

William Nathan Prior



Photo courtesy of Robin and Zoe Barnes

William Nathan Prior was the only son and youngest child of Nathan and Annie Prior.

Nathan Prior was born on 27th June 1854 in Roxwell, a farming village just outside Chelmsford, Essex. Nathan was the youngest child of David Prior, an agricultural labourer/husbandman, also born in Roxwell, Essex in 1811 and Sarah Prior née Bright born in Writtle, Essex in 1815.

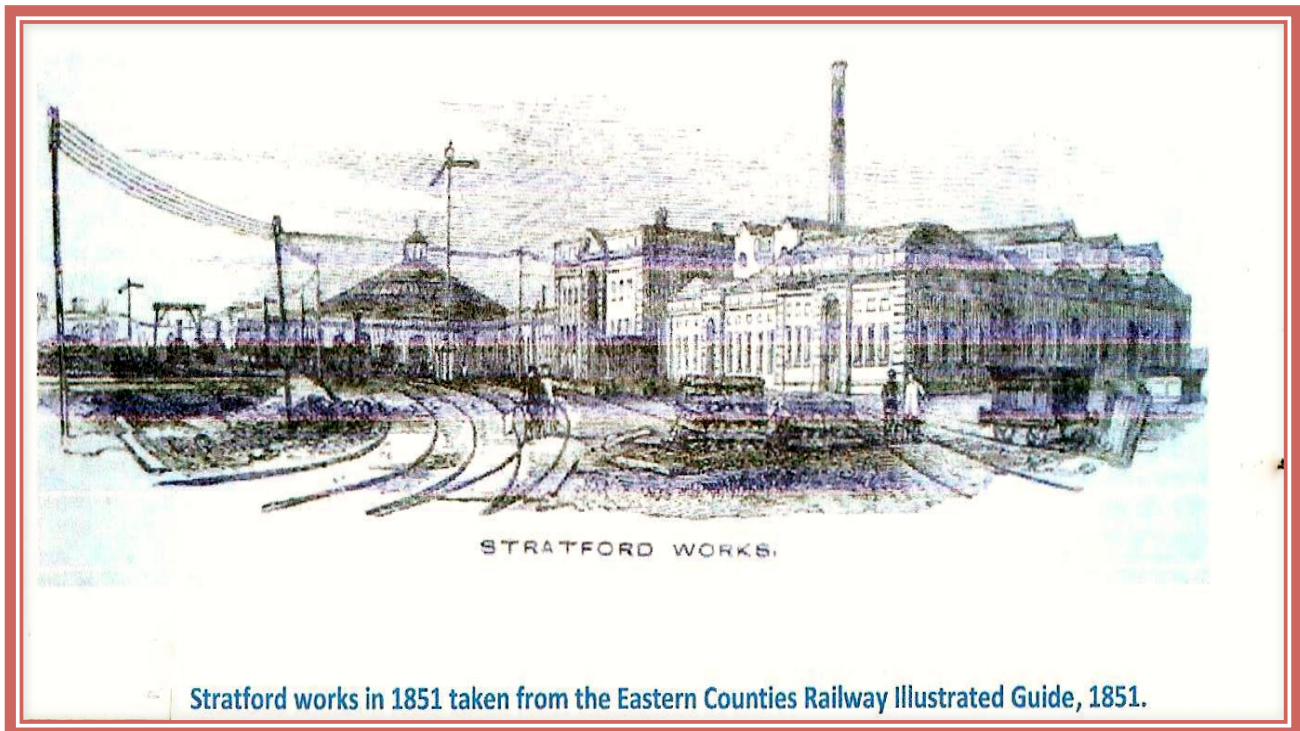
David and Sarah married in 1835. They had five children who survived to adulthood, Emma born in 1836, John born in 1838, Sarah in 1844, George in 1852 and finally Nathan in 1854. Tragedy struck the Prior family when Sarah, aged 43, died of peritonitis on 4th March 1857 and, just two years later, on 28th February 1859, David died of consumption (presumed on death certificate) aged 48.

After the death of their father, young Sarah aged 15 went into service and worked as a general servant for farmer Joseph Williams and his family in Runwell, Essex. Nathan aged 4 and his older brother George aged 7 went to live with their elder sister Emma (1836-1873) and her husband Charles Widocks, an agricultural labourer born in 1835 (also spelled Widerks).

In 1861, Nathan was aged 6 and George was aged 9. The brothers began their working lives as agricultural labourers in Essex. After their sister Emma died, aged just 37, in 1873, the brothers moved to Stratford, Essex to find work.

In 1881, Nathan Prior aged 27 was lodging with the Clark Family at 6, Bridleway, Stratford and was employed as a labourer in an ironworks. The area of Stratford in which Nathan resided suggests that he may have been working in the engineering workshops of the Great Eastern

Railway's large railway works and depot in Stratford. The G.E.R. had built many homes for their workers in Stratford.



Nathan probably met his future wife Anne in Stratford, Essex where she lived with her family.

Anne Terry Rolfe was born in Kings Lynn, Norfolk in 1858. She was the daughter of Walter Rolfe (1826- 1909), a slate layer and later, a railway inspector who was born in Mildenhall, Suffolk. Walter was the son of Thomas Eldred Rolfe (1802-1872), a saddler, born in Brandon, Suffolk and Jane Rolfe née Veall.

Walter's wife was, Ann Terry Rolfe, née Bird (1825- 1903) who was born in March, Cambridgeshire. Walter and Ann were married on 16th October 1850 and they had 10 children including Anne. Walter and Ann Rolfe lived at 55 Manbey Grove, Stratford, near Maryland Station, in the latter years of their lives.

Anne Terry Rolfe and Nathan Prior were married in West Ham in 1883. All their children were born in Stratford Essex. They were Gertrude

Annie born in 1884; Edith Ellen born 1885; Rose Annie (1887-1971) and William Nathan born in 1891. In 1891, the family were living at 99, Manbey Road, Stratford, Essex which was very near Anne's parents who lived at no 55, Manbey Grove.

In 1901, the Prior family were living at 36 Mornington Road, Wanstead, except for Edith aged 15, who was now in service as a housemaid for the Locks Family in Leyton. The eldest daughter Gertrude, aged 17, was employed as a waitress in a restaurant.

Shortly after moving to Wanstead, Nathan Prior joined the Wanstead Men's Meeting. This was a Christian Brotherhood, an organization of the Wanstead Congregational Church, established by the Revd John Jermyn in October 1903. By 1908, Nathan was an active member of the W.M.M and a member of the committee. Nathan contributed to the Brotherhood's considerable success in the area.

In 1911, Nathan aged 56 was employed as a Signal Fitter in the Railway's Engineers Department. Gertrude aged 26 was now employed as a nursemaid. Edith aged 25 was living at home again and was employed as a domestic cook. Rose aged 24 was unemployed.

William, known to the Prior family as Willie, aged 19, was employed as a commercial clerk with a metal merchant. In 1910, William had met and fallen in love with a young lady called Clara Lilian Clarke.

Clara and her family lived at 7 Market Terrace, Market Place, Nightingale Lane in Wanstead where they ran a sweetshop. By the outbreak of war Clara and William were engaged to be married and were saving for a home.

Below: Nathan Prior in c1908. (Wanstead Congregational Church Archives)



Willie enlisted in Shaftesbury Street, North London with the 2nd/ 4th Battalion London Regiment (Royal Fusiliers). The Battalion was formed in September 1914. He landed in Egypt with his regiment on route for Gallipoli, on August 24th 1915.

The Gallipoli campaign was to become one of the most savagely contested of the First World War. Over 400,000 Allied troops were killed and wounded and the Campaign ended in defeat and controversy.

Corporal William Nathan Prior and his Battalion landed at “W” Beach on the Gallipoli peninsula at around midnight on October 15th 1915. They were engaged in various actions against the Turkish Army, including the landing at Anzac Cove, the landing at Cape Helles, the 2nd Battle of Krithia and the 3rd Battle of Krithia.

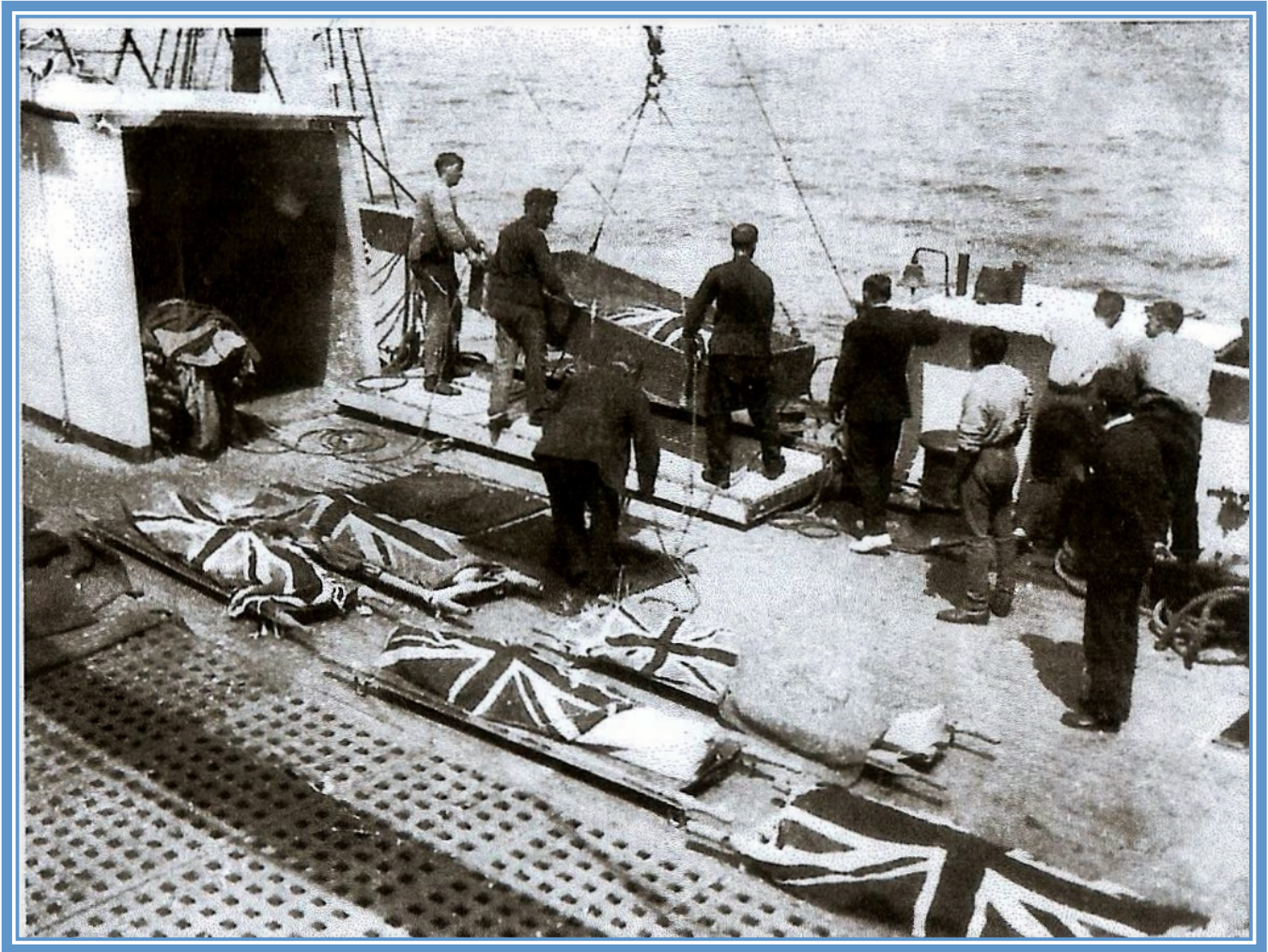
Below, troops landing at ‘W’ Beach



The ill-fated land forces attempt to occupy the Gallipoli peninsula and to control the Dardanelles Strait led to the British Government's decision on the 7th December 1915 to evacuate the peninsula. The last troops left on 9th January 1916.

On December 23rd 1915, while “A” and “B” Companies were out of the line, a dug-out at the rest camp was hit by a shell. One man was killed and six were wounded; William was probably one of these unfortunates. The medical arrangements in Gallipoli for the wounded were totally inadequate; the casualties often outstripped available resources and the injured men suffered unduly. The wounded had to be evacuated to hospital ships offshore, out of range of Turkish gunfire.

Below, an off-shore Hospital Ship



William died of his wounds on the hospital ship 'Gloucester Castle' on 4th January 1916 during the successful evacuation of Gallipoli. He was buried at sea, so he is commemorated on the Helles Memorial, Canakkale, Turkey (Panel 196) on the Gallipoli Peninsula. William was 24 years old when he died.

William was awarded the War and Victory medals with the 14/15 Star. He is also commemorated on the Great War Memorial inside Wanstead United Reformed Church and also on the War Memorial in Wanstead High Street.

Name.		Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
PRIOR		4/Land R	Pte A/Kpl	3174
Medal.		Roll.	Page.	Remarks.
VICTORY	W.N. William	TP4/101 B.	29	D. of W 4-1-16
BRITISH				
15 STAR		JP/16 B	34	
Theatre of War first served in		3/ Egypt		
Date of entry therein		24-8-15		

Medal Record Card for Private William Nathan Prior

William had written a will and after probate was granted, he left the sum of £382 11s 4d to his father Nathan Prior. He also left a small amount of money to his fiancée Clara Clarke.

Nathan Prior died shortly after the War ended, on 29th March 1920, aged 65, just over 4 years after the loss of his only son. In his will, Nathan left his widow Annie the sum of £490- 2s-8d.

Annie Prior died aged 77 in West Ham Essex in June 1929.

With grateful thanks to Jackie Clark, a relative of the Prior family, for her help and support.

William Nathan Prior's fiancée Clara and her family story.



Clara Lilian Clarke wearing Will's locket. Photograph courtesy of Robin Barnes

In 1996, Zoe Barnes wrote an article for the East Surrey Family History Society's publication, 'Families at War.' Zoe is married to Robin Barnes, the great nephew of Clara Lillian Higgin, née Clarke. Clara was born on 14th February 1890, in Hoxton, London. She was the daughter of Alfred Mission Clarke and Sophia Clarke née Kenner. Clara had an older sister, Matilda Petrie Clarke, always known as Trixie, born in 1880 and a brother Alfred Henry Clarke, born in 1900.

In 1911, when Clara was 21 years old, the family were living at 7, Market Terrace, Market Place, Nightingale Lane, near Wanstead Congregational Church. Clara's father had died in 1903 at the age of 46.

In 1911, Clara and her mother were in business, running a small sweetshop and tobacconist. Clara had met a young man called William Nathan Prior in 1910 and they soon became very fond of each other and were expected to marry.



*No 7, Market Terrace, Market Place in Nightingale Lane.
In 2016 this is now Anne's Newsagents, 86 Nightingale Lane, Wanstead.
Photo courtesy of Robin Barnes.*

“He just smiled and passed away”

We re-produce the article below with the kind permission of Zoe Barnes.

By Zoe Barnes

In 1914 Arthur and Matilda (Trixie) Barnes of Catford, Kent found their lives not greatly changed by the outbreak of the First World War. Arthur was forty and not fit enough to fight so he stayed home in the pharmacy he ran in partnership with Mr Charles Sayer. He would have liked to have joined up the same as many of his friends, but instead he patriotically bought maps, magazines and books to follow the progress of the Allies.

As the months wore on, the reality of the terrible battles being fought became apparent from the stories his customers told of the hardships their sons were enduring. Arthur was glad that his son Colin was barely two years old.

On the 23rd October 1914, Matilda's younger sister, Clara came with her fiancé, William Prior to have tea with the family. They had known each other for some four years and were expected to marry when they had enough money for a house. They lived within a mile of each other at Wanstead: Clara with her widowed mother and younger brother Alfred whilst Will lived with his parents.

Will had joined up soon after the outbreak of hostilities and he had come to say goodbye before he left for training with his regiment. Will was 22 years old and I think an only son. His parents, Nathan and Annie and his three sisters must have worried for him. After Will left he wrote regularly to Clara (whom he nicknamed 'Darkie' for her beautiful dark eyes) and she treasured his letters all her life. Honouring her dying wishes, they were destroyed, unread, after her death in 1984. Will also wrote to Arthur and Trix and they in turn sent letters, parcels and reading matter back to him at Christmas.

1914 found Will training at Maidstone with the 2/4th Battalion, London Regiment Royal Fusiliers. He was very busy with little time to spare, but he managed to write to thank Arthur for the parcels and medical advice. Sometime in the New Year the regiment was shipped out to Malta to finish training. Will didn't know it but he was heading for one of the war's biggest catastrophes - Gallipoli.

Will's letters home were all written with the censor in mind so they were mostly light-hearted and contained very little military

information. The pleasure that parcels from home could bring to men living in tents, on army rations, can be imagined. While coping with these difficulties, Will managed to shop for lace and other mementoes to send home. He wrote very practically, 'I purchased the doyleys made with linen instead of silk as I thought the former would wash better.' He also guarantees that the lace is handmade, 'though even in Malta an awful lot of shops endeavour to push lace made in Nottingham on you whilst swearing it is Maltese.'

Though Will hoped daily that the regiment would move on, June 1915 still found him in Malta but at least he had his first taste of action. In a long and detailed letter to Arthur, he tells of a raid on the home of a nearby peasant who was suspected of signalling to enemy submarines. It turned out to be a joke played on the officer in Will's patrol, but unfortunately this was not discovered until they had raided the poor man's house and managed to frighten both themselves and the occupants badly.

Writing letters passed the time, but worrying about family and friends must have made the inaction on Malta seem worse. Arthur wrote that his son Colin had become ill and was taken to Brighton to recover. Parcels continued to be exchanged, with Will endeavouring to find pieces of Goss china to send to both Trixie and his fiancée Clara, who were both keen collectors.

The Dardanelles campaign was going badly. Groups of men fought to gain a toehold on the barren cliffs as the Turks fired from the heights. Will was stuck on Malta. In August he volunteered to go to France to strengthen the regiment where it was in action, but was unsuccessful. The soldiers on Malta were engaged in building new camps. This was not to Will's liking at all. He managed to find a drunken army

storekeeper and persuaded him that he needed an assistant. 'I told him I had considerable experience in that line when in civilian life'- more lies. Every morning Will checked out tools to the men and in the evening he checked them back and for this he received extra pay.

Eventually, in the middle of August 1915, Will was moved to Alexandria. He was now unsure as to where he would eventually end up but for the moment, Egypt made a nice change from Malta. On 14th September 1915, Will and some of his pals pooled their money and went to see the sights.

Arthur received a long letter describing the journey by train from Alexandria to Cairo, the sights of Cairo and the train ride to the pyramids. They had seen the inside of the Great Pyramid, ridden donkeys to see the Sphinx, and even managed to miss their return train. They arrived back in camp early next morning just in time for roll call. It had been a jolly trip and Will had enjoyed himself.

He now heard that they were to move once more and with his next letter to Arthur he enclosed an envelope for Clara: 'should.....I cease to be anymore please give Darkie the enclosed note. Don't think I am losing heart old chap, far from it, but everything is possible I sincerely hope that you will never have the occasion to hand this letter over'.

Before he left Alexandria, Will found he had something new to worry about. Family and friends were under threat from Zeppelins and possibly from invasion. However, he still found time to track down some Goss china for Clara and Trixie.

In the middle of October 1915, one year since he'd answered his country's call, Lance Corporal William Prior finally arrived in Gallipoli

and into the thick of the muddle that marked much of this campaign. He wrote '... if some enterprising person would hire the peninsula and let it out as a maze there is a fortune to be made'.

Will puts a cheerful face on conditions: there was little water, not much in the way of warm food or clothing, and even when not at the front, the troops could be caught under fire. Amazingly the post was still getting through and from a dugout somewhere in Gallipoli, in November 1915, Will sent thanks for another of Arthur and Trixie's parcels. Any illusions he had harboured must have left Will many months before and he hoped in the future, 'that wars will be no more.' His letters now are less cheerful and this must have worried the family at home although Will does not seem to have suffered from the ill-health that plagued many of the men living in the cold, wet trenches.

November 22nd 1915 found Will 'unshaven, covered in mud and terribly dirty, that you may fail to recognise me.' He was in a trench near the front fighting off attacking Turks and sitting through thunder storms. Ominously, he wrote, 'although we have only been here so short a time as six weeks we have only about half the men we landed with I must close now as a nasty accident has just occurred which has upset me a bit. One of my pals has just been blown to pieces and two more seriously injured and the sight of this has turned me a bit.' These incidents must have become all too familiar to the soldiers at Gallipoli although by December, Will wrote in a more optimistic vein that the weather had improved and his health was still good.

Christmas 1915 had none of the optimism of 1914, the war seemed unending and there was no light at the end of the tunnel. At Gallipoli the decision had been taken to evacuate and as Will wrote his Christmas cards, the Anzacs and the B.E.F. were abandoning the

wretched patch of rock they had hung on to for eight months. Why Will dated his cards the 28th December 1915 we will never know because a week later he was dead. Two days later the Allies left Gallipoli for good.

Will had probably been injured by a shell and then suffered an infection. In a time before antibiotics any such infection was serious and often fatal. He was nursed on board a hospital ship and died there. Like many he was buried at sea.

William Prior died 80 years ago and lies buried in the waters of the Dardanelles but for us he lives on in his photographs and the twenty or so letters that he sent home and which survive. Thoughtful, kind and caring with a sense of humour and great optimism are the qualities that shine through his writing. These were also the characteristics that other people noticed in him. Chaplain G. Raymond Locky wrote to Clara, addressing her as Mrs Prior, and telling of Will's last hours, taking communion and sharing an apple with a fellow patient.

In February 1916 Clara received a letter from one of the nurses, A.G. Nash who had been with Will before he died. From her letter we find that Will had had his left arm amputated so he probably died of gangrene. 'He smiled so sweetly when I went to his bed and asked me to give him the little gold ring and put it on his finger and he just smiled and passed away.' Even when he was wounded Will had said, 'attend to the others first they are worse than I am.' This nurse who must have seen all sorts of horrors wrote about Will as if having 'a tremendous feeling of strength and goodness his unselfishness was beautiful, I shall never forget him.'

In the one letter to Clara that survives, Will was anxious that in the event of his death, 'his own dear Darkie' would be happy. 'Now Darkie, I do thank you from the bottom of my heart for all the pleasure you have given me and hope that sometimes in future years when my memory crosses your mind you will always think of me as a true friend and one that should he have lived would have endeavoured to make you as happy as possible.'

Will left Clara some money hoping she would buy a cabinet to display her cherished collection of Goss china, which she did. He also thanked his good friends, Trixie and Arthur, 'for their great kindness and thoughtfulness they have shown me I am very proud indeed to have had the privilege of including them in my small category of real true friends.'

Arthur and Trixie looked after and supported Clara throughout this difficult time as Will had asked them. For just over a year they had followed Will through his brief army career hoping against hope that he would come home and join their family. They were to suffer more anxiety twenty-five years later when their only son joined the RAF in World War II – but that's another story.

[Addendum: In January 2016, Robin Barnes, Arthur and Trixie's grandson added the following to William Prior's story.](#)

We have a number of letters from Will to Clara's sister and brother-in-law, my grandparents, some to Clara herself, and two from those who cared for him in his last hours. We also have pictures of Will and a gold locket that he gave to Clara, with his picture inside

An extract from the Chaplain's letter dated 4th January 1916 to Clara includes the following "Yesterday I asked him if I should write to you

but he determined to do that for himself as soon as he could- I think that what he would have liked to say would be just for your eyes and ears alone. He told me that you were a member of the Church of England and that he had made up his mind to be confirmed: so I told him a little about Communion and Absolution and this morning at 5.30am held a Holy Communion service in the ward and administered to him. He had had a very bad night but just while the service was going on was easier Later it was obvious that he could not last out the morning and I gave him special absolution and Blessing that you will find in the Service for the Visitation of the Sick and he seemed very grateful. At 7.20am I left him with the Sister looking after him, thinking to see him after breakfast, but he collapsed and passed away just after 7.30am.”

At the time of Will’s death Clara was living with her mother at 86, Nightingale Lane (which was 7, Market Terrace, Market Place) where they kept a sweet shop. Strange to relate, it is still a sweetshop, now called Anne’s Newsagent.

Robin and Zoe do not believe that Clara was C of E as she was baptised into the Church of England in old age. They also know that her grandfather was a non-denominational missionary with the London City Mission.

Robin writes, “When news of Will’s death reached Clara she was in the middle of some embroidery and never finished it, leaving the needle stuck in the cloth.

Will had written two “just in case I don’t make it” letters which we still have and they are very sad. They remind us of a marriage and a life planned but unfulfilled.

Will sent Clara a sewing work basket from Malta (where his troopship stopped off on his way to Egypt for military training) and we donated that, many years ago, to the Museum of London. The gold locket now belongs to our daughter, Clara's great, great niece, who remembers Will when she wears it.

After that I think that she rather built Will and the married life that she would have had with him into an ideal. Great Aunt Clara did, later, marry another Wanstead man on the 3rd July 1924 when she was 34 years old. His name was Charles Higgin (1869-1942) who ran the Wanstead Laundry in Nightingale Lane. Clara and Charlie lived at 'Glendale' 4, Stanstead Road which is just off Nightingale Lane, near Nightingale Green.

WASHING BOOK.

Name.....

Address.....

No..... Mark.....

THE . . .

WANSTEAD

STEAM LAUNDRY,

—o—o—o—

NIGHTINGALE LANE,
WANSTEAD, ESSEX.

—o—o—o—

High Class Family Work

Excellent Open Air Drying Grounds.

After Charlie's death in 1942 Clara, aged 52, retired to Chelmsford to be nearer her brother. Sadly Clara never had children of her own but she was looked after in old age by my father, her nephew, and she lived to the ripe old age of 93, dying in 1984.

With grateful thanks to Robin and Zoe Barnes for sharing Clara and Will's story.

Every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders of the material published in the profiles of these young men. We will be glad to make good any errors or omissions brought to our attention.

You may download this resource at no cost for personal use as long as you are not publishing for sale. All we ask is that you acknowledge the source of this material.

Margaretha Pollitt Brown for Wanstead United Reformed Church.