

Robert Beatham biography

Robert Matthew Beatham was born in Glassonby on the 16 June 1894 and baptised at Glassonby Methodist Chapel in the following September. He was the sixth child of John and Elizabeth Beatham, who had a total of nine boys and one girl born to them. Unusually for the times, when it was common to lose at least one child during childhood, John and Elizabeth managed to raise them all to adulthood but only four children, all boys, outlived their mother. Their daughter, Cecilia Margaret, died of rheumatic fever aged 21 in 1909, and John himself died of an accident in July 1915, before war and illness began to take its toll on his family.

The Beathams were an old established Glassonby family. Hannah Elliot, born in Glassonby in 1802, had married an earlier Robert Beatham from Crosby Ravensworth in 1826. They settled in Little Salkeld but most of their many descendants lived in Glassonby, where they were for many years part of the agricultural labouring community, before Robert's father John became a paper maker at the Glassonby Beck mill. His mother, Elizabeth, was born in Sedbergh but came to Cumbria after her father died and her mother became a toll keeper at Cockermouth. Elizabeth later worked in domestic service at Little Salkeld Hall, where presumably she and John met.

The family were Methodist. When he joined up, his religion was given as Church of England – but then his brother Walter Henry was put down as Roman Catholic, when he joined up, apparently because the man in front was. Most of the Beatham children were baptised by the Methodist minister, and the Methodist Circuit acknowledged him as one of its own by putting him on the Circuit Roll of Honour in the local Methodist magazine in 1916 and by printing a notice of his death.

The family was poor; Robert's grandfather's family had needed charitable support from the parish for many years, as did his father to support his large family during Robert's childhood. Robert's siblings, however, were beginning to have very different lives and occupations. His eldest brother, Frederick William, was working as an electric car driver in Burnley in 1911, while John Wilfred was a policeman posted to various places in Cumberland and Lancashire. Joseph James later worked for the railways in Darlington, while Harold, the youngest became an engineer and travelled the world. Walter Henry married and settled in Skipton after the war. Only Stephen stayed in Glassonby to carry on the family name, working as a joiner and cowman, and baptising two children at the chapel.

And Robert? Robert attended Maughanby School from 1899 to 1908, when he reached school leaving age and left to go into farm service. By 1911, aged 16, he was employed, and living in, as a servant on the farm owned by Richard Brownrigg in Staffield. By 1914, when he and his older brother Walter Henry decided to emigrate to Australia, the older brothers had moved away. Only the younger four brothers were still living at home. The circuit preaching plans for Jan – Apr 1914 and Apr – Jul 1914 offer help for intending emigrants from the Methodist Brotherhood, in the form of recommendations and instructions. Did the Glassonby Methodists help them to emigrate? Robert and Walter, sailed for Melbourne on 18 June 1914, two days after Robert's 20th birthday and only ten days before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the descent into war; they arrived in Australia

on 29 July and war was declared by Great Britain on 4 August 1914. Had they seen what was coming?

If they had, they were not trying to escape military service by emigrating, as both brothers quickly joined the Australian Imperial Force at Geelong, Victoria, Robert on 8 January 1915 and Walter only a few days later. Robert was 5ft 9 ins tall, and weighed 10st 5 lbs, a healthy man with a sallow complexion, blue eyes and dark hair. Walter was taller and a bit heavier; at a period when the army was concerned about undersized recruits, and despite their poverty, John and Elizabeth had raised two fine young men. By May Robert was in Egypt, fighting in the Gallipoli campaign, but in July he was sent to Australia for medical reasons; he arrived back in Egypt in October. He had spent a large amount of time on a ship in the past fifteen months.

He then sailed late in 1915 for France, where he was wounded in August 1916 in the Somme campaign, but he was back in action the next month. His mother, now a widow, was told that Walter Henry had been killed in action at the Somme but later discovered that he had been captured and was a prisoner of war in Germany, which probably saved his life. In October 1917 Robert was wounded at Passchendaele and treated for a bomb wound to his wrist and it seems he was back in England at Reading Hospital. Shortly after he returned to active service he was wounded again and sent back to England for treatment. By February 1918 he was back on active duty, but had two further periods in hospital before taking part in the final action that led to the award of the Victoria Cross and his death two days later. The citation for the award read:

For most conspicuous bravery and self-sacrifice during the attack north of Rosieres, east of Amiens, on 9th August 1918, When the advance was held up by heavy machine-gun fire, Pte. Beatham dashed forward, and, assisted by one man, bombed and fought the crews of four enemy machine guns, killing ten of them and capturing ten others, thus facilitating the advance and saving many casualties. When the final objective was reached, although previously wounded, he again dashed forward and bombed a machine gun, being riddled with bullets and killed in doing so. The valour displayed by this gallant soldier inspired all ranks in a wonderful manner.

His commanding officer also wrote to his mother:

First our advance was held up by ten enemy machine guns, but this did not deter him. He worked up an old communication trench and knocked the machine guns out, killing and taking prisoner all the crews of the same. Later, the enemy were in the same trench as we were in, and we were bombing our way along the trench when the enemy jumped out of the trench and began shooting at us from the top. Beatham immediately jumped up and killed them, but as he was getting back into the trench he was sniped through the head. Death was instantaneous. We have recommended him very strongly from here, and if these decorations are fairly awarded he is certain to get the V.C. Any praise I could give would not be high enough for his magnificent tenacity and courage.

Frederick William Beatham was killed in France in November, and John Wilfred died in Constantinople in December of pneumonia. It was a terrible autumn for Elizabeth Beatham. Her sons had come through so much of the war relatively unscathed, but by the end of 1918, she had one son dead in Turkey, two dead in France, and a fourth a prisoner of war in Germany. In February 1919 she buried her nineteen-year-old son Francis, who had died at Renwick, shortly before she travelled to Buckingham Palace in March 1919 to receive the Victoria Cross awarded posthumously to her son. The Penrith Herald, while printing several items about his death, was silent about this visit, which must have been momentous to Elizabeth Beatham in more than one way. It was noted by the Penrith Observer, 19 March 1919.

Her sorrows were not over, for in March 1920, Isaac, who had re-joined the army after the armistice, died at Colchester and was buried with full military honours at Addingham, where he lies with his parents, his sister and his brother Francis. The bodies of those who died abroad in the war were not repatriated; John Wilfred lies in Turkey, Frederick William in Normandy and Robert was buried at Harbonnières, near Amiens.

Robert Matthew Beatham

Relatives of:

One of 10 children, of whom only 4 left issue.

This is a good (though not totally accurate) family tree on ancestry:

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/family-tree/tree/327196/family?cfpid=-487800685>

1 Frederick William (1886 – 1918) – Married Jane Lambert in Burnley in 1911. I believe they had three children born in Burnley, one died as a baby and two survived – Francis Horne Beatham (1913, died 2001 Ilkley) and James Wilfred Beatham (1914, died Wigton 1990). Both married. 1939 Francis was in Shipley and James in Ilkley.

2 Cecilia Margaret (1888-1909)

3 John Wilfred (1889 – 1918)

4 Walter Henry (1891 – 1970) died Hartlepool, married Ethel Preston 1921 Settle, Yorks, Daughter Enid Beatham, married name Booth. Only Enid is listed on the 1939 register, so I assume she was an only child. Enid died 2015 and had at least two other children. WHB was a POW.

5 Joseph James (1893 – 1959) married Elizabeth Egglestone 1923. Died Darlington. 3 children listed on ancestry, Alan 1923-2004, Harold 1926-2008 and 'Private'. His grave stone names 'Isobel' beloved daughter 1919-1946. Isobel Beatham was at Maughanby School in 1928, father James Beatham of Morland and left to move to Ferry Hill Durham, 1929. 1939 Register they are in Darlington, with Alan and two others redacted.

6 Robert Matthew (1894 – 1918)

7 Isaac Allan Allison (1896 – 1920)

8 Stephen (1897 – 1968) died in Penrith. Married Henrietta Thornton at Skipton 1920. 2 children baptised (Methodist) at Glassonby, Robert born 26 May 1921 and Harold Thornton born 3 Oct 1924. 1939 a joiner living at the Pack Horse Inn in Glassonby, with several children redacted but also Stephen born 10 Aug 1928.

9 Francis Richard (1900 – 1919)

10 Harold (1902 – 1969) died Staincliffe, West Yorks., buried Harrogate. 1939 living in Coulsden, Surrey. Married Josephine Bauwens. He was an engineer, 1936 he was 34 and she 42, no children. Not in WWI. I believe they did not have children

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