

ROBERT ALLEN LAWRENCE

Private 18064, Royal Marines Light Infantry

Died at sea on Friday 1st January 1915, from H.M.S. Formidable



H.M.S. Formidable, 15,800 tons, 411 feet long, with a top speed of 18 knots and a main armament of four 12-inch and twelve 6-inch guns, also 4 torpedo tubes, was a powerful battleship. Although launched in 1901, five years before the first Dreadnought and therefore slower, less armoured & outgunned, she was still a force to be reckoned with. Robert Lawrence had already been a Royal Marine for 14 months when, at the beginning of the First World War, Formidable was based at Portland with the 5th Battle Squadron to defend the English Channel and cover the transportation of the B.E.F. to France in August 1914. Transferred to Sheerness because of a perceived German invasion threat, on December 30th the 5th Battle Squadron returned to Portland. On New Year's Eve 1914, she had been practicing gunnery off the Isle and, later that night, in worsening sea conditions, was patrolling about 20 miles off Start Point with her escort of two cruisers.

At 2.20 a.m. the next morning a torpedo from the U-boat U24 struck one of the boilers on the port side. Initially, Formidable headed for the shore in the hope that she could be saved, but 20 minutes later she was listing badly and the Captain, Noel Loxley, gave the order to abandon ship, although in the darkness and a heavy swell it was difficult to launch the boats and some ended upside down in the water. At 3.05 a second torpedo struck the starboard side. The two escorts came alongside and managed to rescue 80 men. More boats were launched, but many men were drowned after the ship capsized and sank nearly two hours later; Captain Loxley, having overseen the evacuation, in true Naval tradition returned to the bridge with his terrier Bruce, calmly lit a cigarette & went down with his ship. This was the first battleship sinking of the First World War. Out of a complement of 711 men, 547 died. Most of the

bodies were never recovered and are remembered, along with Robert's, on the Chatham Memorial.

Robert Lawrence's father, William, was born at East Horsley in 1865. In 1891 he was living with his widowed mother, Rachel and working as a gardener at West Hill, Epsom. At this time William's future wife Lucy Cate was employed as a housemaid to a family in Long Ditton. They married in 1893, probably at Lucy's birthplace, West Clandon. William Frank, their first child, was born in October that year at Staines, with Robert Allen following in July 1895. By 1901, the family had moved to Ham Common, near Richmond, but only three years later are living at Manor Lodge, Mill Lane, Pirbright (*below*), which was owned by Major Armstrong of the Manor House. William was almost certainly employed there as a gardener, together with George Smith, stepfather of Basil Ellis (who also died in the Great War). In the 1911 census Robert was a 15 year-old house and garden boy, with his elder brother employed in grocery and bread making, probably by Harry Boylett on Pirbright Green. Both boys came from Oxted when they went to Pirbright School in 1904, William Frank leaving in September '07 and Robert in July '09. Their parents continued to live at Manor Cottage until 1920, when they moved away.



Chatham Memorial (CWGC)