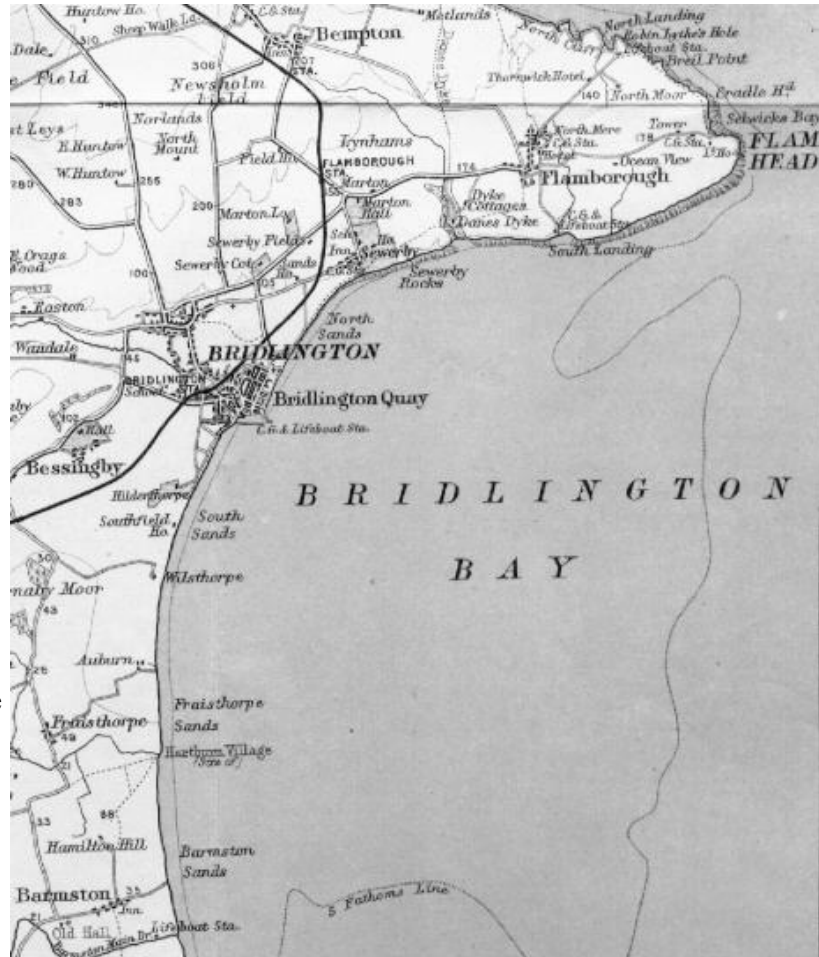


# THE LOSS OF H.M. MINESWEEPER No. 847, THE *LORD AIREDALE* - 18th/19th MARCH 1915

by [Nick Cooper](#) © 2005

The town Bridlington lies on the edge of the bay of the same name on the coast of the East Riding of Yorkshire. To the north of the town, the bay sweeps sharply up to the rocky promontory of Flamborough Head - marked by its 1806 [lighthouse](#) - while to south the curve of the shoreline is more shallow, eventually straightening out to form the flat Holderness coast before the inward sweep of Spurn Head. In the days of sail the Bay was a natural shelter for ships in the event of strong northerly or westerly winds, but the exact opposite when it blows from the south or east, when they would either be driven onto the shallow sand banks to the south, of the deadly rocks of Flamborough Head to the north. The only hope under such conditions was for ships to try to tack into the wind in an attempt to clear the coast, or to make a desperate dash for narrow entrance to the town's harbour, which was more often fatal than successful.

During the Great Gale of February 1871, there was fearful loss life when 22 ships were either brought ashore or smashed to pieces against the harbour walls. The town's two lifeboats - operated by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution ([RNLI](#)) and local fishermen, and so known as the "National" and "Fishermen's" boats respectively - gallantly battled the storm, but could save only a fraction of the stricken crews, and indeed amongst the dead were six of the Fishermen's boat's crew, drowned when she capsized.



## THE STORM

On the afternoon of Thursday 18th March 1915, the National Lifeboat was launched for its quarterly practice, but the inclement weather prevented the usual crowd of sightseers from watching the event, which was usually a popular spectacle. The same applied to both the local Volunteer Company and the Bridlington School Officer Training Corps, which paraded separately in the town around the same time. A number of Royal Navy (RN) minesweepers had been sighted in the bay earlier in the afternoon, but since all were peacetime trawlers built for rough seas, their presence was not an immediate cause for concern.

Just before 17:00, snow began to fall heavily, and before long the whole town had taken on, "a winterly aspect such as [had] not been experienced in Bridlington for a long time." [AOB, 1915/64] As darkness fell, the previously fitful northerly wind that had prevailed during the day rapidly increased. By 19:00 it was at hurricane force and, "the outlook in the bay was very wild and terrible." [AOB, 1915/64]

Shortly before the hurricane broke, a small boat containing five men had been seen putting out from the harbour, heading for the last remaining minesweeper riding at anchor some distance from the piers. She was the Grimsby trawler the *Lord Airedale*, now pressed into war service as His Majesty's Minesweeper No. 847. Her

crew numbered twelve, all members of the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR), with the exception of a regular RN Chief Petty Officer. The coastguards signalled to the minesweeper that the small boat had left the harbour, but fishermen on the piers were of the opinion that it never actually reached the ship, and that the five men were therefore lost even before the main drama of events that would later unfold.

By 23:00, the snow was lying two inches on the ground, even though it had been interspersed with sleet. Around 23:30, the coastguards sighted distress signals coming from the minesweeper, opposite Auburn House 3.8km (2.5 miles) from the harbour, and apparently attempting to head south towards deeper water at Barmston. Three signal rockets were sent up, summoning the Lifeboat crew, although a number of them had inevitably been waiting all night in anticipation of just such a summons. Despite the fact that the weather was now at its worst, with blinding snow and sleet sweeping across the bay, many townspeople rushed to the Lifeboat station in Marine Drive, on the South Side of the harbour. The Lifeboat, the *George and Jane Walker* (Official No. 433), was 35 feet long, 8.5 feet wide, and weighed 3.6 tons. The horse-drawn carriage weighed an additional 3.5 tons. Normally manned by a crew of 13 - ten oarsmen and three officers - the Lifeboat had been in service at Bridlington since late-1899 [See Note 1], and carried sails in addition to oars, but was not otherwise powered.

The Lifeboat carriage was normally drawn by between two and eight (depending on conditions) workhorses owned by the Bridlington Corporation, but as they had not yet arrived, many willing locals - including some 250 soldiers of the Norfolk Regiment stationed in the area - began the task of hauling the carriage down the slipway. With the tide not yet in, the combined weight of over seven tons had to be dragged across the heavy sand to a point opposite the stricken minesweeper, which by around 23:45 seemed to have grounded in about fifteen feet of water, near the low water mark between Auburn and Wilsthorpe, 100 to 150 yards from the water's edge and some 3km (1.9 miles) from the slipway.



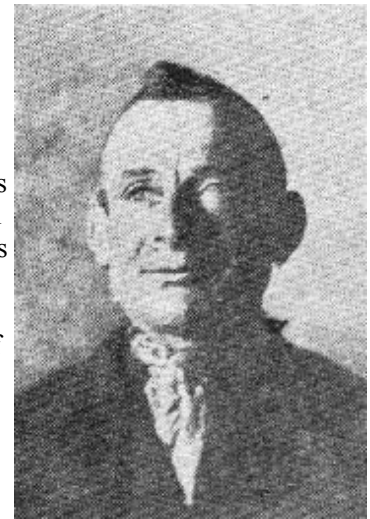
*Launching the Bridlington Lifeboat in more clement weather. This shows how the horses were hitched either side of the carriage, rather than directly in front of it. Also visible are the large sand-plated wheels, one of which was shattered when the Lifeboat was swept off the carriage.*

The Coastguard Life-Saving Company (LSC) - known as the "Rocket Brigade" - under the command of Captain Hugh Batchelor, had already reached an appropriate spot with their breeches buoy equipment, and begun to fire rocket-lines across to the minesweeper. One of the Coastguards later recounted: "Our first two shots went wide, but we got the line over beautifully at the third attempt. We could see it was over by the light of the [distress] flares, and they got it over the winch. We could hear it running and we were preparing the breeches buoy in readiness for sending it across, when the winch stopped." [AOB, 1915/80] Other witnesses said that at least one of the five rocket-lines was seen to pass between the funnel and the wheelhouse, and that after the winch stopped there was the sound of hammering, but then nothing more. It would later transpire that the line

had become fouled in the minesweeper's anchor buoy, although it could never be determined if the vessel had dragged its anchor initially, or if the anchor had been dropped only after she had grounded.



By this time, the eight horses and two drivers under foreman Thomas Lakes [left] had arrived at where the Lifeboat then was, just to the north of the minesweeper. Lakes had been alerted by the signal rockets and the hammering on doors in the vicinity of his home, and quickly made his way to the Corporation yard, where he was soon joined by drivers Robert Carr [right] and Charles Pashby. Carr was 65 years old, a recent widower, and father to four sons - all of whom were serving in the army - and six daughters. Of the latter, two were still under 21, single, and living with him. The youngest of the two, Eliza, was also the unmarried mother of a three year-old girl named Ruth. Understandably, one of his



daughters begged him not to go out on such a wild and terrible night, but Carr knew his duty, and - as he always did - ran all the way to the Corporation yard. Needing eight horses for the launch and expecting others to join them en route, the three men set off, Lakes leading three of the horses, Carr three, and Pashby the other two. By the time they reached the boathouse, however, the Lifeboat had already been removed by hand, so they left half the horses tied up there, and proceeded down the slipway and along the sand.

Reaching the Lifeboat, it was decided to waste no more time and to launch with just four horses, but they were still one man short. A volunteer was called for, and when Robert Brown [right], the son of a local blacksmith, came forward, the crowd parted to let him through. He later recalled: "I was looking out of my bedroom window when I saw the flares. I put on my clothes and went out, and saw the soldiers helping to drag the Lifeboat down the beach. I gave a hand [and] the rocket party overtook us, and I followed them [and] saw them firing. The Lifeboat had been dragged into position for launching, when I heard [police] Sergeant Hammond call for a volunteer. I at once responded, as I am used to horses. It was a fearful night." [AOB, 1915/80]



The horses were hitched to the carriage and the riders mounted; Lakes on the front horse on the right-hand side, with Pashby behind, Brown leading on left, with Carr behind him. The first attempt was made to draw the Lifeboat into the sea, but the horses were lifted off the feet by the heavy swell, and the crowd had to haul the carriage back out of the water. A second attempt was made and the horses and their riders disappeared into the swirling storm. Brown's horse was lifted off its feet, and became entangled in the large sand-plated front carriage wheel, before he was swept onto part of the carriage. Calling for help, he was hauled into the Lifeboat by one of the crew, Mr T Hutchinson, who later recounted: "I saw his horse was down, and I pulled him into the Lifeboat. I have always thought that the men who ride the horses at a launch are heroes, and what I saw on this occasion confirmed my opinion. The horses were overhead in water." [AOB, 1915/80]

Almost at the same time as Hutchinson was pulling Brown to relative safety, a wave caught the semi-submerged Lifeboat broadside, prompting Coxswain George Johnson to shout a warning to Lakes: "Look out, foreman, it's coming over on top of you!" Lakes, clinging to his horse's head, ducked as the wave lifted the Lifeboat and sent it crashing against the top of the front carriage wheel on the right-hand side. The wheel shattered and the carriage collapsed, the axle burying itself firmly in the sand. Miraculously, the Lifeboat was swept clean over both Lakes and his horse, before it steadied itself and began to drift away. Tragically, the sea carried the Lifeboat right past the minesweeper. It was, Coxswain George Johnson later recounted, "[the] heaviest do I ever had. We tacked round three times to get to the vessel, but at every attempt we failed - the weather beat us clean off." [AOB, 1915/72] Damaged and taking in water, the Lifeboat was eventually washed ashore further along the coast at around 03:00, and the crew scrambled ashore

Back at the launching site, and having realised that the Lifeboat had gone, the crowd attempted to haul the carriage out of the water, but it was an impossible task given the damage nobody ashore knew it had sustained.

A few moments later, a lone rider came into view and exclaimed, "For God's sake, help my mates, or they will be drowned!" It was Charles Pashby, who had managed to get both himself and his mount clear, but in doing so had witnessed the plight of the others. Lakes had struggled to loosen his horse's harness, but could not remove the halter, which was virtually strangling the beast. He called to Pashby: "Charlie, can you let me have a knife?" but the other man replied that he didn't have one. At the same time, Carr was also trying to save himself.

"Cut your horse free," Lakes yelled, "Loose your harness!"

"I can't," Carr replied.

In despair, Lakes called out: "God help you, for I cannot!"

Lakes finally managed to free both himself and his horse, known as "Peddler," and they were swept perhaps twenty or thirty yards from the wreckage. Looking back, just before the old man went under for the last time, he heard Carr shout: "Foreman, I am sinking. I cannot get clear..."

In response to Pashby's pleas to the crowd, they again tried to haul in the carriage, but with the broken axle stuck firmly in the sand, the rope broke. Soon, though, they spotted a man and a horse drifting south - it was Thomas Lakes. After travelling about a thousand yards the horse came nearer to the shore, and Mr LM Wilson attempted to reach it, but was beaten back by the waves. An appeal was made to form a human chain, but many feared to enter the water, so Mr FW Lendis made an attempt to reach Lakes alone and managed to grasp the foreman's hand, but he was swept off his feet and eventually had to let go for fear that the horse might fall on top of him.



Again the horse was swept nearer to the shore, but inexplicably seemed to be trying to turn itself out to sea. It was at this point that LSC member Leonard Thompson [right], who was a strong swimmer, chose to plunge into the water, having followed the pair for some 500-600 yards. Thompson had previously seen action during the Zulu Rebellion and the Boer War with the Natal Mounted Infantry. He began to shout commands to the horse, and was gratified to see that it began to turn towards him. When the horse was about thirty yards away, Thompson heard Lakes cry: "I am done for, I am done for. I can't do any more." Up to his waist in water and struggling forwards, Thompson reached the horse and managed to pull Lakes off and back to the shore, helped by Mr M Wiles. Once there, the foreman's first words were of his old friend and colleague Robert Carr: "Poor Bob, he asked me to save him, and I could do nothing! I saw him drown. I saw him go under."

## ***THE AFTERMATH***

In the following hours, there was no lull in the storm, and with the tide rising rapidly, the minesweeper was quickly swamped. By the time dawn broke, only the top of her masts showed above the water. The next morning, the following telegrams were sent by the Coastguard:

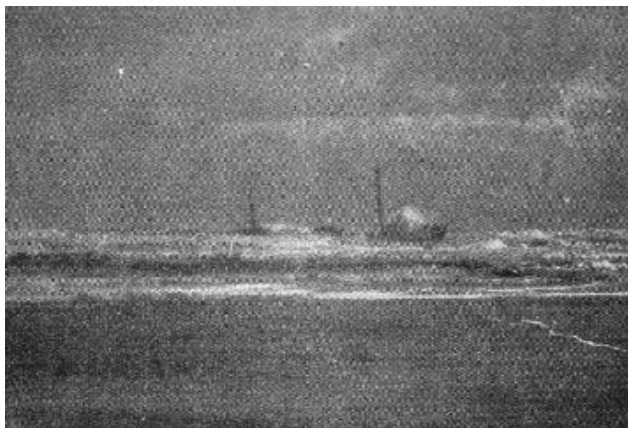
A456 - From Flamborough Head to Admiralty 07:50 19/03/15 [Sent 07:56; Received 09:00]  
Bridlington Coast Guard reports Mine Sweeping Trawler 847 wrecked South Bay. Communication with life saving apparatus but did not use it. Three bodies recovered.

A457 - From Flamborough Head to Admiralty 10:40 19/03/15 [Received 11:36]  
Refer to my A456. Mine Sweeping Trawler went ashore 11.45pm last night, South Side Bridlington Bay. L.S.A. established communication, crew made fast line but nothing more took place. Vessel now submerged only masts showing, four bodies recovered, feared all crew lost, if present weather continues vessel likely to become total wreck, will probably dry at low water.

[ADM 1/8414/71]

After the tide had gone down, it could be seen that the minesweeper's funnel and steering gear had been swept away, and that she had been extensively damaged by the pounding received in the storm. Of the dead, seven bodies were recovered between Fraisthorpe and Barmston during the Friday, and four more the next day, including that of Carr near Barmston. The minesweeper crew - including the skipper, John Robert Dawson - were placed in the local mortuary, while Carr was taken to the family home at 55 Brooklands Road, where the blinds of many houses in the immediate vicinity were already drawn in mourning. Miraculously, Lakes's horse,

Peddler, was found alive on the Saturday, having made it ashore further down the coast. He lived for a further 23 years, and was for ever known in the town as, "the Sea Horse."



*Seen from the beach, the wreck of the Lord Airedale in the distance at half-tide. Foreman Thomas Lakes's horse, Peddler, who survived the storm.*

The low tide also revealed the remains of the Lifeboat carriage and the bodies of two of the horses. Robert Brown's mount was so entangled in the wreckage that it could only be removed after its legs had been sawn off, while Robert Carr's horse was found some distance from the carriage. They were buried at the foot of the adjacent cliff. Even with eight more of the Corporation horses under the charge of foreman John Cox, the carriage could not be dragged out of the sand (the carriage was eventually dismantled on site and the components sent to Bristol for repair). Meanwhile, it has been determined that the Lifeboat had suffered little damage, so she was refloated and sailed to the harbour.



*The wreck more visible at low-tide.*



*Soldiers examine the remains of the Lifeboat carriage.*

## ***THE INQUEST***

On Monday 22nd March, an inquest was held by county coroner Sir Luke White at the Court House, Bridlington, into the death of Robert Carr, as well as the ten of the minesweeper crew whose bodies had been recovered:

John Robert Dawson (Skipper)  
 Stephen Hartley Booth (Deck Hand)  
 David Buxton (Deck Hand)  
 Arthur Ellis (Trimmer/Cook)  
 James Grice (Deck Hand)  
 Albert George Mayson (Second Hand)  
 Thomas Edward Salt (Engineman)  
 Alfred Taylor (Engineman)  
 Albert Ernest Llewellyn (Chief Petty Officer, RN)  
 Albert Stephenson (Trimmer)

Nine of the crew were formerly identified by Arthur Fletcher (RNR), who had been the skipper of the *Lord Airedale* up to 12th March - when Captain Dawson took over - and had therefore escaped almost certain death himself by a matter of days. Pte George Bernard Salt (10th Lincolnshire Regiment) confirmed the identity of his stepfather, while Dvr Joseph Carr (187 Coy, ASC) did the same for his father. Also present were Lt Alfred J Havercroft Chafer (RNR) and Paymaster R B Ford (RNR) representing the Admiralty, and Bridlington Lifeboat Committee secretary Mr A J Parnell representing the RNLI.

After hearing all the evidence and questioning witnesses - including Pashby and Brown (Lakes was too ill to attend), Coxswain Johnson, and Captain Batchelor - the coroner concluded that everyone involved had done all that was humanly possible to prevent the loss of life, which was compounded by the unforeseen breakage of the Lifeboat carriage axle. On the ten recovered crew he recommended that the jury should deliver a verdict of, "found drowned" - since there were no other survivors to relate exactly how they died - and for Carr, "accidentally drowned whilst assisting in the launching of the Lifeboat at Bridlington on 19th March 1915." The jury concurred, with the foreman, Mr W Robinson remarking that it was the saddest inquest he had attended since that following the Great Gale of 1871, and he moved for a vote of sympathy with all the families of the dead men. The Coroner said he was sure the jury would be in agreement in recording their sympathy to the children of Robert Carr, as well as the families and friends of the ten of the minesweeper crew the inquest covered, as well as two whose bodies had not been recovered. In fact the body of Albert Henry Leman (Deck Hand) was not recovered until 06/05/15, and Alfred Ernest Doore (Trimmer) not at all

A letter from the secretary of the RNLI to Parnell was also read out:

"Dear Sir, --- The news contained in your telegram is very saddening, as it means the death of another brave man who has sacrificed his life in the effort to succour those who were in great peril, and who, unfortunately, appear also to have been drowned.

I shall await further particulars as soon as possible, but meanwhile I would ask you to be good enough to express to the relatives of the brave fellow who lost his life the warm sympathy of the Committee of Management and myself in their bereavement. They may well feel that he has been "killed in action" in as true a sense as any of the brave men who have lost their lives on the field of battle or on the high seas fighting in the cause of our country.

Will you please let me know as soon as possible the position with regard to his relatives. Is there a widow, and are there any children? If so, will you please give me their ages. I would ask you to defray the expenses of the funeral, which will, of course, be borne by the Institution. I trust that none of the other men have been injured in this deplorable accident.

Will you also let me know whether there is any possibility of a local fund being opened for the benefit of the relatives. Of course the Committee of Management would make a substantial grant as a contribution to any such fund, and they feel sure that the residents of the town which has so long and so honourably associated with the Lifeboat cause will not be backward in coming to the assistance of those who have been bereft of their breadwinner in this sad accident.

Your further report is awaited.

Believe me, yours faithfully, George Smee, Secretary, 19th March 1915."

Paymaster Ford also expressed sympathy at the death of Carr, before going on to praise the work of both the Lifeboatmen and the Coastguard Life-Saving Company, saying that he hoped that they would always, "continue to render such good services to the men who day by day were following a life of peril in carrying out their duties to their King and country." [AOB, 1915/80]

## ***THE FUNERALS***

Initially it was thought that Carr would be buried alongside his late wife at the village of Kilham, but it was known that he had expressed a desire to be buried at Bridlington many times when he was alive. The funeral was a solemn affair that united the town in mourning, and it was reported that, "every blind was drawn right along the route from No. 55 Brookland Road to the Priory Church." [AOB, 1915/80] Nine of Carr's children were present, including three of his sons then serving in the army: Joseph, Tom (Pte, ASC) and Fred (Pte, Royal Field Artillery). Only Robert Jnr (Dvr, RFA) was absent, since he was already in France. At the close of the service, the Rev J Topham said:



"It is seldom on such an occasion that one cares to break silence, but I feel that I must just say one or two words. Our dear friend, Robert Carr, was one of the first men I got to know on coming here as your Rector, and from the first week we had been excellent friends, and I believe that with the exception of one Sunday, when he was ill, he had not missed a single Sunday afternoon service in that noble house of God which stands right in front of me as I speak to you. I need not refer at length to the circumstances under which he was called to go; but I want to say that he lost his life in a noble cause. In spite of his advancing years he bravely went - ever running to do his duty - anxious not to be the last there, but rather one of the first. His life was bravely given in the cause of duty. I want to say to you, as I say to myself, let us all endeavour to do our duty bravely, as unto God, so that our lives may please Him."



After the funeral, Carr's coffin was taken to the town cemetery for burial [above-right].

Seven of the minesweeper crew were buried with full naval honours at Grimsby on Tuesday 23rd March, it being reported that: "The people here fully recognise that the men died in the service of their country, and though we are accustomed to naval and military funerals - for there have been many since the war began - the town turned out to do homage to the memory of seven of its people." [AOB, 1915/81] The cortege started near the dock offices, "amid an universal crowd of sympathisers," and the coffins were carried to Scartho Road Cemetery, where the service was led by the Rev C H Lenton for six of the men, while the Rev Canon O'Donoghue officiated for the single Roman Catholic crew member.

## ***POSTSCRIPTS***

Minesweeper crewmen Leman, Buxton, Taylor, Stephenson, Booth, Ellis, Salt and Llewellyn are buried in graves 41 D 15-thru-22 respectively in Grimsby (Scartho Road) Cemetery. Grice is buried in grave 76 N 19 in the same graveyard (presumably a Catholic plot). Dawson is interred in Great Yarmouth (Gorleston) Cemetery (grave D 4 105); while Mayson is buried at Fleetwood Borough Cemetery (grave 357). As the body of Doore was never recovered, he is commemorated on the Chatham Naval Memorial, Kent. Although it was at first thought that the vessel was beyond further use, the *Lord Airedale* was refloated within three weeks and towed to Bridlington harbour, taking in a great deal of water in the process. Despite hopes that the remains of the two still missing crewmen would be found inside the minesweeper, this turned out not to be the case. The *Lord Airedale* was repaired and returned to mine sweeping service, but was herself sunk by a mine on 29/11/16 with the loss of seven of her fourteen crew. None were recovered, and they are commemorated as follows:

CHATHAM NAVAL MEMORIAL:	James Brunton (Deck Hand) Frederick Charles Fletcher (Trimmer/Cook) John Thomas Wilson (Engineman)
PLYMOUTH NAVAL MEMORIAL:	Albert George Boobyer (Signalman) Neil Mackie (Engineman) Albert George Wiles (Trimmer)
PORTSMOUTH NAVAL MEMORIAL:	John Thomson (Trimmer)

[See Note 2]

Robert Brown, the volunteer driver on that fateful night, later served as a driver in the Royal Garrison Artillery and survived the Great War.

Of Robert Carr's four sons, three returned safely from service, although Robert Jnr was wounded, and Tom (who had driven RAMC ambulances) suffered a bout of trench fever. The youngest, Joseph, received a shrapnel wound to the forehead (which also blinded him) in the very early hours of 15 June 1917, while taking ammunition supplies up to the front line near Ypres. He was evacuated via the 2/1 Wessex Field Ambulance and No. 12 Casualty Clearing Station to No. 4 General Hospital near Boulogne. He eventually died of meningitis as a result of his wounds on 13 July, and is buried at Etaples Military Cemetery, Pas-de-Calais, France. He named his unmarried sister Eliza as beneficiary in his army will.

Michael Fursey O'Neill, the absent father of Eliza Carr's daughter, Ruth, had been mobilised whilst in Australia at the start of the War during his period of Reserve service in the Grenadier Guards (he had originally enlisted

for three years active service in September 1904, with nine years in the Reserve). He arrived in France on 15 January 1915, and was awarded the Military Medal in early 1918. At the end of October 1918 he was repatriated to the UK after receiving a gunshot wound to the right shoulder. He died of pneumonia at his home in Ireland less than two weeks later, and is buried nearby.

Ruth Carr had four daughters, who in turn gave her two granddaughters and two grandsons, one being the author. She died in 1989, but since then her descendents now include four great-grandsons.

## REFERENCES

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ADM 1/8414/71; HM Trawler No 847 (LORD AIREDALE) - Wrecked in Bridlington Bay. Report of loss and casualties. [1915] Former Admiralty document held at the National Archives, Kew.

ADM 1/8474/282; Loss of Trawler LORD AIREDALE [1916] Former Admiralty document held at the National Archives, Kew.

THE ANNALS OF BRIDLINGTON [AOB]: A series of "scrapbook" collections of newspaper cuttings relating to Bridlington, maintained by the Clerk to the Town Corporation before, during and after WW1. Held at Bridlington Library.

### PUBLISHED SOURCES:

*MEN OF THE STORM - THE STORY OF BRIDLINGTON'S LIFEBOATS* [H E Whitaker, Bridlington, 1948]

*THE BRIDLINGTON LIFEBOATS - A HISTORY OF THE BRIDLINGTON STATION* [Ralph S Fawcett, Bridlington, 1985]

## NOTES

[1] Fawcett states the *George and Jane Walker's* first sea trial at Bridlington was on 02/11/1899 and that the first service launch was on the, "last day of the nineteenth century." Correctly this would be 31/12/1900, but it seems unlikely that the Lifeboat would not have been service launched in more than a year, so we must assume the date was actually 31/12/1899.

[2] The survivors of the second sinking of the *Lord Airedale* were:

James H Gardner (Skipper)  
 Harry Allard (Second Hand)  
 James Pacey (Deck Hand)  
 Thomas Darcy (Deck Hand)  
 Geroge Kirby (Deck Hand)  
 Isaac Platts (Deck Hand)  
 Alex Milne (Leading Seaman)



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