

Frederick James Meaden 1871-1940

We were contacted by a grandson of Frederick James Meaden about six months or so ago and this is an account of the research that we have undertaken on his behalf. At the time of this contact, the information we had on Frederick consisted only of his birth and who his parents were and that he had served in the Army in India. We traced a marriage record for him in 1908 to a Meena Minnie Whatley of Trowbridge and checked this find with Frederick's grandson by email. This is part of the answer we received:

My Grandfather did marry Meena Whatley, I remember her well, she used to baby sit me and was a very kind soul.....

Later, in the same email was the following:

There is one mystery that we haven't solved yet, my eldest son was christened in St James parish church in Trowbridge and at the time the vicar said "do you want to see the entry of when your Grandmother Meena was married" of course we did and it turned out he was a widower, this was news to both her Daughters, so he must have been married before, it was the big secret.

This sent us off on a search for another marriage for Frederick James prior to 1908, but we were unable to trace any further information on this. Later we were speaking to a cousin, David Meaden, who immediately came up with the answer – Frederick had married a woman called Rebecca and had a child with her, the child being called Emily. Even armed with this information, we were still unable to find a marriage and trawled through his military records, where there was no mention of any marriage while he was in the Army. We knew that he was unmarried in 1889 when he enlisted in the Wiltshire Regiment of the Army, so this was a real mystery. He left the Army in February 1908 and married Meena Minnie on 17th October 1908 – this obviously did not give him enough time to marry a first wife, have a child and for the wife to die, so what had happened? So it was time to examine his military records again, to follow his somewhat odd military career.

Military Career

Frederick James Meaden joined the Army on 6th July 1889 in Devizes, at the age of 18 years and 2 months. He was posted to the Wiltshire Regiment and given the regimental number 2579. After 2 years service, on 6th July 1891 he was awarded Good Conduct pay. Following this, on 14th August 1891 he is noted as a deserter; the next entry on his Army record shows him rejoining his regiment on 25th November 1893, some two years later. After this episode, for which he was court-martialled, he carried on his career in the army, serving for a considerable time in India from 16th September 1895, returning to this country on 12th March 1907. The rest of his time in the Army was spent at Devizes in Wiltshire, until 1908, when he was discharged at his own request on 29th February 1908 having completed 18 years service. After the outbreak of the First World War, he re-joined the Wiltshire Regiment on 23rd October 1914 and served throughout the war, being discharged on 19th April 1919. Obviously, Frederick was, apart from the curious incident between August 1891 and November 1893, a model soldier.

What had he been up to, during this time? The answer came from another member of the Meaden family, who came up with the tale that Frederick had wanted to transfer to the Liverpool Regiment, but had not been allowed to do so, for reasons that are unknown. This has been confirmed by his Army records, which appeared to have been mixed up with another soldier, Frederick Fry from

Frederick James Meaden 1871-1940

Birmingham. When these were unravelled, it was clear that this was Frederick James Meaden, under another name. Following his desertion from the Wiltshire, he had obviously travelled North as on 2nd September 1891 he had re-enlisted in the Army in Warrington, Lancashire as Frederick Fry, now giving his age as 19 years and 3 months. He was now posted to the Liverpool Regiment and given the regimental number 3597. Here he stayed for the next two years, again being granted Good Conduct pay after two years service on 2nd September 1893. However, on 3rd October 1893 he is declared a deserter again, this time from the Liverpool Regiment. This is the end of Frederick Fry and the re-appearance of Frederick James Meaden – it is obvious that at this point he had either owned up to who he really was, or had been discovered in some other way.

Again, from the same family member who had come up with this story, came the answer. Frederick had married Rebecca Taylor from Manchester on 15th April 1893 in Salford – the marriage record is in the name of Frederick Fry. Following on from this, a daughter Emily was born to the couple on 14th November 1893 in Salford – in the birth records, Emily is down as Emily Meaden, rather than Fry. Whether this event caused the story to come out, or it had come out just before is unknown. He then returned to the Wiltshire Regiment as above. This explains why there is some confusion in his Army records over the length of his service, as initially the time he was missing from the Wiltshires was deducted from his service, but then later this time was added back in, as he had served this time, except for a few weeks in 1891, in the Liverpool Regiment.

This must be one of the few occasions where a deserter has chosen to conceal himself in probably the last place people would look, in the Army itself!

Marriage to Rebecca Taylor

As stated above, Frederick and Rebecca had married in 1893 in Salford, while Frederick was going under the name of Frederick Fry. This marriage was to end in tragedy some 15 years later, just after Frederick had finished his time in the Army. With Frederick posted to India in September 1895, his daughter Emily seems to have been brought up by her grand-parents John & Louisa Meaden in Trowbridge, which is where she is at the time of the 1901 census. Rebecca at this time is living in Emsworth in Hampshire, her occupation being given as a laundress. With her is a child, William Arthur Meaden aged 2 from Emsworth – his birth certificate shows that he was born on 10th January 1899 and no father's name is shown. With Frederick stationed in India, he obviously was not the father.

Sometime while she was in Emsworth, Rebecca had started a relationship with a Charles Vinall, an ex-artillery man and at the time of the 1901 census, he is also shown as being resident in Emsworth, not far from Rebecca and William Arthur. This relationship seems to have lasted for the next few years until sometime in 1907, at which point Frederick returned home from India. Frederick left the Army on 29th February 1908, having spent almost 13 years of his service time in India. By this time Rebecca had settled in the village of Holt in Wiltshire, setting up a home for Frederick. Also by this time, Emily, the couple's daughter had returned and was now living in Holt with them. Also living with the family was a child, named Willie Cousins, and he appears to be the William Arthur Meaden born in 1899. Thus was the stage set for the tragedy to unfold on Saturday, 4th April 1908.

Frederick James Meaden 1871-1940

The murder of Rebecca Meaden

This is how events unfolded, as recounted in the Wiltshire Times in 1908, and subsequently reprinted in 2010 in the local Holt Magazine.

April 1908

TERRIBLE TRAGEDY AT HOLT. WOMAN SHOT DEAD BY HER FIRESIDE

A tragedy took place at Holt which probably forms one of the most terrible chapters in the history of that thriving village.

The victims were Rebecca Meaden, aged 37, wife of Frederick Meaden, an ex-soldier of the Wilts Regiment, and Charles Vinall, an ex-artilleryman, whose home was at Emsworth, near Portsmouth.

The Meadens resided in a cottage near the Green, and here it was that on Saturday afternoon Mrs Meaden met with a violent death at the hands of Vinall, who then deliberately took his own life.

Meaden served with the colours for quite a number of years in India, during which period an intimacy sprang up between his wife and Vinall, whose age is given as 56 years. In the autumn of last, however, Mrs Meaden came to Holt, where a home was prepared for her husband, who had returned from India, and was then attached to the Depot at Devizes, and who took his discharge in February last, since which he and his wife and children had lived happily together in their little cottage, Mrs Meaden being employed at the Laundry. Vinall paid them a week-end visit at Christmas, but nothing untoward occurred.

On Saturday, about 1.30 pm, Vinall again put in an appearance, and though totally unexpected he was made welcome. Nothing peculiar seemed to have been noticed in his manner, and he was apparently as friendly as ever. He accompanied Meaden on the road to Melksham, who was going to see the Wilts cup final between Trowbridge and Devizes, and on the way the men called at both the White Hart and the Three Lions, where they drank together. They then separated, Meaden proceeding to Melksham, and Vinall, who was accompanied by a little lad named Willie Cousins, who resided with the Meadens, returning to the cottage, where he had been urged by the husband to make himself comfortable until he returned.

What conversation took place between Vinall and Mrs Meaden is a matter of conjecture; but it is clear that upon his return the woman went into the front room and Vinall and the lad followed. Here whilst Mrs Meaden was attending to the fire Vinall suddenly produced a loaded revolver, which he must have had concealed about his person all the time, and fired point-blank at her several times, two of the shots entering her head with fatal effect.

With a cry of "Oh, God, Oh, Fred," the unfortunate woman fell dead in front of the fire-place. Then, with the little lad still a horrified spectator, Vinall turned the weapon upon himself and with one shot took his own life. He, too, fell to the ground and lay with his head resting on the body of the murdered woman, and the revolver by his side.

These events were described in more detail in the Wiltshire Times edition of Saturday, 11th April 1908, and this is attached elsewhere.

Frederick James Meaden 1871-1940



The house in Holt - 2011

Aftermath

Following on from this tragedy, Frederick subsequently married Meena Minnie Whatley of Trowbridge on 17th October 1908 and the couple had five children. When the First World War started, Frederick again joined the Wiltshire Regiment on 23rd October 1914, serving in France until once again he was demobbed on 19th April 1919. He died in Trowbridge on 17th October 1940.

His daughter Emily was at the time of the 1911 census back with her grand-parents, after which time she disappears. William Arthur Meaden, also known as Willie Cousins disappears after this episode and there appears to be no further trace of him.