

Chester Forster: THEODORE BAILEY HARDY: Monthly Meeting, 20 October, 2022

Very kindly stepping in at the eleventh hour, Chester Forster gave members of Penrith and North Lakes a most interesting talk on a World War One hero who had lived in Cumbria for part of his life and whose plaque may be found in Carlisle Cathedral. It was this memorial which sparked Chester's interest in researching Hardy's life and he spent much time in visiting the places he had lived and worked in to discover more about this unique character.

Born in 1863 into a fairly well-off Exeter family, Theo and his brother, both bright lads, were educated in London, Theo going on to London University to read History and English and his brother to Belfast to read Medicine. Despite being small and short-sighted, Theo greatly enjoyed sport. Whilst staying with his brother during a summer vacation he met and fell in love with a vivacious, kind lady: Florence Hastings, whom he married before graduating and to support her he became a teacher. Whilst he felt called to ordination, he thought he could not thereby support his family and in the 1890s Hardy secured a job at Nottingham High School where he taught DH Lawrence. Hardy also became a house-master and decided in 1898 to be ordained so at that stage he was very busy with both his school and church roles. Promotion came in 1907 when the family moved to Bentham where Hardy was appointed to the headship of the Grammar School.

Sadly, Florence was diagnosed with cancer in 1914 and died only a few months afterwards at Hutton Roof near Kendal in the Carlisle diocese, Hardy having become the rector there. This loss was a great blow to Hardy who visited her grave daily to offer prayer. Once the First World War broke out he was determined to serve as an army chaplain but only after 2 years of persistence and following the Battle of the Somme was Hardy taken on.

It was at this stage that the special qualities of Hardy most clearly came to the fore. His caring attitude, kindness and bravery were apparent to the soldiers from the beginning of his service and he comforted and supported each one in their greatest hour of need. Stories abound of his commitment to the soldiers, keeping them company in their final minutes, hours or even days in the dangers of the battlefield; and on occasions digging out the wounded in the hope of saving their lives. He offered the troops sweets, cigarettes or a quiet chat during the long, sleepless nights, greeting them with his catch-phrase 'It's only me'. Not satisfied until he was allowed to go to the front, the padre went with the men 'over the top' an astonishing 43 times when the average number for the troops was just 3. His impressive diligence and outstanding kindness were soon recognised not just by the combatants but also by their officers and Hardy was awarded the DSO. His courage in the Battle of Passchendaele led to his gaining the MC and for rescuing, along with others, a comrade on the front near Switzerland he was awarded the VC which the King presented to him in person. A further honour was to be made a chaplain to the King but Hardy refused to leave the front. Sadly, his determination to stay with the troops until the war was over cost him his life. Following a leg wound which proved fatal, despite the ministrations of staff at a hospital in Rome, Theodore Hardy died on 18 October, 1918, shortly before the armistice.



Portrait of Theodore Hardy by Howard Somerville, kept by the Imperial War Museum.

A biography, 'It's Only Me : A Life of the Reverend Theodore Bayley Hardy V.C., D.S.O., M.C. 1863 – 1918 Vicar of Hutton Roof, Westmorland' by David Raw was published in 1988.