

# *This is A Few Forgotten Women Story*



***This is one of a series of stories about those who served with the Voluntary Aid Detachment.***

## **Miss Muriel Mesney VAD Redcross Nurse**

In April 1915 Miss Mesney, Muriel to her closest friends, signed up to work at the Okehampton Voluntary Aid Hospital, one of over 3,000 auxiliary hospitals administered by Red Cross county directors<sup>1</sup>.

Early in the First World War, the British Red Cross and the Order of St John of Jerusalem combined to form the Joint War Committee. By securing buildings, equipment and staff, they were able to set up temporary hospitals as soon as wounded men began to arrive from abroad. The buildings varied widely, the most suitable becoming established as auxiliary hospitals, attached to central Military Hospitals. Patients remained under military control, but were looked after by the volunteers as they convalesced<sup>2</sup>.

Muriel initially helped with cooking, but after one week was transferred to nursing duties. She started at the V.A. hospital in Belstone, but later moved to the V.A. Military Camp Hospital, where she did the majority of her volunteer sessions. Like many other local women and around 90,000 other volunteers, Muriel worked for the Red Cross on a part-time basis. She completed a total of 182 hours over 14 months, working less than 4 hours per week.

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<sup>1</sup> You can search for volunteers by name or place at <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/our-history/first-world-war-volunteers>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/our-history/list-of-auxiliary-hospitals-in-the-uk-during-the-first-world-war.pdf>

I suspect that being socially active and from a relatively well-to-do clergy family, Muriel would have used her background and experience to help with fund raising. Her mother was noted to be collecting for the flag day in aid of Red Cross funds<sup>3</sup>.

No doubt Muriel was also fund raising alongside Mrs Prickman<sup>4</sup>, the V.A. hospital quartermaster, who was also a clergyman's daughter.

On her Red Cross application in 1915 Muriel was living at The Retreat in Sticklepath.



*Chapman postcard showing The Heritage,  
The Retreat is similar, hidden behind the trees on the left.*

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<sup>3</sup> Reported in the Western Times Friday 12 October 1917

<sup>4</sup> You can read more about Amy Beatrice Prickman  
<https://sticklepathhistory.family/2021/03/17/oneplacewomen-amy-beatrice-prickman/>

A newspaper article<sup>5</sup> on Friday 13 April 1917 in the Exeter and Plymouth Gazette tells us her mother was living in Tawburn, a few doors along the street, renting from the Misses Trethewey, daughters of a methodist minister, who had retired to Sticklepath. It is highly likely Muriel was living there too.

Exeter & Plymouth Gazette Friday 13 April 1917

Messrs Callaway and Co., of Hatherleigh acting on instructions from the Misses Trethewey,  
sold by auction, at the Taw River Hotel, the following properties:

Tawburn  
occupied by Mrs. Mesney, £825 to Mrs J.D. Prickman

“Aeffra” and “Farleigh” cottages  
tenanted by Miss Elderton and Mrs Middle respectively, £215 to Mrs Middle

At auction Mrs Prickman bought Tawburn:

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<sup>5</sup> All newspaper articles transcribed from images accessed June 2023 from [BritishNewspaperArchive.co.uk](http://BritishNewspaperArchive.co.uk), originals held by The British Library



Photo of Tawburn taken 1983 showing the proximity of the thatched roof of The Retreat at the far right.

The Retreat was occupied by the Misses Trethewey in 1917 but soon became the home of the Mesney family again. Mrs Mesney and her sister Emily C Button are there on Census night 1921.

If The Retreat could be considered a substantial house, then Tawburn must be considered as *very* substantial. When it was available for renting on 17 June 1898, the Exeter & Plymouth Gazette described it as an attractive modern house with 3 reception rooms, 6 bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchens and offices, two-stalled stable and a coach house.

I wonder how the use of these houses might have changed during the war?

The following local news article from the Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, Friday 21 May 1915 gives some idea of the impact of war on village life.

With the nearby Okehampton military camp on Dartmoor, Sticklepath was being asked to house some of the soldiers in training. I wonder how many were welcomed at Tawburn or The Retreat? The newspaper article also names two of the village's young men who were injured, Muriel's brother Roger and another near neighbour Willie Tucker.

#### STICKLEPATH

The question is asked: Are we to have some soldiers billeted in the village? The police have been round to the householders asking what number can be taken in at each house.

Second-Lieutenant R.J.Mesney, Warwickshire Regiment, son of Mrs Mesney, of Tawburn House, and of the late Archdeacon Mesney of Gidleigh Rectory, has been wounded at the front, and is now in England. We are glad to hear his wounds are not serious.

Sergeant W.J. Tucker, of the Devons, soon of Mr and Mrs Aubrey Tucker, who has been in France since August, has been wounded by a bullet through the leg and has been brought back to England. He is progressing favourably. Willie was always a bright lad and a favourite in the village

The same article went on to say that Mrs Ann Mallett of Foundry House, Sticklepath, had just received a letter from the King congratulating her on having 4 sons and a son-in-law in the army, as well as a grandson in training. How would she have felt about it? Proud of them I am sure, but perhaps also a feeling of dread. Her house would certainly have felt half empty.

I note the timing of this article and the date Miss Mesney volunteered were close. I wonder if news of her brother's injury prompted her to volunteer? Perhaps she sought to gain some experience, in case she should need to nurse her brother? Would he come to Okehampton VA Hospital to convalesce?

Muriel will have had to face the grim reality of nursing injured soldiers, the horror of dressing physical wounds, listening to their terrifying stories and witnessing their nightmares. Then there was the psychological impact both on these young men and on their distressed relatives struggling to come to terms with the realities of living with injuries, or the daunting prospect of their loved one returning to war.

The war was a traumatic life experience for everyone. There is a tendency now to neatly package the war between two dates. However, the impact remained long after fighting had ceased. Food was scarce, so not only was there rationing but a generation grew up not knowing how to cook many previously common dishes. Women who had had servants before the war probably never would again. Then there were the effects on family structure caused by losing so many young men. Many girls, perhaps Muriel included, who had hoped to marry, did not find a much longed for sweetheart. The challenges of living with chronic disability, and the on-going psychological effects meant many could never forget. Women who had been allowed to work in a 'male occupation' started a revolution that, as we now know, very gradually changed attitudes to sex discrimination in the workplace. Many women no doubt felt frustration at having to relinquish the freedom brought by work when the men returned.

A Roll of Honour in St Mary's Church, Sticklepath names Muriel's brother "Lieutenant Roger Mesney, Warwickshire Regt" among the 35 who served and returned. The Village Hall also has a memorial plaque for the 8 villagers who had served and fallen, almost one in every four who fought. You may be pleased to note only one of the Mallett family is named here.

The newspaper article reporting the unveiling of this plaque is transcribed here in full. Roger and Muriel's mother, Mrs Alice Mary Mesney, accompanied the singing. It is most probable the whole family were in the crowd. Would they have joined the chorus of uplifted voices, struggled to fight back tears, or stood immobile, chilled to the core by the thought of so many friends lost?

Western Times - Friday 16 July 1920

### STICKLEPATH

In the presence of a vast concourse of people, and in glorious sunshine, the war memorial to the fallen of Sticklepath was unveiled on Sunday afternoon. The memorial takes the form of a handsome white marble tablet, about three feet by two, and fixed in the wall of the village hall, which adjoins the main street. Mr. A. G. Finch, J.P., was the chairman of the memorial committee. The Rector of the parish (Rev. J. F. Beaumont Burnaby), who was a chaplain to the Forces, was unable to be present. The tablet, which was unveiled by Private James Wright (the oldest soldier), bore the inscription:

"This tablet was erected in memory of the eight men  
from this village, whose names are recorded, who fell  
serving their God and Country during the Great War, 1914-1919.

William Henry Bowden,  
Alfred Hellier,  
Ernest Hellier,  
Thomas Lethbridge,  
Benjamin A. Mallett,  
Samuel Pearse,  
Cecil Rowell,  
Alfred Norman White.

Several hymns were sung, including a special, "The Supreme Sacrifice." Mrs. Mesney acted as accompanist. The "Last Post" was sounded by Private Sydney Coombe. Rev. Sparshott, in a short address, asked for the prayers of all for the relatives. He said those who had died were not lost. They had simply gone before, and if they could flash a message, he (the rev. gentleman) was sure the words would be "Duty and service." The speaker emphasised how nobly the brave men had gone to save us from being a crushed and beaten nation, and we could not do too much for those who were left.

Rev, A Simpson Leek (Wesleyan) related some of his experiences while engaged in some of the large hospitals, and paid a very high tribute to the unfailing cheerfulness and bravery of the men. He asked those present, in passing along the village street, to turn their eyes to the tablet, and breathe a word of prayer for those lying peacefully in a far away land.

The National Anthem having been sung, the proceedings terminated.

So who was Muriel Mesney?

Muriel Osmond Mesney was born in Sarawak, Kuching, Borneo in 1893 or 1894. She was baptised by her father William Ransom Mesney, Archdeacon of Sarawak<sup>6</sup>. Her parents were Missionaries, so she was a British national.

Her father was educated at St Augustine's College, Canterbury and ordained in 1862. He had been married prior to marrying Muriel's mother and had children by that marriage, though they do not concern us here. From 1864 he had been stationed in the Diocese of Labuan and Sarawak, Borneo as a missionary. (Labuan, is an island in East Malaysia, 6 miles from northwestern Borneo in the South China Sea.) Initially in Labuan, by 1868 he was in Banting<sup>7</sup>. From 1872 he was working in Borneo, including Kuching in 1876, and became Archdeacon of Sarawak in 1882<sup>8</sup>. He was widowed in 1883.

In 12 December 1888 he married Alice Mary Button in Singapore Cathedral. She was the third daughter of James Button of Caistor, Lincolnshire. Their three children were all born in Sarawak. The family returned to the UK between 1897 and 1900 and by 25 Apr 1900 he was appointed curate to Withycombe Raleigh (Honiton, Devon).

In 1901 we find Muriel aged 7 at The Vicarage in Withycombe Raleigh with her parents, older sister Sybil (11 y) and younger brother Roger James (4 y). Aunt Emily C. Button is visiting.

In 1911 Muriel is living at Hillside, Drewsteignton, along with her father, mother and one servant Lilian Lucy Lewis (who was 20 years old and originally from Reading, Berkshire).

In 1921, on census night, she was staying with her brother and his family in Wales. However, he is in the electoral register in the same year both before and after, living at The Retreat in Sticklepath, so this visit to Wales in June may have been a holiday<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> *FindMyPast has an index of baptism records which state Entry 925, 1893, Sarawak Baptisms, 1844-1925, Sarawak St. Thomas, Borneo, Record Set: British Armed Forces And Overseas Births And Baptisms, Consular/Overseas*

<sup>7</sup> Crockford's Clerical directory 1868 accessed through [ancestry.co.uk](https://ancestry.co.uk) June 2023

<sup>8</sup> UK Clergy list 1897 accessed through [ancestry.co.uk](https://ancestry.co.uk) June 2023

<sup>9</sup> All census information and electoral register accessed through [ancestry.co.uk](https://ancestry.co.uk) June 2023, except 1921 census accessed through [FindMyPast.co.uk](https://findmypast.co.uk)



Life gradually returned to a new normal. Muriel won prizes at Sticklepath Flower Show, and for her cake at a WI Handicrafts Exhibition for the region held in Plymouth in 1926<sup>10</sup>.

Sadly, she only had a short life. Muriel developed sarcoma, a cancer, probably in her leg. This recurred in 1928, and on 5th December she died in Okehampton Hospital of septicaemia at just 35 years of age. (The Cottage Hospital in Okehampton then stood where the doctor's surgery is today).

Probate confirms that at the time of her death she was still living in Sticklepath with her mother at "The Retreat". She left just £66 6s and 11d.

*This story was researched by Helen Shields and written with the benefit of comments from Natalie Pithers as part of the Curious Descendants Club July 2023*

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**You can find details of all those who were part of the Voluntary Aid Detachment on the excellent Red Cross website. You are invited to research one of these women to add to our gradually expanding resource . For more information about tracing those associated with the VAD see the Historical Musings blog. There are more stories of VAD workers on the Remembering British Women in World War 1 Facebook page. Please see the Few Forgotten Women website for further information about joining us on a Forgotten Women Friday or taking part in this VAD research as part of our perpetual Forgotten Women Friday.**

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<sup>10</sup> Western Times - Friday 30 April 1926