

Private Henry George Chamberlain[©]
Regimental Number: 20655
2nd Battalion, Suffolk Regiment

born: 1878 – died: 20 April 1918

Although Henry Chamberlain likely had a difficult childhood, being born to an unwed mother who died when he was about 17, and he ran “a-fowl” of the constabulary shortly before he signed up for the War, he became a dedicated and valiant soldier, earning a Distinguished Conduct Medal just months before his untimely death. Much of the personal information in this biography was provided by *Herts at War, Great War Commemoration*.¹

Henry had been born to Rose Chamberlain in Pirton, Hertfordshire, England, in 1878; he was christened on Christmas Day.² Rose was one of seven children of Thomas Chamberlain and Dinah Odell, who had married on 7 June 1843 at Hitchin, a town close to Pirton.³ Rose’s youngest sister, Elizabeth, who was born in 1866, about a decade after Rose,⁴ became an important person in Henry’s life, particularly after the death of Rose.

It appears that Rose had two other children, also out of wedlock: Albert Thomas, who had been born on 11 June 1879 in Pirton⁵ but did not appear on any future census with his mother; and Ellen, who was born in 1888⁶ in Hitchin but died early in 1890.⁷

In 1881, toddler Henry was living with his grandparents, mother, uncle Hezekiah and aunt Elizabeth. Thomas was then a retired agricultural labourer and Hezekiah was an agricultural labourer, but all of the women were straw plaiters.⁸ Straw plaiting, the making of hats and bonnets from wheat straw, had been quite important to the Hertfordshire economy from at least the early 17th century. Being close to London was likely an important factor, but it may also have been that the wheat straw grown on chalky soil was of better quality for this purpose. The heyday of straw plaiting was during the Napoleonic wars, when blockades and high import duties excluded foreign plait. Wives plaiting straw could make appreciably more income than their farmer husbands. However, by the beginning of the 20th century the industry had sharply declined and by the end of the First World War, the local Hertfordshire plaiting industry was ending.⁹

In 1891, Henry was living with his mother, aunt Elizabeth and grandmother Dinah in Pirton. The women continued to work as straw plaiters.¹⁰ Thomas, who was 72, is not shown on the 1891 Census, but he passed away early in 1894¹¹ when Henry was about 15. A year later Rose also passed away at the age of 38.¹² The death of his grandmother Dinah early in 1900 at the age of 82¹³ left Henry relying on his aunt Elizabeth and her husband, Fred Gazeley.

In 1901, Henry was living with Elizabeth, his two-year-old niece Mary Rose and his infant nephew Frederick.¹⁴ Although Elizabeth is noted as married, not widowed, Fred is not shown in the census. Henry was an ordinary agricultural labourer.



Photo of Henry George Chamberlain, DCM

Source: “Pirton,” *Herts at War*

In 1911, Elizabeth was a 44-year-old widow with two young children, and Henry, her 32-year-old nephew, was still living with her. He remained a farm labourer.¹⁵

In early October 1914, the *Hitchin Express* described a “fowl” incident for which Henry was found guilty. He had apparently been in the local public house, perhaps having consumed a few too many pints. There had been a number of fowl robberies in the town recently and the police were paying special attention to the “fowl-runs,” which are small enclosures for poultry. Just before 10:00 one evening, two special constables, wearing arm bands identifying them as such, entered the establishment and were immediately threatened with violence should they be caught around one defendant’s fowl-runs that evening. The article appears to imply that this gentleman may have been suspected as being a fowl thief. He, with Henry and another fellow, followed the constables outside where the constables were accosted. Henry pleaded guilty to striking one constable in the face and the other on the shoulder, and to using obscene language. He was fined £2 7s 6d or one month in jail (this was a very large sum of money for an agricultural labourer.)

In addition, later that night in another part of town Henry was charged with assaulting a Mrs. Hubbard. She had been awakened with police whistles and shouts of “police,” “murder,” and “help.” She went out to the back lane and saw three men, including Henry, who were threatening her husband. Mrs. Hubbard spoke up against Henry hitting her husband and Henry “sprang at her and grasped her shoulder. Then he struck at her, but her husband stepped in front and received the blow on his eye.” For his rashness, Henry was fined an additional £1 or 14 days in jail.¹⁶ The article did not say whether Henry paid the fines or spent six weeks in jail.

It seems that a few months after this incident, Henry joined the war effort at Hitchin. Regrettably, only about 30% of UK service records still exist due to a fire resulting from a 1940 air raid on the Army Records Office in Walworth, London,¹⁷ and it appears that Henry’s records were not saved. As a result, certain specifics of Henry’s military experience were not obtainable. Henry initially enlisted with the 12th Battalion, Suffolk Regiment and eventually was moved to the 2nd Battalion.¹⁸

The *North Herts Mail* dated 1 July 1916 and the *Parish Magazine* of September 1915 both state that Henry joined one of the Suffolk Bantam Brigades. This indicates that Henry was of small stature (likely less than 5’ 3”), as men of such stature were not accepted for service at the outbreak of the war.¹⁹ Indeed, the 12th Battalion was raised in July 1915 as a bantam battalion. They proceeded to France on 6 June 1916, landing at Le Havre.²⁰

Early in 1917, Henry was badly injured and was returned to England to convalesce, but he was returned to France in July of that year.²¹

Henry received a Distinguished Conduct Medal (commonly referred to as the DCM),²² the next highest award to the Victoria Cross, for his gallant conduct at Zonnebeke, a municipality in the Belgian province of West Flanders. This would have occurred during the Third Battle of Ypres or the Battle of Passchendaele in late 1917. The Suffolk Regiment Museum has an account written by Colonel C. C. R. Murphy to identify the likely date of the event as 27 September 1917, for the 2nd Suffolks had captured Zonnebeke on the 26th.²³ The Allied forces were fighting to fend off advancing German forces during one of the bloodiest battles of the Great War. The fighting was particularly bad in the Zonnebeke area. At the height of the battle, more than 35,000 soldiers were surviving underground in the Ypres area. This battle lasted 100 days, claimed half a million casualties for the sake of a five-mile advance. *The Telegraph* recently reported, “Thunderous rain turned the battlefield into a quagmire of mud that drowned tanks, horses and men as they tried to reclaim the high ground at Passchendaele and push the Germans back from the coast, in order to

destroy their submarine bases that threatened Britain's supply lines and the American reinforcements arriving by ship."²⁴

20655 Pte. H.G. CHAMBERLAIN (Hitchin)

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. During operations an enemy aeroplane flew low over our lines and fired a white light, which was answered by a hostile sniper near by. Entirely on his own initiative he went in search of the sniper, found three in a shell-hole, killed them all, and returned with Very lights and a trench lamp. He afterwards accounted for three more snipers lying out for hours in No Man's Land, and stalking them when they declared themselves. (6.2.18)

Citation of Distinguished Conduct Medal

Source: *Ancestry*

Henry's fortitude after being injured and fighting, constantly under fire by the enemy for several years in horrendous situations and conditions, especially the months in torrential downpours, surviving in mud-laden trenches with so many of his comrades killed and injured while fighting next to him.

Sadly, Henry was admitted to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station on 20 April 1918 with shrapnel wounds and a fracture of his head. He died later that day.²⁸ The war diary for the 2nd Battalion, Suffolk Regiment reported a quiet day on 20 April, while still identifying two Ordinary Ranks (non-officers) killed and six injured.²⁹ Henry was buried at Pernes British Cemetery on 21 April in Plot 1, Row C, Grave 2 with Chaplain G. d'Easum presiding.³⁰ His grave marker contains the additional quote selected by his aunt Elizabeth: God is Love, In Paradise.³¹ Pernes British Cemetery was not opened until April 1918 when the 1st and 4th Canadian Casualty Clearing Stations pulled back to Pernes, driven back by the German advance in Flanders. There are 1,098 First World War burials in Pernes.³²

Henry's receipt of the DCM was unusual in that he was but a private. His actions were described in a number of newspaper articles and the award citation was published in *The London Gazette* on 23 November 1917.²⁵

Other local newspapers expanded upon Henry's bravery: "He was further instrumental in the capture of a "pill-box" containing twelve Huns, who had been overlooked by the front line troops. He also bayoneted several Germans who feigned death."²⁶ (A pill-box was a concrete guard post with loopholes through which to fire weapons. They were often part of a trench system, camouflaged to conceal their location.²⁷) One can only imagine



Grave marker of Private Henry George Chamberlain, DCM

Source: *Findagrave*

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Many thanks are extended to Jonty Wild, co-author of *The Pride of Pirton*, for providing copies of newspaper clippings, excerpts from the book, and other supporting documents and photographs.

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- ¹ "Pirton," *Herts at War* (<http://www.hertsatwar.co.uk/pirton>: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Henry George Chamberlain DCM.
- ² "England & Wales, Christening Index, 1530–1980," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Henry George Chamberlain
- ³ "England & Wales Marriages, 1538–1988," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Thomas Chamberlain, Marriage Place: Pirton, Hertfordshire, England
- ⁴ "1881 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Elizabeth Chamberlain, Registration district: Hitchin, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 28, Piece: 1421, Folio: 97, Page: 30
- ⁵ "England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538–1975," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Albert Thomas Chamberlain, FHL film number: 1040655. Albert's death could not be found in GRO, but there is an interesting hint on *Ancestry* for an Albert Thomas Chamberlain in the 1911 England Census, born about 1879 in Pirton. GRO shows only one such Albert Thomas Chamberlain being born in 1879. Could Albert have been raised by his father or another relative?
- ⁶ "GRO online index," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 27 December 2017) entry for Chamberlain, Ellen, Volume 03A, Page 499
- ⁷ "GRO online index," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 27 December 2017) entry for Chamberlain, Ellen, Volume 03A, Page 329
- ⁸ See endnote 4
- ⁹ "Occupations, The History of Straw Plait in Hertfordshire," *Genealogy in Hertfordshire* (<http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/data/occupations/straw-plait.htm>: accessed 27 December 2017)
- ¹⁰ "1891 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Henry Chamberlain, Registration district: Hitchin, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 27, Piece: 1108, Folio: 208
- ¹¹ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Thomas Chamberlain, Registration district: Hitchin, Inferred county: Hertfordshire, Volume: 3a, Page: 338
- ¹² "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Rose Chamberlain, Registration district: Hitchin, Inferred county: Hertfordshire, Volume: 3a, Page: 272
- ¹³ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Dinah Chamberlain, Registration district: Hitchin, Inferred county: Hertfordshire, Volume: 3a, Page: 330
- ¹⁴ "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Elizabeth Gazeley, Registration district: Hitchin, Sub-registration district: Hitchin, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 25, Household schedule number: 124, Piece: 1300, Folio: 189, Page: 22
- ¹⁵ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 27 December 2017), entry for Elizabeth Gazeley, Registration district: Hitchin, Registration district number: 136, Sub-registration district: Hitchin, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 21, Household schedule number: 35, Piece: 7610
- ¹⁶ See endnote 1. Excerpts from an article entitled "War Against Special Constables" published by the *Hitchin Express* in October 1914 is found in the book *The Pride of Pirton*.
- ¹⁷ "How to research a soldier," *The Long, Long Trail, The British Army in the Great War of 1914–1918* (<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/how-to-research-a-soldier/>: accessed 30 May 2017)
- ¹⁸ "UK, WWI Service Medal and Award Rolls, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 28 December 2017), entry for Henry George Chamberlain
- ¹⁹ See endnote 1. Information taken from *The Pride of Pirton* by Tony French, Chris Ryan and Jonty Wild.
- ²⁰ "12th (East Anglia) Battalion, Suffolk Regiment during the Great War," *The Wartime Memories Project* (<http://www.wartimemoriesproject.com/greatwar/allied/battalion.php?pid=7311>: accessed 27 December 2017)

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- ²¹ See endnote 1. Newspaper article dated 4 May 1918 entitled *Pirton D.C.M. Hero Killed*
- ²² "UK, Citations of the Distinguished Conduct Medal, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 28 December 2017), entry for H.G. Chamberlain
- ²³ Ibid. Article in *The Pride of Pirton* by Tony French, Chris Ryan and Jonty Wild.
- ²⁴ "Battle of Passchendaele: horror, heroism and a hidden underground city," *The Telegraph*, by Emma Thomson, 31 July 2017 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/tours/passchendaele-how-to-visit-battlefield-tour/>: accessed 28 December 2017)
- ²⁵ See endnote 1. Article in *The Pride of Pirton* by Tony French, Chris Ryan and Jonty Wild.
- ²⁶ See endnote 1. Clip of a newspaper article from an unnamed publication dated 18 February 1918 entitled *Pirton Man's Exploit*
- ²⁷ "Pillbox (military)," *Wikipedia* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillbox_\(military\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pillbox_(military))): accessed 28 December 2017)
- ²⁸ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 28 December 2017), entry for Chamberlain Pte. H.
- ²⁹ "UK, WWI War Diaries (France, Belgium and Germany), 1914–1920," (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 28 December 2017), entry for 2nd Battn. The Suffolk Regiment
- ³⁰ See endnote 28
- ³¹ *Find A Grave* (www.findagrave.com: accessed 28 December 2017) entry for Private Henry George Chamberlain, D.C.M.
- ³² *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, (www.cwgc.org: accessed 6 October 2017), entry for Chamberlain, H. G., Service No: 20655