

**ALPHONSE MEULBROUCK & THE 10TH BATTALION
GLOUCESTERSHIRE REGIMENT BATTLEFIELD CROSS**



Among the exhibits on view at the CLHS History Afternoon in St Matthews Church on 19 July 2014 was an item minded by Steven Blake (former Deputy Director and Keeper of Social History of Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museums): a single page, about A3 in size, dating from World War 1, with the following citation '**N^o2250 Sergeant Alphonse Augustus Meulbrouck, Gloucestershire Regiment Served with honour and was disabled in the Great War. Honourably discharged on 17th December 1917 George R.I.**' The names *Alphonse Augustus* suggested a Catholic connection, and having written an account of the men named on St Gregory's Catholic Church World War 1 memorial I decided to research him.

In the *Cheltenham Chronicle & Gloucestershire Graphic* (CCGG) I found a photograph of St Gregory's Church rugby team of 1925.¹ Standing far right on the back row and dressed in 'civvies' was 'A Meulbrouck', maybe unable to play rugby because of an old war wound.



The name 'Meulbrouck' pointed to a French or Belgian connection and there were plausible links. Cheltenham had welcomed French refugees following the 1789 Revolution and during the Napoleonic Wars (1793-

¹ 26/12/1925 edition; St Gregory's lost 16-9 to the Cheltenham Police on December 16th in aid of the Christmas Unemployment Fund. The match was played at the Athletic Ground and almost £75 was raised.

1815). In August 1914 Belgian refugees fleeing the invading German armed forces began to arrive in Cheltenham with tales of German atrocities.

Alphonse was born in Cheltenham on 24 September 1876 and baptised at St Gregory's on 22 October 1876. According to one family source his father Jules (1847-1928) came to Cheltenham from Belgium to teach French at the Boys College,² and his granddaughter Vivienne Halliday believed the family were Flemish.³ In fact, he was born in Roubaix on the French/Belgian border in 1847. In the 1871 census Jules (24) and wife Ellen (22) were in lodgings in Stamford, Lincolnshire; in 1891 Jules was a wood carver living at 6 Grove Street. In the 1911 census, Jules gave his nationality as French.

Before the outbreak of war, father and son were lodging-house keepers at Cumberland Villa, Grove Street, accommodating thirty male lodgers.⁴ A decade earlier, in 1901, Edith, Alphonse's wife, was in charge with a male deputy and twenty lodgers including a young charwoman and her daughter.⁵ Grove Street was sited in a poor area and was eventually bulldozed in the 1930s as part of a slum clearance programme. The photograph of Edith and five children dates from 1913/14 and perhaps Alphonse took a copy as a keepsake when he went off to fight.



When the 1901 census was recorded Alphonse was serving in South Africa during the Second Boer War (1899-1902) as a sapper (*left*) with the 1st Gloucestershire Royal Engineers (Volunteers). It was not his first experience of military service; on 6 October 1892 he had enlisted for short service in the 4th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment. Alphonse's Army Medal Roll Index Card reveals he embarked for France with the 10th (Service) Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment on 9 August 1915. Within six and a half weeks many from the battalion (including more than forty Cheltonians) would be dead, wounded or missing. The 10th had trained in Cheltenham throughout the autumn and winter of 1914/15 and many of the men attended services at Christ Church. The 10th comprised volunteers, ready to enlist in the weeks following the declaration of war on 4 August 1914.

² *Cheltenham 4 u* website; information posted in 2009 by Georgette Way.

³ Vivienne Halliday was Georgette's mother and grand-daughter of Alphonse, fn 5.

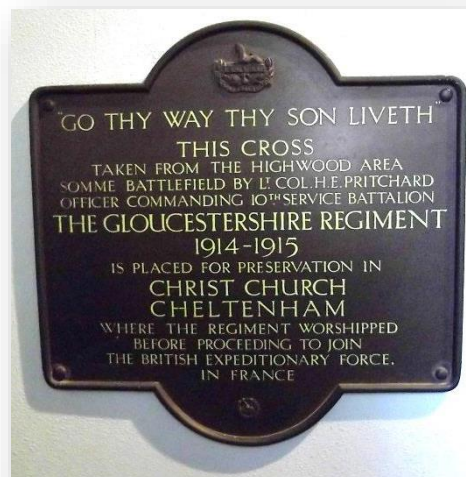
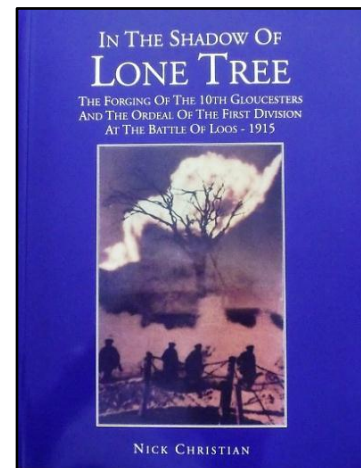
⁴ The 1911 census has 'Common lodging house keeper' i.e. 'doss house'. Many of the lodgers were labourers.

⁵ Her maiden name was Faulkner; she and Alphonse married at St Mary's Parish Church in 1896 and had seven surviving children, including a son Alphonse who was baptised at St Gregory's on 8 March 1903.

The opening day of the Battle of Loos, 25 September 1915, witnessed the first major offensive action by Allied forces during the war; it was also a baptism of fire for the inexperienced soldiers of the 10th Battalion and of those who perished three are named on St Gregory's World War 1 Memorial.⁶ In the summer and autumn of 1916 the battalion was engaged in the attritional Battle of the Somme and at the end of August another St Gregory's man was killed at High Wood.⁷

In Nick Christian's book *In the Shadow of the Lone Tree* (2012, revised edition) Alphonse is mentioned twice, firstly (pp133/34) as the recipient of a letter from the former commanding officer of the 10th, Lieutenant Colonel Henry E Pritchard and secondly (p195) as the soldier who made a memorial cross for the battalion.⁸

The story is related in the Postscript to the book. Attacks on German positions at High Wood between July and September 1916 resulted in many casualties. Nick Christian describes how on Christmas Eve 1916 *'the battalion's survivors held a solemn service amidst the splintered shambles of High Wood. Here they erected a wooden cross crafted by Sergeant Meulbrouck and dedicated to their lost comrades.'* It would seem Alphonse had inherited some of his father's wood carving skills.



⁶ Fred Smith 34, Francis Driscoll, 20 and Cecil Delaney, a boy soldier aged 16.

⁷ A married man Edward McCormick, 32, born in Ireland.

⁸ Quoted at length by Nick Christian the letter references the *'glorious deeds ... of our heroic men'* but also the grief and strain suffered by Pritchard who *'discovered myself on a stretcher, being carried away, until I was landed in a hospital at home in the old country.'* Vivienne Halliday showed me a copy of the four page typescript letter which was sent on 27 March 1927 in reply to a letter from Alphonse. It is clear from Pritchard's letter he had only recently become aware that Alphonse made the cross.

The story of the cross does not end at High Wood in December 1916. In 1927 the French government made it clear it wanted only official memorials on French soil. Accordingly the cross was collected by Lieutenant Colonel Pritchard, brought to Cheltenham and placed in Christ Church where it remains in a small alcove to the left of the sanctuary.⁹



⁹... along with the battalion's Colours, which were laid up in 1932', Nick Christian (p 133). The Colours now hang from a wall in the old baptistry at the back of the church.

Alphonse (the portly man in photograph 4, above) waited with other 10th Battalion veterans in wet weather to witness the return of his battlefield cross on 10 February 1927 and he was spotted by his former commanding officer outside the church after the service.



10th GLOUCESTER MEMORIAL CROSS UNVEILED AT CHRIST CHURCH, CHELTENHAM.
 6.—Arriving at church. 7.—Spectators outside church. 8.—The 5th Gloucesters' Band leading procession. 9.—Old 1/5th Gloucesters arriving at church.

THE CHELTENHAM CHRONICLE AND GLO' SHIRE GRAPHIC
 With Which is incorporated the "Cheltenham Looker-On."
 GRATIS SUPPLEMENT. Saturday, February 26, 1927. No. 1,365.

CHELTENHAM THEATRE AND OPERA HOUSE. The Enormously Successful Musical Comedy—"WILDFLOWER."

THE PALACE, HIGH ST., CHELTENHAM. Monday, Feb. 27th, 1927. "MEN OF STEEL." Musical Settings by William Goodrich and His Popular Orchestra.

THE DAFFODIL, Cheltenham's Premier Cinema. Monday, Feb. 27th, 1927. "FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE."

WINTER GARDEN, CHELTENHAM. Monday, Feb. 27th, 1927. "THE BUCKAROO KID."

NORTH STREET PICTURE PALACE. Monday, Feb. 27th, 1927. "THE BARBIT'S BABY."

MAISON ANNETTE, Cheltenham. Specialists in Exclusive CORSETS & LINGERIE.

For the Best PIANOS, DALE, FORTY and Co., Ltd



10th GLOUCESTERS MEMORIAL CROSS.
 This wooden cross was erected some years ago by Lieut. Colonel Pitt-Rivers, C.E. of the 10th Gloucesters in the High Wood area of the Somme Battlefield. It was the memory of the Officers, N.C.O.'s and men of the 10th Gloucesters Regiment who fell in that area in the Great War. In consequence of alterations and adjustments being carried out by the French Government it was decided to place it in Christ Church, Cheltenham, where it was unveiled by Col. Pitt-Rivers on Sunday 19th Feb. 1927.

At the very least it must have gratified Alphonse to see his handiwork on the front cover of the CCGG (26/2/1927). However, it is a moot point whether he actually set foot in Christ Church, as at that time it was most unusual for a Catholic to enter an Anglican church and vice versa.

A striking example of this Catholic reticence occurred on Sunday 3 August 1919 when a public commemorative event was prohibited to his congregation by the parish priest, Fr. Bede Ryan. The Church Notice Book for the week reads, 'as the project is tantamount to a religious or quasi-religious service, it is clear that we as Catholics may not take part.' A service was held instead at St Gregory's on the same afternoon, but flowers were sent to the public event.

On Remembrance Sunday each year the cross is placed in the main body of Christ Church and it was given pride of place on 25 September 2005 (*below*) for a service to commemorate the men who died a century early on the first day of the Battle of Loos.



When I photographed this cross in August 2014 I was puzzled when a long-standing member of the congregation referred to it as the 'Loos Cross' despite the precise inscription honouring the officers and men killed in action at High Wood during August and September 1916. A citation below the Colours specifically refers to the cross '*from the Somme Battlefield*'.



The memorial plaque on the wall to the left of the cross lists fifty four military personnel from the parish who lost their lives in World War 1, including one man (Private S G Mitchell 9th Battalion Welsh Regiment, aged 26), who died on 25 September 1915.¹⁰ At the base of the memorial is a dedication to those who were killed in the Battle of Loos and this may possibly account for the title 'Loos Cross'.

¹⁰ He appears twice on the Cheltenham Borough Memorial in the Promenade as Pte S and Pte G.

Alphonsus Meulbrouck died on 29 May 1955, aged 79. Although he was not a regular church attender, he was buried in the Borough Cemetery after a service at St Gregory's. His wife Edith died the following year.

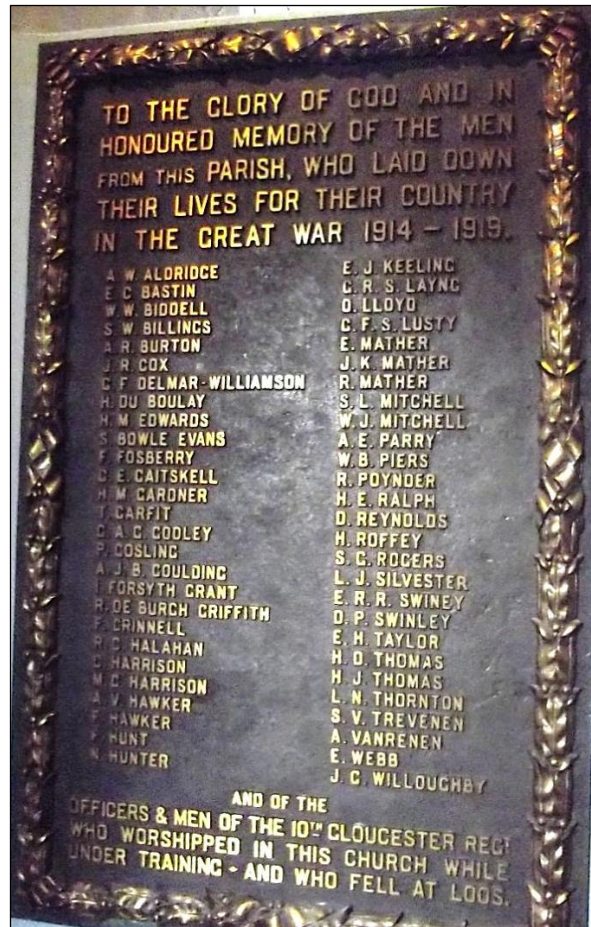


The grave of Alphonse and Edith Meulbrouck
Cheltenham Borough Cemetery (8/10/2014)

Chris Bentall
October 2020

Acknowledgements: Mrs Vivienne Halliday, the late Brian Meulbrouck, Nick Christian, Gloucester Record Office for permission to quote from St Gregory's Church Notice Book (1916-19), Cheltenham Local History Library for permission to use material from the *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic*, Martin Chapman of Christ Church, and Steven Blake.

Gallery



This Colour of the
10th (Service) Battalion,
The Gloucestershire Regiment,
was deposited in
Christ Church, Cheltenham.
on July 10, 1932, by
Major J. Lewis, M.C., & Captain H. J. Mackenzie, M.C., 10th Bn. &
Sergeant-Major Wilcox, & Quarter-Master Sergeant Rawlings 5th Bn.
and was received on behalf of the Church by
Canon F. H. Webb-Peploe, M.A. Vicar,
and
Brig-General H. C. Potter C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., } Churchwardens
Lt.-Colonel A. G. Foord D.S.O. }

To the Glory of God, and in honoured
memory of the men of the 10th Gloucestershire
Regiment, who worshipped in this Church during
their training, many of whom fell at Loos, and
other battlefields in the Great War.
1914 - 1918

The Memorial Cross to this Battalion, from the Somme Battlefield
may also be seen in the North Porch of this Church.



Below. Two pages from the letter written to Alphonse Meulbrouck from Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pritchard. On page (2) he refers to the continuing stress he experienced as a result of his war experience, and the unveiling ceremony brought him 'near to breaking down'. On page (4) he freely admits he was 'speechless' in the presence of the survivors of his regiment.

(2)

replying to your letter, which was read I may tell you with great interest by Mrs PRITCHARD and myself. As we read your letter out aloud we both exclaimed what a beautiful letter it was, and I cannot say that I have received any letter (and I have had so many from so many people, not only those who served with the Regiment, but also their relations and friends) which has given me such a happy feeling to read. You may as well know then, that I shall keep it always (this time with some others of special interest) so that we can read it again and show it our friends, so proud we are of your letter. There are many many things I feel I wish to tell you about.

You remember after the service at Christ Church, I inspected the 5th GLOUCESTERS, and then came to a halt before you and others of the old war time comrades. The truth is, I was much affected by the unveiling ceremony, my nerves, my sympathies, my feelings where I saw so many gathered to do honour to the memory of our fallen comrades, had undergone a severe strain, and I felt utterly unable to do any more, and whatever I may have looked, I felt near to breaking down, for I had loved the men of the old regiment so dearly, they were I felt my countrymen, and such countrymen, such brothers, with such hearts and wonderful spirits, that I always felt so small, so slight, so weak a figure beside them and this was so whether I was in their presence or in their absence. I cannot tell you how great an honour I felt it to have had the fortune through God's Providence, to have collected together, brought into one camp, trained into one body such a battalion of men of our race.

(4)

fine words in your letter, when you say the finest battalion of men that ever donned uniform.

Then when I came to see before me that morning 18th March, 1927, outside Christ Church, the small band of those few men of our 10th Batt'n, he thoughts about them all crowding back again and however, at the effort was to speak in the presence of their friends who numbered nearly two thousand in the Church, I became speechless in the presence of our men.

Will you please if ever you meet any of our men at any time tell them from me that as long as life and memory lasts they are for me, the finest examples of their British manhood, the willing and eager offerers of their lives for their King & Country, the matchless 10th Glos'ters, and may God grant that their children

they pass through that Porch and view that Cross and thank God for their fathers who delivered them from the hands of their enemies. With most hearty greetings from my wife and myself.

Yours truly,

(Sgd) H.E. PRITCHARD,
Lt. Colonel.

P.S. As soon as I can I will send you some copies of extracts from the Morning Post of 30th August, 1916.

Henry Pritchard was an experienced Indian Army officer who had been brought out of retirement to command the 10th Battalion.





Photograph from *Cheltenham as it was* (1976) by Roger Beacham

Members of the 10th Battalion at Lansdown Crescent during their sojourn in Cheltenham (1914-15). Vivienne Halliday identified Alphonse as the sergeant standing right of centre.



CCGG (26/12/14) Sergeants of the 10th Battalion; there are several lookalikes but I think Alphonse is seated second from left