

Sergeant Harold Dickinson®
Regimental Number: 602947
7th Battalion, Canadian Infantry

born: 25 June 1895 – died: 21 March 1918

Harold Dickinson was an orphaned British Home Child. Born on 25 June 1895 in Sheffield, England,¹ as of 31 March 1901, Harold was living at Fir Vale Workhouse as a foster child in the Sheffield children's home called The Beeches, on Barnsley Road.² There was another inmate at the same workhouse, Thomas Dickinson, aged 13, also originally from Sheffield and also arriving on the same day as Harold, so it is possible that he was Harold's brother, but no information could be found to identify his parents or determine whether Thomas was Harold's brother.³

The Fir Vale Workhouse was completed in 1881 to house up to 1,800 "inmate" paupers and another 200 in an asylum. A report from 1896 discussed the author's visit to the workhouse and his rash decision to taste the dinner of the day. He was rewarded with a severe attack of indigestion. He talked about the great nuisance of black beetles which occasionally got into the food, although the workhouse was vigorously attempting to get rid of them.⁴ However, children were placed in "scattered homes" under the care of a foster parent employed by the union. The children attended local schools.⁵

The BIFHSGO website describes the Home Children Program:

Canada's Home Children were inevitably poor and primarily between a few months and 18 years of age when they arrived here from Great Britain. . . . A child would be in such circumstances usually because he or she was too poor to survive without public support — either because the parents could not support their child, or the local church and government authorities considered the child's moral upbringing was at risk, or one or both parents were dead or in some way incapacitated. . . . Both the Canadian and British governments supported this emigration program — it reduced the costs on the public purse in Britain and, for Canada, provided workers-in-training (usually aged 12 to 14 and older) or young children (usually aged 10 and under) for adoption by interested and suitable families. The requests by Canadians for children almost always far outnumbered the number of children available. At least at the beginning of the program, the Canadian government subsidized the cost of transporting children from Britain. . . .⁶

At the age of 13, Harold left Liverpool on 21 May 1908 aboard *SS Dominion*, traveling with numerous other children under Dr. Barnardo's program. There were no other Dickinson children on the ship.⁷

Harold was placed with the Adam E. Johnston family in Northwood Road in Kent Bridge, Kent, Ontario. In the 1911 Census, Harold was living with the Johnston family, including Adam, his mother Margaret, and his sisters Ann Jane and Margaret. Harold is identified as the adopted son of Adam, who is single.⁸

He must have had a good placement with this family, as he was still with them when he enlisted with the CEF on 17 August 1915, and he named Adam as his next of kin and sole beneficiary in his military will. Harold was also having \$25 of his monthly pay assigned to Adam.⁹ Interestingly,

Harold signed up with another Home Child from the same workhouse.¹⁰ Indeed, Harold was one of the 531 Barnardo Boys who died during the Great War.¹¹

When Harold enlisted with the CEF he identified himself as a farmer. He was fairly short at 5'5" tall and he had extensive scars from burns on his front thighs.¹² Harold arrived in England aboard SS *California* on 1 November 1915, and was transferred to the Front on 25 May 1916. By 25 July 1917, he had advanced from private to lance corporal to corporal and then to sergeant. On 15 January 1918 Harold was awarded the Military Medal.¹³ The citation read: "Sergt Dickinson displayed conspicuous gallantry and good leadership in action. During our attack on Aug 15th 1917 he led his men with marked coolness and skill, his contempt for danger inspiring all ranks."¹⁴ Amazingly, Harold was just 22 years old.



Harold Dickinson

Source: "Home Children Who Died in the First World War,"
Made with Silk

On the evening of 21 March 1918, while standing at the door of his hut, Harold was hit in the head by a piece of shrapnel from a bomb dropped during an enemy air raid.¹⁵ He was immediately evacuated to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station but he was dead on arrival there the next day.¹⁶ Harold was buried on 23 March at the Houchin British Cemetery, Section I, Row G, Grave 24.¹⁷ Houchin Cemetery was opened in March 1918 when the 6th Casualty Clearing Station came to Houchin. From April to September the German advance made Houchin unsafe for hospitals, and the cemetery was used by the 55th (West Lancashire) Division. In September 1918, the 6th Casualty Clearing Station returned to Houchin and was joined by the 15th CCS in October.¹⁸

Harold is well remembered at the *Home Children Who Died in the First World War* website, including photos of his Memorial Plaque and Barnardo Medal, which were given to Adam Johnston, and of his grave marker.¹⁹

Adam Johnston died 21 October 1949 and is buried at the Maple Leaf Cemetery in Chatham, Ontario.²⁰

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¹ "Service Files of the First World War, 1914–1918 - CEF," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>; accessed 5 March 2017) entry for Dickinson, Harold, Reference: RG 150 Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2511 - 27, Item number: 354856, Digitized service file - PDF format: B2511-S027

² "Fir Vale Workhouse," *Sheffield Indexers* (http://www.sheffieldindexers.com/WorkhouseHospitalCottage_Index.html; accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Harry Dickinson

³ *Ibid.*, entry for Thomas Dickinson

⁴ "Sheffield, West Riding of Yorkshire," *The Workhouse* (<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Sheffield/>; accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Fir Vale Workhouse

⁵ *Ibid.*, entry for Scattered Homes

⁶ "Origins of Home Children Sent to Canada," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (<http://bifhsgo.ca/cpage.php?pt=10>; accessed 6 March 2017)

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- ⁷ "Immigration Records," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/immigration-records/home-children-1869-1930/immigration-records/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=66550>; accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Harold Dickinson, database number 162352
- ⁸ "1911 Census of Canada," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Adan [sic] Johnston, Province: Ontario, District: Kent West, District number: 85, Sub-district: 18-Harwich, Sub-district number: 18
- ⁹ "Service Files of the First World War, 1914–1918 - CEF," *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/search.aspx>; accessed 5 March 2017) entry for Dickinson, Harold, Reference: RG 150 Accession 1992-93/166, Box 2511 - 27, Item number: 354856, Digitized service file - PDF format: B2511-S027
- ¹⁰ "British Home Children: Quick Search," *RootsChat.com* (http://surname.rootschat.com/lexicon/dbsig/dbsig-quick-search.php?dbsig_num=1&surname=DICKINSON&view=15194; accessed 6 March 2016), entry for Harold Dickinson
- ¹¹ "CEF Soldier Detail," *Canadian Great War Project* (<http://canadiangreatwarproject.com/searches/soldierDetail.asp?ID=32620>; accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Sergeant Harold Dickinson
- ¹² See Endnote 10
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ "CEF Soldier Detail," *Canadian Great War Project* (<http://canadiangreatwarproject.com/searches/soldierDetail.asp?ID=32620>; accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Sergeant Harold Dickinson
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca; accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Harold Dickinson
- ¹⁷ *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org; accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Harold Dickinson, Service No: 602947
- ¹⁸ *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org; accessed 24 February 2017), entry for Robert Anderson
- ¹⁹ "Home Children Who Died in the First World War," *Made with Silk* (<http://bhc-who-died-in-the-first-world-war.silk.co/page/602947>; accessed 6 March 2017), entry for Harold Dickinson
- ²⁰ "Canada, Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 10 October 2016), entry for Adam E. Johnston