

Jack Cornwell's Victoria Cross

Part One



Left: John Travers Cornwell Boy 1st Class (1900-1916) by Ambrose McEvoy John Cornwall VC

The Ancestry of Jack Cornwell

John Travers Cornwell was born on the 8th January 1900, just off Capworth Street in Clyde Cottage, Clyde Place, Leyton. Like most working class boys named John, he was always called Jack.

He was a son of Eli Cornwell, a tram driver and Lily King. He had an elder brother, Ernest born two years earlier, a one year younger brother George and five years younger sister named Lily. There were also two other older

children in the family from Eli's previous marriage to Alice Cornwell neé Carpenter. These were his half brother Arthur and his half sister Alice.

A Church Pauper

Jack's father Eli was some ten years older than his first wife and to his second partner and there is not any clear record of what happened to his first wife, Alice or of a marriage to his partner, Lily. Eli Cornwell was born in 1853 in a small rural village in Bottisham, Cambs. He was the son of a Samuel, a labourer and Elizabeth. Samuel died in 1860, leaving his wife as a church pauper, with seven children to care for aged from thirteen years to one year old.

A Soldier' Life

Eli's life would have been incredibly hard and in 1871 he was serving as a private in the 34th Foot (Border Regiment) at Shorncliffe Camp in Folkestone. As, in the 1871 census his age is given as twenty one years old, it is obvious that he had lied about his age to enlist. I suspect that he probably enlisted around 1867, when he was fourteen years old and added three years to his real age. The army was a way out of the grinding poverty of his family and provided him with regular meals, low paid employment and a chance to travel.



Above right: The colours of the 34th Regiment of Foot

In the 1881 census, Private Eli Cornwell's age is given as twenty seven years old.



This makes his birth date as 1854 and shows that he had reverted to his actual age. He was a member of the Army Hospital Corps and serving at the Royal Victoria Hospital, at Netley, S Stoneham near Southampton. This was a hospital dedicated to treating the war injuries of soldiers.

Above: The Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley.

Marriage

Three years later his marriage to Alice Carpenter, a nineteen year old girl from Maidstone in Kent was registered at West Ham. Alice was the daughter of Henry Coooper, a brewers cooper. In 1881, she was working as a domestic servant in the Margate house of Robert Romania, a Head Constable in the police.

Ten years later in 1891, he is employed as a milk man and living in Limehouse with his wife and two small children who were; Arthur, age three years and Alice, aged one year old. Fast forward another ten years and the situation is dramatically different.

Lily King

In 1901, his wife Alice has gone and there is a new woman caring for the family. She is Lily King, born in Leighton Buzzard who is 29 years old. They are living in Clyde Cottage in Clyde Place. He works as a tram driver and in addition to his two children with Alice, there are also three year old Ernest and one year old John who are his children with Lily. We don't know what happened to his wife, Alice. The age of Lily's eldest child suggests that his Alice possibly left him around 1897-8 possibly because of his relationship with Lily.

It is painfully obvious that all was not well with the family. Eli came from an incredibly deprived family background and would have been heavily institutionalized by his years of army life. It is very likely that he would have found that living with his own family in poor conditions in very competitive world was very stressful.

Part Two

Jack Cornwell's Life

Evidence of the family's dysfunction and deprivation is provided in the 1911 Census where Eli and Lily are shown as living with only their five year old daughter Lily at Byron Road in Leyton. Eli is working as a cab driver and twelve year old Ernest and ten year old John (Jack) Cornwall and nine year old George are living in one of the West Ham Union's (work-house) eight scattered homes in Romford Road. Big brother Arthur was working as a Nursery Gardener and living in Belmont

Road in Leyton. His older sister Alice has married and moved away.



Left: A Foster mother and children outside a typical 'scattered ' home

The 'scattered' homes were all next door to each other and each had 7 rooms. They had a total of 108 residents (74 boys + 26 girls + 8 officials) The 8 officials were all

described as temporary Foster Mothers and were widows or single women between the ages of 35-54.

At this time, children could go into this kind of Work House care when their families could prove that they couldn't look after the children themselves. The admission policy was very strict as each placement had to be agreed and approved for payment from the West Ham Union funds. We can be sure that the home conditions for Cornwell children who were admitted to the Union Work House were very poor.

Schooldays



Above: the present day George Google Michell school by courtesy Above of Google maps

Jack Cornwell originally attended Farmer Road School (Now renamed George Mitchell School) that was a short distance from his home in Clyde Place, Leyton. In

In 1910, his family moved to Alverstone Road in Manor Park and he then went to Walton Road School. Later, this was re-named after Jack Cornwell and it was demolished in 1969.

Jack was an enthusiastic member of the local 11TH East Ham Scouts troup at St Mary's Mission in Little Ilford. He gained his Tenderfoot and 2nd class badge as

well as the Missions badge. He also won a special Boy Scout award for freeing a girl from a drain.

Jack Goes To Work





Above: a Brook Bond delivery cart

Above: a Whitbread dray

Jack left school in 1913 and got a job as a Brook Bond tea van boy. The van would have been horse drawn and while the driver stayed with the horse and van, Jack would have loaded and delivered the tea to the customers on the delivery round. The following year he worked as a dray boy for Whitbreads brewery in Manor Park. His job would have been to help load and deliver the beer barrels by rolling them down the stillions to the pub cellars.

WWI Declared



At the end of June 1914, the Archduke of Austria, Francis Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo. This began a 'domino' effect of many countries in the world declaring war on each other and was called the 'Great War' and later WWI. Great Britain entered the conflict by declaring war with Germany in August 1914.

Left: The Archduke Francis Ferdinand

Enlistment: Patriotism & Jingoism



Above: Jingoistic images. Jack would have collected cigarette cards with these images

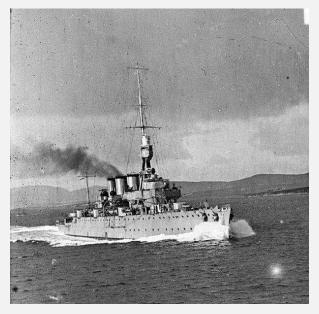
Like his father before him, Jack tried to enlist by lying about his age. I'm also sure that he would have heard his father tell stories of his past military exploits and he would have been fired up by the hysterical jingoism of the times. What we don't know is how much a desire to escape from his dysfunctional family's played in his attempt to enlist. In the advent, he wasn't successful and he had to wait another year before he successfully enlisted in the Royal Navy as a Boy Sailor in 1915. He didn't have his father's permission but used letters of reference from his headmaster and employer.

He wasn't the only member of his family to enlist. Although, now well over normal recruitment age, his father re-enlisted, his brother Arthur also joined the army and Ernest joined the navy.

Naval Training & Posting

Jack was sent to a navy shore based establishment at Keyham Naval Barracks, Devonport for basic training and received further training as a Sight Setter or Gun Layer.. He completed his training in May 1916 and on the Easter Monday of 1916, he left for Rosyth, Scotland to join his assignment in the navy. He was posted to *HMS Chester*, a town class light cruiser, as a Boy 1st class sailor.

HMS Chester



HMS Chester was launched on 8 December 1915 and entered service in May 1916, three weeks before the Battle of Jutland. Jack Cornwell was part of the new crew complement of 500 men.

The Battle of Jutland was a naval battle fought by the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet (which also included ships and individual personnel from the Royal Australian Navy and Royal Canadian Navy against the Imperial German Navy's High Seas Fleet

during the First World War. The battle was fought on 31 May and 1 June 1916 in the North Sea near Jutland, Denmark. It was the largest naval battle and the only full-scale clash of battleships in the war.

Battle of Jutland

The Grand Fleet was commanded by British Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, and the High Seas Fleet by German Vice-Admiral Reinhard Scheer. The High Seas Fleet's intention was to lure out, trap and destroy a portion of the Grand Fleet, as the German naval force was insufficient to successfully engage the entire British fleet. This formed part of a larger strategy to break the British blockade of Germany and to allow German mercantile shipping to operate. Meanwhile, the Royal Navy pursued a strategy to engage and destroy the High Seas Fleet, or keep the German force contained and away from Britain's own shipping lanes.

The German plan was to use Vice-Admiral Franz Hipper's fast scouting group of five modern battlecruisers to lure Vice-Admiral Sir David Beatty's battlecruiser squadrons into the path of the main German fleet.

Battle Is Joined

On the afternoon of 31 May, Beatty encountered Hipper's battlecruiser force long before the Germans had expected. In a running battle, Hipper successfully drew the British vanguard into the path of the High Seas Fleet. By the time Beatty sighted the larger force and turned back towards the British main fleet, he had lost two battlecruisers from a force of six battlecruisers and four battleships, against the five ships commanded by Hipper. The battleships, commanded by Rear-Admiral Sir Hugh Evan-Thomas, were the last to turn and formed a rearguard as Beatty withdrew, now drawing the German fleet in pursuit towards the main British positions. Between 18:30, when the sun was lowering on the western horizon, backlighting the German forces, and nightfall at about 20:30, the two fleets – totalling 250 ships between them – directly engaged twice.

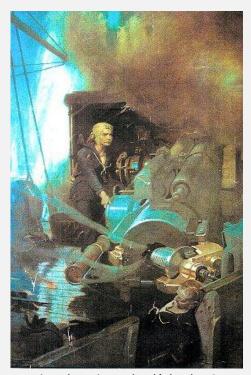
The Price Of War

Fourteen British and eleven German ships were sunk, with great loss of life. After sunset, and throughout the night, Jellicoe manoeuvred to cut the Germans off from their base, hoping to continue the battle the next morning, but under the cover of darkness Scheer broke through the British light forces forming the rearguard of the Grand Fleet and returned to port.

Both sides claimed victory. The British lost more ships and twice as many sailors, and the British press criticised the Grand Fleet's failure to force a decisive outcome, but Scheer's plan of destroying a substantial portion of the British fleet also failed.

HMS Chester Attacked

HMS Chester fought as part of the 3rd Battle Cruiser Squadron. Four enemy light cruisers appeared in sight and HMS Chester turned to open fire but, being outnumbered, was hit by withering enemy 150mm shellfire, 17 times in 3 minutes. Three out of her ten guns were disabled and she suffered casualties of 29 men



The painting right is by Frank Salisbury RA. It shows Jack Cornwell at his gun station. The artist used Jack's brother George as the model for Jack

killed and 49 wounded; many of the wounded lost legs because the open backed gun-shields did not reach the deck and give adequate protection.

After the action, ship medics arrived on deck and found Jack Cornwell still at his gun. There were steel splinters penetrating his chest. He was looking at the gun sights and still waiting for orders. He and one other were the only survivors of the ten member gun crew.

Part Three

Jack Cornwell's Death

Being incapable of further action, *HMS Chester* was ordered to the port of Immingham. There, although he was clearly dying, Jack Cornwell was transferred to Grimsby General Hospital. He died on the morning of 2 June 1916 before his mother could arrive at the hospital.

The navy provided a coffin and Jack's body was taken home. He was buried two days later in a communal grave in Manor Park Cemetery with only a few members of his family present. His last resting place was marked by a wooden sign that read Grave 323.

The captain of HMS Chester wrote to Jack's parents saying:

I know you would wish to hear of the splendid fortitude and courage shown by your son during the action of May 31. His devotion to duty was an example for all of us. The wounds which resulted in his death within a short time were received in the first few minutes of the action. He remained steady at his most exposed post at the gun, waiting for orders. His gun would not bear on the enemy: all but two of the ten crew were killed or wounded, and he was the only one who was in such an exposed position. But he felt he might be needed, and, indeed, he might have been; so he stayed there, standing and waiting, under heavy fire, with just his own brave heart and God's help to support him.

"I cannot express to you my admiration of the son you have lost from this world. No other comfort would I attempt to give to the mother of so brave a lad, but to assure her of what he was and what he did, and what an example he gave.

I hope to place in the boys' mess a plate v with his name on and the date and the words ' Faithful unto death. I hope some day you may be able to come and see it there'

Afterwards Admiral Jellicoe wrote his official report of the Battle of Jutland and added these words:

'A report from the Commanding Officer of 'Chester' gives a splendid instance of devotion to duty. Boy (1st Class) John Travers Cornwell, of 'Chester,'was mortally wounded early in the action. He nevertheless remained standing alone at a most exposed post, quietly awaiting orders till the end of the action, with the gun's crew dead and wounded all round him. His age was under 16years. I regret that he has since died, but I recommend his case for special recognition in justice to his memory, and as an acknowledgment of the high example set by him'

And there the matter would have ended, just another young British sailor in an unknown grave.

The Daily Sketch Tells Jack's Story

Just over a month later, the Daily Sketch, a popular daily newspaper published a full front page spread telling of the scandal. The story told how an unrecognized boy war hero from the battle of Jutland had been buried in a common grave. The paper demanded that this 'mistake' should be rectified. As they had not been able to find a photo of Jack, they had taken and used a picture of his brother George dressed in a naval uniform that had the cap band of another ship..



A High Level Leak

We don't know how the Daily Sketch

got the story. After the battle of Jutland, Admiral Jellicoe was criticized heavily for his defensive attitude towards sea warfare and in late 1916 was replaced by his Vice Admiral, Sir David Beatty. A suspicion must be that this was leaked from someone in the Navy Office as part of the politics around this situation. It also could be that the 'powers that be' decided that Britain needed a well publicized war hero to help improve the poor national morale at this period of the war.

A Hero's Funeral

What we do know, is that the situation captured the hearts of the British people



and home and throughout the British Empire. The Royal Navy now decided that Jack should be given a full military funeral and on 29th July his body was exhumed from the common grave and taken to rest at East Ham Town Hall.

The day of the funeral dawned with clear blue skies and temperatures rose into the eighties. The funeral route was lined by

Boy Scouts and attended by tremendous crowds including hundreds of members of the armed forces. The cortege left West Ham Town Hall at 3 p.m., led by mounted police. There followed a Naval band, a firing party and gun carriage bearing the coffin, draped with the Union Flag and surmounted by Jack's naval cap, together with many floral tributes including one from Admiral Sir David Beatty.

Above: Jack Cornwell's funeral procession

The Mayor of East Ham, Martin Banks, Sir John Bethel, the local MP Parliament and Dr Macnamara, M.P., representing the Admiralty, followed the coffin on foot, as did the Bishop of Barking, local clergy and other dignitaries including members of the committee formed to raise money for Jack's memorial. The St Nicholas Boys' School Band from East Ham led 80 boys from Jack's own school, Walton Road, in the procession. (This was ironic and particularly appropriate as St Nicholas Boys school was the Roman Catholic equivalent of the West Ham Union education for inmates!)

These were by followed local military units including six boy sailors from Jack's ship, HMS *Chester*, the 2nd Cadet Battalion of the Essex Regiment and local Boy Scout Troops including the 2nd Ilford, Jack's old Troop.

Jack's Last Home Visit

The cortege wound its way through the district to Alverstone Road, home of Jack's parents. Here, close relatives and friends joined the procession including another boy from HMS *Chester*, who had been wounded in the Battle of Jutland.

At the committal the Mayor read a passage of scripture and the local M.P. delivered a short address. Dr Macnamara spoke on behalf of the Royal Navy saying: "First Class Boy John Travers will be enshrined in British hearts as long as faithful unflinching duty shall be esteemed a virtue amongst us."

Shots from the firing party rang out, the last post was sounded and Jack's shipmates from the *Chester* came forward to place a final floral tribute in the shape of an anchor on the grave. The thousands present sang with feeling the hymn 'O God our help in ages past' followed by the first verse of The National Anthem.

Part Four

Jack Cornwall VC

As a result of massive public pressure and in the interest of uplifting national morale, Admiral Beatty recommended Jack Cornwall should be awarded the country's highest military award for bravery – the Victoria Cross. By now a lot of important people, including, Lord Baden Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts movement were pushing for official recognition of Jack's bravery.

The Cornwell Award For Bravery

In August 1916, the Boy Scout Association's newsletter, the *Headquarters Gazette* announced the foundation of the 'Cornwell Memorial Fund' to endow Scholarships or Apprenticeships for Boy Scouts who qualify as 'Cornwell Scouts' and a penny subscription was invited from all Scouts. The Scout movement instituted the Cornwell Badge as an award for bravery. It is in the shape of a C encircling a fleur de lis. The C stands for Cornwell and Courage.

Star & Garter, Jack Cornwell Ward

This was followed on September 14th, when the Lord Mayor of London announced a national appeal which would endow in perpetuity a Jack Cornwell Ward to be reserved for disabled sailors in the Star and Garter Home at

Richmond, Surrey and make provision for Jack Cornwell Cottage Homes for disabled and invalided sailors and their families. Naval scholarships were to be endowed for deserving boys.

The VC Citation For Bravery

On the 15th September, nearly three months after Jack's death, the government publication, the London Gazette, printed the following:

'The King has been graciously pleased to approve the grant of the Victoria Cross to Boy, First Class, John Travers Cornwell ONJ 42563 (died 2 June 1916), for the conspicuous act

of bravery specified below:

Mortally wounded early in the action, Boy, First Class, John Travers Cornwell remained standing alone at a most exposed post, quietly awaiting orders, until the end of the action, with the gun's crew dead and wounded all around him. His age was under sixteen and a half years'

Above: Lily King Cornwell with her children Lily, Edward and George reading the citation.



Jack's grave and memorial was solely funded by contributions from school children and ex-scholars from East Ham. It reads

In Memoriam

First Class Boy JOHN TRAVERS CORNWELL, VC. Born 8th January 1900 Died of wounds received at The Battle of Jutland 2nd June 1916

This Stone was erected by Scholars and ex-Scholars of Schools in East Ham

'It is not wealth or ancestry but honourable conduct and a noble disposition that makes men great'

Part Five

Aftermath

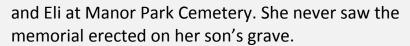
The war wreaked a terrible carnage on the Cornwell family.

Still serving in the army, Jack's father Eli, died of bronchitis in August 1916 and was buried with Jack. His brother Arthur was killed in action in France in 1918. His brother Edward served in the Royal Navy and survived the war. His brother George emigrated to Canada and was followed to there by his sister Lily. His sister Alice married a disabled WWI veteran and also emigrated to Canada.

Buried Under The Wrong Name

In 1919, Jack's mother Lily, was living in reduced circumstances and was working in a sailors' hostel to supplement a very small pension awarded on the death of her husband. It is possible, that the pension payable to Eli's legal wife, was the cause of the terrible confusion that followed.

She was found dead at her home in Commercial Road, Stepney, on the 31st of October 1919 aged 48. She was known as Mrs Cornwell and she seems to have been confused with Eli's wife, Alice. She was buried as Alice in the grave with Jack



We don't know what happened to the real Alice Cornwell neé Carpenter.

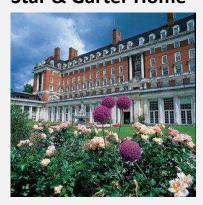


September 30th, 1916 was declared 'Jack Cornwell Day' and the Navy League (an independent organisation set-up to raise awareness of naval issues) was given permission to sell a specially designed stamp or 'flag' through the nation's Elementary Schools. Over 12,000 schools sold more than one pound's worth of flags and they were



rewarded with the Frank Salisbury print of the painting of Jack Cornwell standing by his gun Seven million children bought these flags, which was an unprecedented response by the youth of the nation to a single fund-raising campaign. It was this money that was used to fund the original Jack Cornwell Ward at the Star and Garter Home, as well as many other charitable works.

Star & Garter Home



A new, purpose-built Star and Garter Home was opened on the site by King George V and Queen Mary in 1924. The Jack Cornwell Fund was able to make a significant contribution to the cost of the new Home that has a recently re-furbished ward named the *Jack Cornwell Suite*. This was officially opened by The Duke of Edinburgh in April, 1999 unveiling a plaque and portrait dedicated to the memory of Jack.

Austerity & Poverty Lead To Emigration

In the times of austerity after the war, like many other working people, the surviving members of Jack's family struggled to survive. In the early 1920's, brothers George and Ernest, sisters Lily and Alice and Alice's husband and child all emigrated to Canada. It is possible that they were part assisted with the passage fares by money from the Navy League Jack Cornwell Fund.

Twelve years later. Lily Cornwell now Mrs James Johnson, living in very poor condition and 'on relief', gave a interview to a reporter in Windsor, Ontario. She complained bitterly of the lack of the help promised to her family by the British authorities but not received. Her brother George was also in a poor situation and also receiving 'relief'. Brother Ernest was apparently doing well until the time of the depression and then returned to England on a cattle boat.

Jack's Legacy

The legacy of Jack Cornwell is still very much alive in Newham today. In Manor Park, there is The Jack Cornwell Centre in Jack Cornwell Street, The Victoria Cross public house and Jack Cornwell V.C. House in Grantham Road. In Manor Park Cemetery there is Cornwell Crescent and in Vicarage Lane, East Ham, there is The Cornwell V.C. Cadet Centre,

where the Newham Sea Cadets are based. This unit is the only one in Britain not to have T.S. (Training Ship) written upon the ribbon of their cap. Instead, they have the honour of having J.T. Cornwell V.C. printed upon it. A parade and



memorial service by the Sea Cadet Corps. and The British Legion takes place every year.

The London Borough of Newham introduced The Jack Cornwell Bravery Award in 2001, which has been presented annually in recognition for outstanding acts of bravery by Newham people.

Above: - Jack Cornwell Sea Cadets on the annual Royal British Legion march for war hero Jack Cornwell to St Mary Magdalene church, East Ham

Part Six

One Hundred Years Later

I have written this article because I believe that the facts about Jack Cornwell's life and death should be told.

Britain's Morale

In 1916, when Jack died, Britain had been at war for two years and things were not going so well. The battle of Jutland was not the decisive victory that was expected from Britain's navy and there was a clear division between Britain's two highest Naval commanders. In Europe there was stalemate between the British and German troops. National morale was at a low ebb.

The Jack Cornwell Story

The conventionally accepted story about Jack Cornwell is that he was young patriotic lad who, like his father before him, loved his country and joined the

services to fight the German foe. Given the jingoism of the times this is probably true but I would suggest that there were other factors at work.

Like his father before him, Jack grew up in a very poor family. At an important time in his formative years he and two brothers were taken out of his family home and placed in a Workhouse children's home. It is possible that a major factor in the reason why Jack was so keen to enlist was escape from his home life.

The story of Jack's heroism came as a result of him being found by his gun as the only other survivor of the ten man gun crew after his ship was attacked. He was injured with shrapnel piercing his body. This situation was presented as a young wounded hero calmly waiting orders to serve the gun.

Gun Crew Dead & Injured

The difficulty with this scenario is that without a gun crew, the gun couldn't be loaded, aimed and fired. Jack's job in the gun crew was as the 'sight setter' and without other members of the gun crew he couldn't do his job. The sad reality is that is was probably because of his wounds that he couldn't move from his position.

Burial In A Common Grave

When he died two days later at Immingham, nobody was calling him a hero. His mother collected his body that was placed in a naval coffin and accompanied by a navy officer taken to Manor Park Cemetery. There was a small family presence when his body was buried in a common grave. This doesn't suggest that the navy thought there was anything special about Jack's death.

The Daily Sketch Exposé

Jack had been buried for over a month before the Daily Sketch broke the story of his heroic death. Given the machinations around the naval high command at the time, it seems very likely that the Daily Sketch was given the story by someone in the navy office. Speculation about the motive/s for this must include a suspicion that this was connected with the struggle for power in the navy office and/or a successful political attempt to raise war time morale.

They Were All Heroes

Having raised these issues I would like to stress that this doesn't in any way detract from Jack Cornwell's heroism. While he may not have been the kind of hero that is depicted, he, like all the young men, who fought and died on both sides of the terrible conflict, were true heroes and their sacrifice should never be forgotten.

The total number of military and civilian casualties in WWI is estimated at 37 million people. There were over 16 million deaths and 20 million people wounded.

Bill Bayliss April 2014

Sources

I have extensively researched Jack Cornwell's genealogy via the 'Ancestry.Com' site. The site contains a number of subscriber generated 'family histories' that are incorrect and some seem to have simply copied another person's incorrect research.

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http://interactive.ancestry.co.uk/2352/rg14 09596 0056 29/52684391?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.co.uk%2fcgi-

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