**Corporal**

# William Lynn

WR/268351, 33rd Light Rly. Operating Coy., Royal Engineers who died on 11 June 1919, aged 31

**Remembered with Honour**
Barrow Hill and Staveley Memorials
Staveley Cemetery (Plot XX. 37.C)

Peter James Lynn and Ruth Birney lived in Cummersdale, Cumbria, where they both worked in the cotton mills. They married in 1881 when Peter was 26 and Ruth was 23.

In 1891, the couple were living in the Parish of St James at 1, Richard Street, Caldewgate in the Carlisle Borough. Peter was still working in the mills as a cotton spinner whilst Ruth was at home taking care of their three children; 8 year old George Birney, 6 year old Sarah Elizabeth and 2 year old WILLIAM EDWARD.

William was just 6 years old when his mother, Ruth, died at the age of 35. His father remarried a year later at the age of 40 to Frances Glendenning, a 23 year old local girl. In 1901, the family were living at 8, Metcalfe Street, Caldewgate and had grown to include a daughter, William's half-sister Annie. Peter had left the cotton mill and was now working as an Insurance Agent; 18 year old George was a bricklayers apprentice and Sarah was a Tin Box Maker.

The couple had another son, Ernest James, in 1905 and by 1911, were living at 18, Collingwood Street. The three children from Peters' first marriage had all left home; George was in lodgings in Barnsley where he still worked as a bricklayer and Sarah was boarding a few doors away at 22, Collingwood Street with the Doyle family.

William and a colleague, Robert Little, were both 22 years old and employed as Firemen at the Midland Railway Loco Department in Barrow Hill. Both from Cumbria, they were in lodgings on the "Long Row" at 195, Barrow Hill with Alfred and Rosina Smith and their 16 year old dressmaker daughter, Lilian Blanche. Lilian was just 18 years old when she and 25 year old William married in the Autumn of 1913. Their daughter Rosina was born on 26th April 1914, shortly before war was declared.

William originally enlisted as a Private with the Sherwood Foresters (Notts and Derbys Regiment) (12764). His service number indicates that he volunteered early in the war and this is confirmed by the Midland Railway's publication, "For King and Country," which lists the 7000+ railway employees who had joined up prior to November 1914. William's Medal Index Card reveals that he arrived in France on the 1st July 1915 and the engraving on his 1915 Star confirms that he was still with the Sherwood Foresters when he disembarked.

*Researched and written by Ann Lucas as part of the Barrow Hill: A Community Remembers project*

*Britain, since the early 1900's, had an official policy that favoured the use of motor vehicles, over light railways, for the transportation of men and supplies from the main line railheads to the War Zone. In 1914 the Royal Engineers, on whom the responsibility devolved for railway transport in the War Zone, was stuck with this policy. It was not assisted in deploying it by the general paucity of suitably rugged and reliable motor vehicles and the trained manpower to drive and maintain them. Nor did the road networks of Belgium and France have any great potential to absorb really heavy military motor vehicular traffic. Accordingly, when the British Expeditionary Force left for the Western Front, it was not at all prepared for this kind of logistics.*

*The existing French railway network was able to largely fill the transportation gap until the static nature of trench warfare in the British Sector made the inadequacies only too clear, and the benefits of a light railway system self-evident. Consequently, as early as 1915 the British built wooden tramways, or cannibalised existing steel tramways they found in situ, to create ad hoc Front Line transportation systems.*

The Royal Engineers had long had a small cadre of specialised railway troops. In 1914, these had been grouped into two companies totalling about 400 men. When the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) left for France in 1914, men from these rail companies soon followed to work on the existing standard gauge French and Belgian Railway system. As the numbers of the Royal Engineers railway specialists were so few, compared with the escalating need for railway transportation, new recruits were sought from railway workers already in the British Army.

The first of the railway operating companies had been raised in April 1915 and deployed to France in June of that year where they managed traffic, provided crews for locomotives and repaired rolling stock to keep the railways in operation. With his previous experience as a railwayman, it is not surprising that William Lynn was transferred to join the inland Waterways and Railways section of the Royal Engineers (hence the WR prefix of his new service number **WR**268357).

The Light Railway Companies came into existence when it became clear that the maintenance of roads was becoming a severe problem, in terms of the manpower needed and enormous quantities of road stone clogging up the supply routes. In February 1916 the first new light railways were sanctioned. The first light railway worked by the British was a French one. It had a track gauge of 60cm (2 feet), and this was subsequently applied to all light railways constructed by the army. The British system developed tracks that were prefabricated in lengths that were themselves of light weight. They could be easily carried

and laid quickly, and with minimal preparation of the ground. For lengths of rail that were going to be more permanent, they were laid like full-size tracks, with sleepers and stone ballast. Special units were formed for the construction, maintenance and operation of the new system.

The formation of the Royal Engineers Light Railways Operating Companies in early 1917 was an innovation that was one of the factors that transformed the operational abilities of the army. Goods and men could now make the last leg of the journey to the front by light rail. Until that time, ammunition supply in particular had been subject to delays and required vast numbers of men and horses, and the light railways helped overcome both problems.

Light railways made an important contribution to the Allied war effort and were used not only for the supply of ammunition and stores but also for the transport of troops and the evacuation of the wounded. Companies were formed within the Royal Engineers to staff the lines, mostly comprised of British ex-railwaymen like William Lynn who had been promoted to the rank of Corporal whilst in France.

With the formation of the RE Light Railway Operating Companies, William was given a new service number (251985) and attached to the 33rd Light Railway Company as a Railway Fireman. The 33rd LROC are known to have been in the Ypres sector from at least May 1917 to April 1918.

William was admitted from France to the County of Middlesex war Hospital at Napsbury, St Albans where

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he died on the 11th June 1919, aged 31, from Mitral Valvular Disease. He is buried in a military grave at Staveley Cemetery (Plot XX. 37.C).


William Edward Lynn was posthumously awarded the 1915 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

***Sources include:***


1. *England Census 1881-1911*
2. *England & Wales, FreeBMD Birth/Marriage/Death Indexes, 1837-1915*
3. *British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920*
4. *Web: International, Find A Grave Index*
5. *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*
6. *http://www.midlandrailwaystudycentre.org.uk/King_and_Country.php*
7. *http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/73-weapons-equipment-uniforms/354-light-rail.html*
8. *http://www.1914-1918.net/TF_renumbering_re.htm*
9. *http://www.1914-1918.net/lightrail.htm*
10. *Medals: D and W Feltham*