considered that at that rate of pay there would be plenty of labour available, dismissed the appeal and William was sent off to his death in the mud of Flanders.

During WW2 William's nephew John Pillinger of 1 Bath View, also a gardener and Superintendent of Batheaston Methodist Church applied for exemption from military service. His claim, however, was on grounds of conscience. He told the Tribunal that as a member of The Peace Pledge Union "he would rather be put up against the wall and shot than take any part in the war. The judge accepted his justification although as an agricultural worker he was in a reserved occupation and therefore had no need to apply for exemption. John's decision to appear before the tribunal was therefore extremely courageous.

Dave Pearce

WESLEYAN LOCAL PREACHER KILLED IN ACTION.

Mr. and Mrs. E. C. Branch, of Roseland Nursery, Swainswick, received official intimation on Tuesday night that their youngest son, Pte. W. F. S. Branch, Somerset L.I., aged 25, was killed in

action on October 14th, a piece of shrapnel striking him in the chest and killing him instantly. Mr. and Mrs. Branch have received a letter from an officer of the regiment speaking in high terms of Pte. Branch as a soldier, and referring particularly to his conscientiousness. Up to the middle of last January he worked in the nursery. He joined up on January 17th, and on May 23rd went overseas. He was a teacher in the Larkhall Sunday School, and for about two years before he became a soldier he was a Wesleyan Circuit local preacher, and often took services in the country.

The Bath Chronicle prints news of WFS Branch's death at Passchendaele

The memorial in St Saviour's Junior School showing William Branch's name

BATHEASTON SOCIETY

Our next meeting is on

Friday 15th April at 7.00pm

At the Church of the Good Shepherd

2 Northend, Batheaston

Professor Steve Poole of The University of the West of England is giving an illustrated talk on "Scurrilous goings on in the Genteel Society of Sydney Gardens of the 18th Century"

ALL WELCOME