

Sergeant Major Fred Mitchell (1871 - 1st July 1915)



From the *Brighouse Echo* Friday July 16, 1915

Local War News

FIGHTING UNDER BOTHA.

BAILIFFE BRIDGE MAN KILLED IN

SOUTH WEST AFRICA.

Mr. and Mrs. Henry Mitchell, of Bailiffe Bridge have received an official notification last Friday that their son, Sergt-Major F. Mitchell, of the Brand's Horse, fifth regiment, South Africa, had been killed in action near Otavi, in German South West Africa, whilst fighting under General Botha. The following is a copy of the communication:--

Downing-street, 8th July, 1915

Sir,--It is with deep regret that I have to inform you, on behalf of Mr. Secretary Bonar Law, that a telegram has been

received from the Governor General of the Union of South Africa, stating that Sergeant-Major F. Mitchell, of the Fifth Regiment, Brand's Horse, was killed in action near Otavi, on the 1st July. Mr Bonar Law is commanded by the King to assure you of the true sympathy of His Majesty and the Queen in your sorrow. --- I am, your obedient servant,

H.W.JUST

A further communication of the same date was also received. This reads as follows:--

Sir, With reference to my letter of today's date, I am directed by Mr. Secretary Bonar Law to inform you that Lord Buxton has asked that an expression of his sincere sympathy may be conveyed to you upon the death in action of Sergeant-Major F. Mitchell. --- I am, your obedient servant,

H.W.JUST

Sergeant-Major Mitchell was 44 years of age. He was a born soldier and has been in the army practically all his life. As soon as he was old enough to join he enlisted in the Prince Albert Guards. Most of his time has been spent in South Africa, and for close on twenty years he has served in the Imperial Forces in that country. He was there at the outbreak of war, and went all through that campaign, for which he received a medal with bars. He was one of the South African

contingent who came over to guard the route for the procession at the Coronation of King Edward. He has been with General Botha during the whole of the present campaign, which has been carried out so successfully, and it was not far from the place where the treaty was signed that Mitchell had the misfortune to get killed. He was the third son of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Mitchell and brother to Mr. E. Mitchell, joiner and undertaker, of Bailiffe Bridge.

It is interesting that Fred Mitchell had guarded the route of the procession at the coronation of Edward VII and his wife Alexandra on 9th August 1902. And then intriguing that 'His Majesty and the Queen' sent their sympathies on hearing that he was killed in action in 1915. They were King George V and his wife Queen Mary whose coronation was on 22nd June 1911.

The second Downing Street letter refers to Lord Buxton. This was Sydney Charles Buxton who was Governor General of South Africa from 1914 to 1920.

A briefer obituary appeared in the *Halifax Courier* Saturday 17th July 1915

BAILIFFE BRIDGE MAN KILLED

IN GERMAN SOUTH WEST AFRICA

Information has been received by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Mitchell of Bailiffe Bridge, that their son Sergt-Major F. Mitchell, of Brand's Horse, 5th Regiment, South Africa, has been killed in action near Otavi, in German South-West Africa, whilst fighting under General

Botha. Sergt-Major, who was 44 years of age, enlisted as soon as he was old enough in the Prince Albert Guards, and spent most of his time in South Africa. For close on 20 years, he served in the Imperial forces of that country. He was in South Africa throughout the Boar War and has been with General Botha throughout the campaign against the Germans.

General Botha was Louis Botha (1862 – 1919) who became the first president of South Africa from 1910 to 1919.

Fred Mitchell was the son of Henry Mitchell and Rhoda Crowther. Henry was a 25-year-old fatherless 'Miner' when he married 21-year-old 'Weaver' Rhoda Crowther, daughter of a 'Labourer' John Crowther on 2nd December 1867 in Bradford Parish Church. Before the 1871 census the baptisms of two children born to Henry, a 'Miner', and Rhoda Mitchell of Beck Hill were recorded at St. Michael and All Angles Church, Shelf. John William Mitchell was born on September 1868 and baptised on 18th October 1868. Daughter Sarah was born on 27th January 1870 and baptised on 3rd March 1870.

1871 census

Henry Mitchell Head 28 Coal Miner
 Rhoda Mitchell Wife 24 Worsted Weaver
 John W Mitchell Son 2
 Sarah Mitchell Dau 1
 Address Buttershaw, North Bierley

1881 census

Henry Mitchell Head 38 Coal Miner
 Rhoda Mitchell Wife 34
 John W. Mitchell Son 12 Coal Mine Hurrier
 Sarah Mitchell Dau 11 Scholar
 Fred Mitchell Son 9 ditto
 James Mitchell Son 7 ditto
 Willie Mitchell Son 5 ditto
 Edwin Mitchell Son 3
 Annie Mitchell Dau 1
 Sam Thorp Boarder 15 Coal Miner
 Address New Brighton, Cleckheaton

1891 census

Henry Mitchell Head 48 Coal Miner
 Rhoda Mitchell Wife 44
 John Wm Mitchell Son 22 Silk Dresser
 Sarah Mitchell Dau 21 ditto Spinner
 Jas Mitchell Son 17 ditto Dresser
 Willie Mitchell Son 15 Cotton Spinner
 Edwin Mitchell Son 13 Hurrier in Coal Mine
 Annie Mitchell Dau 11 Cotton Spinner
 Address
 5 Waddington Buildings, Bailiffe Bridge

1901 census

Harry Mitchell Head 58 Coal Miner Hewer
 Rhoda Mitchell Wife 54
 Willie Mitchell Son 25 Farmer's Labourer
 Edwin Mitchell Son 23 Joiner
 Annie Mitchell Dau 21 Cotton Reeler
 Address Spring Field Terrace, Hipperholme

The census data gives the details of the expanding Mitchell family. No baptism has been found for Fred Mitchell, but his birth was registered in the Bradford district Q4 1871. Willie Mitchell was born on 27th July 1875 and baptised on 5th September 1875 at St Michael and All Angels, Shelf. Edwin was born 17th July 1877 and Annie Q3 1879.

Notice that Fred Mitchell only appears on the 1881 census. In 1891 he was a 19-year-old "Private" at the Infantry Barracks, Fulford, York. As the newspaper articles above state, he became a career soldier taking part in both Boer War and the First World War in South Africa and rising to the rank of Sergeant-Major.

Brother James Mitchell, born Q4 1873, was ordained a Methodist New Connexion vicar in Dewsbury on 17th June 1903 according to a *Leeds Mercury* report on 18th June 1903. But then nothing more has been found about him.

Sadly 27-year-old Annie died on 30th September 1906 and was buried in St Matthew's Churchyard on 3rd October 1906 in plot C38. The *Brighouse News* for 5th October 1906 reported:-

A SAD EVENT. – The death of Miss Annie Mitchell, youngest surviving daughter of Mr Henry Mitchell, 46 Springfield Terrace, Bailiffe Bridge, caused a painful sensation in the village and district. The deceased young woman was employed by Messrs Hardman and Son, and on Wednesday (last week) had to leave her work owing to the malady from which she was suffering. She was attended by a doctor but his efforts were unavailing, and death took place last Sunday afternoon, about half-past four o'clock. Miss Mitchell was 27 years of age and was loved and respected by all who knew her. She had been connected with Ebenezer Methodist New Connexion Church as a scholar in the Sunday School and a member of the congregation.

There were abundant manifestations of sorrow and regret in the village last Wednesday afternoon, when the funeral took place at Lightcliffe Old Church. The Rev. E. Colley (M.N.C. circuit minister) conducted a short service at the home of the deceased, and then the cortege proceeded to the place of

internment. A large number of people watched the funeral, the work people of Messrs Hardman and Son being allowed to leave for that purpose. At the graveside the service was conducted by Rev. H.A. Kennedy (vicar of Lightcliffe). There was a large number of beautiful floral tributes, amongst them being tokens of regret from her fellow workmen at Messrs Hardman's, several from the Ebenezer Church and Sunday School and one from Rev. James Mitchell (Dewsbury) brother of the deceased. A large floral cross was also sent by Mr. and Mrs. Hardman. There was also a large and beautiful wreath from the family.

There was no mistaking the sincere regret on every hand caused by the death of Miss Mitchell at such an early age, just when she seemed so full of life and vigour. She was beloved by all, her bright, kindly temperament being the means of obtaining her many friends. Much sympathy is felt with the bereaved parents and family in their time of trouble.



Edwin Mitchell seems to have been the only sibling who remained in the local area. He married Ruth Cheetham in 1908. Their daughter Annie was born on 31st May 1912. She was presumably named in part after his younger deceased sister. The 1911 census indicated that Henry and Rhoda had lost two children, perhaps another daughter, hence the mention of Annie Mitchell being the surviving daughter.

1911 census

Henry Mitchell Head 68
 Colliery Labourer (Pit Top)
 Rhoda Mitchell Wife 64
 Address Providence St., Scholes, Cleckheaton

1911 census

Edwin Mitchell Head 33
 Joiner Builder Undertaker
 Ruth Mitchell Wife 33
 Address 87 Springfield Terrace, Bailiffe Bridge

Forty-three-year-old Sergeant-Major Fred Mitchell, service number 1031, was killed in action on 1st July 1915 at the battle of Otavi. The battle took place between the Otavi mountain and Otavifontein, when the German South West Africa militia tried to delay the advance of the South Africans under Louis Botha in an attempt to hold on to territory. But it did not work. The South African advance was swift and the Germans fled. The only casualties were Sergeant Major Fred Mitchell, four South Africans and three Germans. A South African and a German died after the battle presumably as a result of battle wounds that they had suffered. Seven other South Africans were wounded as were eight Germans. Twenty Germans were also taken prisoner. All eight casualties were buried in Otavifontein cemetery as listed on the CWGC form below.

CEMETERY *1000* *9/10/26* **FINAL** *S.W. PROTECTORATE* *27-1*

OTAVIFONTEIN MAGISTRAL DISTRICT GROOTFONTEIN, S.W.A.

Name.	Reg. No.	Rank	Unit	Date of Death.	Remarks
Holzhausen, L.G.	651	Burgher	Botha's Scouts	1. 7.15 ✓	Grave not numbered
Mitchell, F.	1031	Sgt. Maj.	5th Regt. 5th M.B.	1. 7.15 ✓	"
Needham, E.A.	1319	Pte.	5th Inf. <i>1st B. I.</i>	29. 7.15 ✓	"
Strydom, G.J.	N/N	<i>Pte. Brough</i>	3rd Regt. 5th M.B.	1. 7.15 ✓	"
van Rensberg, D.G.	145	Burgher	2nd Regt. 5th M.B.	1. 7.15 ✓	"
Roberts, G.W.	N/N	Cpl	Jordaan's Comdo.	1. 7.15	"
BUENTE Wilhelm		Cpl	GERMAN	1. 7.15	} IN OTHER GRAVE
BORTH Wilhelm		Cpl	"	1. 7.15	
GNAUTH OSKAR		TROOPER	"	24. 7.15	

ENTERED. *13/10/26*
 SLIPS CHECKED. *20/10/26*

Page.....

They all have similar headstones in this 'uncontrolled' cemetery on a private farm in what is now Namibia.



[photograph courtesy of the South African War Grave Project]

Sergeant-Major Fred Mitchell's story, along with all our soldiers' abbreviated stories – just search using the word 'Lightcliffe' - is up on the CWGC *For Evermore* website

[Sergeant Major Fred Mitchell, 5th Mounted Brigade - killed in action in South Africa, 5th Mounted Brigade - killed in action in South Africa \(cwgc.org\)](http://www.cwgc.org/ForEvermore/sergeant-major-fred-mitchell-5th-mounted-brigade-killed-in-action-in-south-africa)

The CWGC list below would also seem to indicate that Fred Mitchell was the most senior casualty. Does that and the fact that he was the only British-born soldier to be killed in this short battle explain the letters from Downing Street with the condolences of the King and Queen and then those of the Governor General of South Africa? Presumably so.

OTAVIFONTEIN CEMETERY. Otavifontein, in the North-East part of the territory, was captured on the 1st July, 1915.

HOLTZHAUZEN, Burgher L. C., 681. Botha's Scouts. 1st July, 1915.

MITCHELL, S.M. F., 1031. 5th Mounted Bde. 1st July, 1915.

NEEDHAM, Pte. E. A., 1319. 1st Inf. (Durban Light Inf.). 29th July, 1915.

STRYDOM, Pte. G. J., 311. 5th Mounted Bde. 1st July, 1915.

VAN RENSBURG, Burgher D. C., 145. 5th Mounted Bde. 1st July, 1915.

281141
 Name *Mitchell Fred*
 Rank and No. *1031 Sgt Maj*
 Regiment *5th Regt, 5th Mtd Bde ad 37091*
 Next-of-Kin *E. Mitchell, Bailiff Bridge, York*
 REFERENCE
 Papers or Report. *of 1.11.14 to 31.12.14 also 1.2.15 to 1.7.15. Sgt.*
 Date *1915* Hospital. Nature of Illness. REMARKS. *1708*
Embarked per S.S. Lanka 27.3.15 (See page 118)
1st July 1915 at the occupation of Otavi.
 STAR despatched *10.9.15*
 Registd. No. *2064 2302 17*
 W. & V. despatched *25/1/22*
 gd. No. *227* List *6* Roll *25* 1914-1915 STAR

Although Fred Mitchell probably had not seen his family in Bailiffe Bridge for some time he was commemorated on the right-hand kerb of his family's grave plot, C38. It seems more than likely that his undertaker brother, Edwin Mitchell – named as his Next of Kin on the form above - was responsible for the family commemorations.



Their father, Henry Mitchell, died on 14th November 1920 and was buried in plot B38, or so the transcribed parish records say, on 17th November 1920 but it probably should be C38. It looks as if his widow then moved to Pontefract to live with her daughter Sarah Pilling whose family she was with on 19th June 1921.



1921 census

Alfred Pilling	Head	49	Police Constable	West Riding Constabulary Wakefield
Sarah Pilling	Wife	50	House Hold Duties	Own Account
Ernest Pilling	Son	24	General Carter	Own Account
Elsie Pilling	Dau	21	Help To Mother	Home
Herbert Pilling	Son	14	Ironmonger Errand Boy	Messrs Crabtree Walker Iron Monger
Rhoda Mitchell	Mother-in-law	74	None	None

Address 11, Addisleigh Terrace, Pontefract, Yorkshire (West Riding), England

Son Edwin Mitchell was probably the only family member still in Bailiffe Bridge.

1921 census

Edwin Mitchell	Head	43	Joiner Builder Undertaker	Employer
Ruth Mitchell	Wife	43	-	Home Duties -
Annie Mitchell	Dau	9	-	-

Address Wakefield Road, Bailiff Bridge, Hipperholme, Yorkshire (West Riding), England

The death of 78-year-old Rhoda Mitchell, on 16th April 1925, was registered in the Pontefract district. She was brought back to Lightcliffe for burial, on 18th April 1925, with her husband and daughter in plot C38.



**IN LOVING MEMORY OF
ANNIE**

**DAUGHTER OF HENRY AND RHODA
MITCHELL
OF BAILIFFE BRIDGE**

**WHO DIED
SEPTEMBER 30TH 1906
AGED 27 YEARS**

**ALSO OF HENRY MITCHELL
WHO DIED
NOVEMBER 14TH 1920
AGED 78 YEARS**

**ALSO RHODA HIS WIFE
WHO DIED APRIL 16TH 1925
AGED 78 YEARS**

About this time the youngest son, Edwin Mitchell, and family moved to Lancashire which was where they were in September 1939.

1939 register

Edwin Mitchell	17 Jul 1877	Male	Housebuilder (Master)	Married	32	1
Ruth Mitchell	06 Feb 1878	Female	Unpaid Domestic Duties	Married	32	2
Annie Mitchell	31 May 1912	Female	Civil Servant (Typist)	Single	32	3

Address 2 Homfray Avenue, Morecambe, Morecambe and Heysham M.B., Lancashire, England

The death of Edwin Mitchell, on 30th March 1940, was reported as follows in the

Morecambe Guardian 6 April 1940

DEATH OF WELL-KNOWN BUILDER

Mr Edwin Mitchell, of 2 Homfray Avenue, Torrisholme, died on Saturday, aged 62. He came to Morecambe from the Halifax district 15 years ago and leaves a wife and one daughter.

The interment took place at Lightcliffe, near Halifax, on Wednesday. A service in the old Parish Church there was conducted by Canon Taylor.

As the report states he was brought back to Lightcliffe for burial in the churchyard on 3rd April 1940 in plot 1A66. There is a probate record.

MITCHELL Edwin of Lindale Homfray-avenue Torrisholme Morecambe-and Heysham Lancashire died 30 March 1940 Probate Lancaster 11 June to Martins Bank Limited and Annie Mitchell spinster. Effects £4699 12s 4d

A decade later his wife Ruth née Cheetham died on 14th April 1950. She too was brought back to Lightcliffe for burial with her husband on 18th April 1950. Their short headstone has sunk into the ground, but you can just see the memorial inscription.



**IN LOVING MEMORY OF
EDWIN MITCHELL
WHO DIED 30TH MARCH 1940
AGED 62 YEARS
RUTH HIS BELOVED WIFE
DIED 14TH APRIL 1950**

MITCHELL Ruth of Lindale 2 Homfray-avenue Torrisholme Morecambe and Heysham Lancashire widow died 14 April 1950 at The Victoria Hospital Morecambe and Heysham Probate Lancaster 8 May to Annie Mitchell spinster. Effects £501 18s 3d.

D.M.Barker
December 2015
Updated February 2024