STENNESS WAR DEAD DETAILS

Details, including birth and family, of the twenty World War dead that are listed on the Stenness War Memorial:

**Great War, 1914 – 1918**

60806 Private James Alexander Burnett


Born at Warsetter, Cross and Burness, Sanday on 19th March 1896, son of farm servant James Burnett and Margaret Burnett (née Kirkness). Family moved to Grievehouse, Stenness and James was employed as a ploughman at Barnhouse before he joined up. Jim’s parents woke up suddenly one night thinking he was shouting outside the door, then found out soon after Jim had been killed in France that day. James is also commemorated on the Sanday Memorial.

2389 Lance Corporal Robert Coghill

27th Battalion, AIF, killed in action near Passchendaele on 9th October 1917, aged 27. Commemorated on Panel 23 of the Menin Gate, Ieper, Belgium.

Born at Stoursdale, Stenness on 9th May 1890, son of Donald Coghill and Catherine Coghill (née Leask). Robert was working as a painter, when he joined the Australian Imperial Force in Adelaide, South Australia on 26th May 1916, age 26. He left Adelaide with 5th Reinforcements for 50th Infantry Battalion on HMAT A73 Commonwealth on 21st September. Robert transferred to another South Australian unit, 27th Battalion in 2nd Australian Division, on 28th February 1917. He was promoted Lance Corporal on 28th September. During the Battle of Passchendaele, Robert was in a Lewis Gun team in XIV Platoon of ‘D’ Company. On 9th October Robert went out with about 100 other stretcher bearers, to carry in wounded men from a failed attack near Zonnebeke. A German shell burst directly above his stretcher party, killing Robert and the other soldier at the back of the stretcher.

2380347 Private William Malcolm Finlay

78th (Manitoba) Battalion, CEF, died on 27th September 1918 near Cambrai, aged 25. Buried in Grave II.C.17, Bourlon Wood Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France.

Born at Bridge of Waithe, Stenness on 5th December 1892, son of Jane E. Finlay, a domestic servant. William sailed to Canada in 1911, aged 18, leaving Glasgow on board the steamship Hesperian on 9th June, bound for Montreal. William was still single and working as a farmer at Halboro, Manitoba, when he was drafted under the Military Service Act, 1917. He joined up at Winnipeg on 30th January 1918 and travelled to France to join 78th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force. William was killed during the heavy fighting near Cambrai to cross the Canal du Nord and capture Bourlon Wood. His mother, then Mrs R. O. Watson of Kirkwall, whose other son John had died near Arras in April 1917, unveiled the Stenness War Memorial in a downpour of heavy rain on the first Sunday of October 1923.

William Moir Irvine

*Details of William’s war service and death are not known.*

Born at Seattersquoy, Stenness on 31st January 1882, a twin son (with brother Robert) of farmer Francis Irvine and Jane Irvine (née Moir). Soon after marrying in Aberdeenshire in 1858 they came to Orkney, taking over (120 acres, 83 arable) Seattersquoy Farm, where they brought up a large family. Francis had retired and died there of heart disease before the war started, while his widow died at Seattersquoy in August 1915. William had left Orkney (and Scotland) before the 1901 census was taken and details of his military service and death are not known.

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13888 Private Harold Thomas Leask

1st Royal Scots, killed in action at Hooge on 4th May 1915, aged 23. Commemorated on Panel 11 of the Menin Gate, Ieper, Belgium.

Born at Coldomo, Ireland, Stenness on 15th October 1891, second son of Master Mariner William S. Leask and Barbara Leask (née Mowat). Harold was attending Veterinary College in Glasgow when war broke out. He joined the Royal Scots and trained at Weymouth, then crossed to France on 26th January 1915. After a few weeks he was sent to a base hospital suffering from tonsillitis, rheumatism and frost bitten feet. On his recovery Harold returned to the front and was killed at Hooge on 4th May during the Second Battle of Ypres. His older brother, William, joined 8th Seaforths and was taken prisoner wounded at Hill 70 in September 1915. He made five escapes from German P.O.W. Camps, the stories of which were told in The Orcadian after the war (and in a booklet published by the newspaper).

235 Private John Linklater

36th Battalion, AIF, killed in action near Messines on 10th June 1917, aged 24. Commemorated on Panel 25 of the Menin Gate, Ieper, Belgium.

Born at Germiston, Stenness on 20th September 1892, son of farmer John Linklater and Jane Linklater (née Wood). John enlisted in Sydney on 22nd March 1916 and joined the 3rd Australian Division, the last AIF division to reach France. John left Sydney in 36th Battalion on HMAT A72 Beltana on 13th May 1916. John crossed to France in January 1917, spent a week in hospital in February with defective vision problems. John had been less than six months at the front, when he was killed in the Battle of Messines.

Lieutenant Thomas Frederick Muir


Born at Mill of Ireland, Stenness on 8th November 1877, second son of the miller, Thomas Muir and Jessie Muir (née Swanson). Thomas made the sea his career, taking his tickets on a square rigger. He served for 17 years as a Chief Officer with the Clan Line. On 28th April 1910 Thomas married Jane Jessie Clouston on her parents’ farm in Stenness, Cumniness, where the couple lived when Thomas was home from sea. Soon after war broke out, Thomas’s ship was torpedoed and sunk, but all hands were rescued after spending two days in open boats. Thomas held a Royal Naval Reserve commission, so was called up to serve in the Royal Navy. He was in command of the 275 ton commissioned trawler, Longset, working in the Bristol Channel out of Swansea, when it was sunk by a mine off Nell’s Point, Barry Island on 6th February 1917. Thomas’s body was recovered and returned to Orkney for burial in Stenness Churchyard.

63416 Private Alexander Lyall Pottinger

2nd Otago Regiment, NZEF, killed in action on 30th May 1918, aged 25. Buried in Grave I.AA.19 in Sucrerie Military Cemetery, Colincamps, Somme, France.

Born at Gyrehouse, Stenness on 20th February 1893, second son of farmer Thomas Pottinger and Ann Pottinger (née Lyall). The family had moved to the farm of Lower Bigswell, Stenness before the 1901 census was taken. Alexander emigrated to New Zealand with his younger brother James in 1913, sailing together from London on board the steamship Mamari on 13th November, bound for Wellington. Alexander Pottinger served in 2nd Otago Regiment, was killed in action in France on 30th May 1918, aged 25.
9/1387 Trooper James Pottinger

Otago Mounted Rifles, NZEF, died on 3rd March 1920, aged 25. Buried in Lot 8, Anderson’s Bay Cemetery, Dunedin, Otago Province, New Zealand.

Born at Gyrehouse, Stenness on 9th February 1896, third son of farmer Thomas Pottinger and Ann Pottinger (née Lyall). James worked as a cattleman in the farm of Upper Hobbister after he left school, emigrated to New Zealand with older brother Alex in 1913. James served in the Otago Mounted Rifles in Egypt during 1915-16. After he contracted typhoid, was struck off the strength of the NZEF in March 1916 and invalided back to New Zealand. James died in Seacliff Hospital, Dunedin on 3rd March 1920.

S/13333 Lance Corporal James William Sinclair

1st Seaforth Highlanders, died of wounds on 26th February 1917, aged 23. Commemorated on the Shaikh Saad Old Cemetery Memorial, Amara War Cemetery, Iraq.

Born at Garth, Stromness on 4th November 1893, second son of farmer John Sinclair and Mary Sinclair (née Hourie). The family soon after took over the farm of Redbraes in Stenness, where James and his brothers went to school. James joined the Seaforth Highlanders in May 1916 and travelled out to Mesopotamia to join the 1st Battalion. James died of wounds in Mesopotamia on 26th February 1917, while being treated in one of the seven general hospitals stationed around the town of Amara on the left bank of the River Tigris. James was buried in Amara War Cemetery, where he is now commemorated on a screen wall (as all the cemetery headstones were removed in 1933, because salts in the soil were causing them to deteriorate). James’s younger brother, John, survived multiple gunshot wounds sustained in May 1918, while he was serving in 1st Scots Guards on the Western Front.

808483 Private James Sinclair

59th (Ontario) Battalion, CEF, died of wounds on 23rd August 1917 near Bethune, aged 40. Buried in Grave V.E.5, Lapugnoy Military Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France.

Born in Holm on 2nd January 1878, first son of ploughman David Sinclair and Ann Sinclair (née Matheson). After a couple of years they took over the farm of Breck in Stenness, where three more sons and five daughters were born. James travelled to Canada with younger brothers David and Robert in 1904, leaving Liverpool on 14th April on the steamship Tunisian of the Allan Line bound for Halifax. The brothers settled first in Toronto, but moved to New Ontario where James as a contractor built much of the town of Matheson, also worked in New Liskeard and Cochrane. James had spent about 7 years in a blacksmith business with his brothers in Didsbury, Alberta (also served a year in 15th Alberta Light Horse) when he enlisted into the 137th Overseas Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Calgary on 8th February 1916. James arrived in Liverpool on 30th August. In January 1917 he joined 21st Reserve Battalion at Seaford, then 50th Battalion in France on 22nd April. James died of wounds in 18th CCS on 23rd August 1917. The Canadian Corps was then involved in heavy fighting in front of Lens, including the capture of Hill 70 at Loos. James was one of 55 Canadians who died in August and are buried in Lapugnoy Cemetery. David and Robert Sinclair returned from Canada after the Great War and set up the successful business of Sinclairs Supply Stores in Stromness.

S/43302 Private William Sinclair

1/4th Seaforth Highlanders, killed in action on 9th April 1918, aged 30. Commemorated on Panel 11 of the Loos Memorial, Dud Corner Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France.

Born at Breck, Stenness on 8th December 1887, fourth son of farmer David Sinclair and Ann Sinclair (née Matheson). William did not follow his older brothers to Canada, by 1911 he was living in a hut on the side of Wideford Hill and working as a carter. William enlisted into the Gordon Highlanders in 1916, with service number S/18782, in Ayr. He transferred to the Seaforth Highlanders, with new service number S/43302, when arrived in France. William joined 1/4th Battalion, Seaforths in 51st (Highland) Division. He was killed on the first day of desperate fighting to stop the German Lys Offensive on the French-Belgian border in April 1918.
S/17924 Private John Firth Spence

10th Black Watch, killed in action on 9th May 1917, aged 33. Commemorated on the Doiran Memorial, Kilkis, Central Macedonia, Greece.

Born at Burnside, Upperbrough, Harray on 6th April 1884, second son of shoemaker and general merchant Mathew Spence and Robina Spence (née Firth). John joined the family business when he left school, by delivering letters. On 3rd November 1910 John married Maggie Jolly, whose father had recently died. John initially lived in Madras House with the Jolly family, but he and Maggie moved into Lochend, Stenness and John continued to work as a postman. John and Maggie had three children: sons Jack and Stanley, daughter Irene. As a married man with children, John’s call up was deferred into late 1916, but he then joined the Black Watch, with service number S/17924. John joined the regiment’s 10th Service Battalion when travelled out to Salonika, Greece. Although it was a relatively quiet theatre, with more deaths from malaria than in action, John was killed when the British made a frontal night assault of Bulgarian defences on Doiran on 8th-9th May 1917. John was reported “missing” days after the failed attack, but not reported “believed dead” until September 1918. John is also commemorated on the Harray War Memorial.

S/13264 Private James William Smith Tait


Born on 25th April 1889, at Stoney Hill, Harray, elder son of shoemaker James Tait and Margaret Tait (née Bews). The family moved a couple of miles to the Bridge of Waithe, Stenness before 1901. James trained as a tinsmith and joiner. He was employed for three years by Mr. A. S. Johnston, merchant, Orphir, then worked in Kirkwall as a cycle repairer in the Junction Road business of his uncle, Duncan Gardner. James was one of at least fourteen Orcadians who died as a result of the failed attempt by 7th Seaforths to capture a strongpoint, the Butte de Warlencourt, on 12th October 1916, while many more were seriously wounded in the most costly battalion action for Orkney in the war. James was wounded in the attack, died of his wounds on the 15th in 56th (1/1st South Midland) Casualty Clearing Station at Dernancourt, three kilometres south of Albert.

S/16984 Private John Thomson


Born at Burnside, Stenness on 21st January 1898, son of John Thomson of Crockness, Longhope and Jane Finlay, and brother to William. The brothers grew up on the farm of their widowed great aunt, Jane Smith, and worked at Burnside after they left school. John was called up when reached aged 18 and trained in the 3rd Seaforth Highlanders at Cromarty. He returned home for embarkation leave before joining 1/5th Seaforths in 51st (Highland) Division in France. 1/5th Seaforths was in the second wave of the opening day advance of the Battle of Arras on 9th April 1917. John was wounded in the heavy fighting and died on the next day, six weeks to the day since he had left home to cross to France.

S/12853 Private Caleb Walter


Born at Dowscarth, Stenness on 11th June 1893, fourth son of farmer Caleb Walter and Christina Walter (née Lyall). Caleb joined up in early 1916 under the Derby Scheme, crossed to France in the late summer to join 2nd Seaforth Highlanders in 4th Division and the Battle of the Ancre. After difficult service in the line near Combles, Caleb was amongst the 129 personnel 2nd Seaforths sent to hospital in January 1917, from billets in reserve near Albert. He was treated for typhoid infection in 25th Stationary Hospital, Rouen, but died from the fever on 28th January and was buried in St. Sever Cemetery Extension in the town.
World War 2, 1939 – 1945

Sailor William R. Coghill


Born at Savedale, Stenness on 31st December 1914, the eldest son (known as Will) of Donald Coghill and Tomina Coghill (née Leask). Will was serving on the 1139 ton steamship Minorca of the Currie Line taking a cargo of cement and three passengers from London to Grangemouth, when it was torpedoed and sunk by Schnellboot S-28 (Oblt. Klug) 10 miles NE of Cromer. Will died of exposure in the lifeboat, one of the 17 crew (including the Captain) and two passengers lost, as there were only three survivors. Will’s body was returned home and buried in Stenness Churchyard.

1570690 Sergeant John Robert Cursiter

35 Squadron RAF, died when Lancaster serial ND 762 was shot down near Eindhoven on 23rd May 1944, aged 20. Buried in Grave 70, Plot KK, Eindhoven (Woensel) General Cemetery, Noord-Brabant, Holland.

Born in Victoria Street, Stromness on 23rd July 1924, the only son of motor hirer John R. Cursiter and Mary Cursiter (née Garriock). Jack had a sister, Mabel, but both were orphaned by the early deaths of their parents. Jack was brought up by his paternal grandparents, Thomas and Margaret Cursiter at Stenness Post Office, Mabel by her maternal Garriock grandparents in Stromness. Jack attended Stenness School and Stromness Academy. When he left school, Jack started work at Stromness Post Office, then busy with wartime mail. When he was called up Jack volunteered for aircrew, where he was able to apply the mechanical aptitude that he had learned from his father and grandfather to train as a flight engineer. While flying Halifax bombers out of RAF Marston Moor, Jack became engaged to Joan Archer from York. Jack was posted into the elite No 8 (Pathfinder Force) Group, joining 35 Squadron stationed at RAF Graveley, 4½ miles south of Huntingdon. His Lancaster aircraft was shot down by a German night fighter while on a mission to bomb Dortmund on the night of 22nd/23rd May 1944. Three of the crew survived the aircraft crash to be taken prisoner, but Jack was one of the five who did not and were buried in Eindhoven Cemetery. Mabel, after WAAF wartime service at RAF Netherbutton, visited his grave there several times and befriended a young local Dutchman, Wim Vlemmix, who was born on the night that Jack lost his life.

2110347 Sapper Samuel MacKenzie

Royal Engineers, attached 76 General Hospital, RAMC. Died at the hospital in Naples on 7th July 1945, aged 25. Buried in Grave IV.J.16, Naples War Cemetery, Naples, Campania, Italy.

Born at Scar, Hillside, Stenness on 21st March 1920, son of Alexander MacKenzie and Mary Ann MacKenzie (née MacDonald). The family moved to Negheads before Sam was called up and joined the Royal Engineers. He was stationed in Scapa Flow for a time, before Sam was posted to the Mediterranean theatre and took part in the Italian campaign. Sadly the war, in Europe at least, was over when Sam met a tragic death on 7th July 1945 while he was attached to a hospital in Naples. His great niece, Eilidh MacDonald, visited Sam’s grave in Naples War Cemetery in November 2001.
James William Isbister

First civilian air raid casualty of the British Empire of the war. Died when German bombs landed around his house at the Bridge of Waithe, Stenness on 16th March 1940, aged 27. Buried in Kirwall St Olaf's Cemetery.

Born at Upper Onston, Stenness on 6th December 1912, son of John Isbister and Jean Isbister (née Sutherland). After schooling, Jim worked as a farm servant at Rossmyre, where set up home with Lilian Tait after they married in Kirkwall during 1937. They moved to a cottage at the Bridge of Waithe after the war started and Jim got a job as an Orkney County Council roadman. Their son Neil was born in December 1939. When German bombs began to fall at the Bridge of Waithe on 16th March 1940, Jim and Lily pulled two of their neighbours, Mrs Burnett and Miss Muir, inside their house for shelter. Jim rushed to the door when a bomb hit the nearby house of Mrs MacLeod (she survived, wounded) and stepped out to catch the full force of a bomb that killed him. Jim became the first fatal civilian air raid casualty in Great Britain during World War 2, but over 60,000 more civilian deaths followed. Also wounded in the air raid were Mrs Muir of Cumminess, Stenness and James Jamieson of Bankburn, Stenness, on the land of Quoyynamoan while on his way home.