

December 1915

Christmas Day is here. Merry Christmas. Anyone passing St Peter's church today should hear the joyous sound of the congregation singing "The First Noel" and "Good King Wenceslas". Within earshot, across the graveyard, in the Cemetery Lodge, live Fred Wilby and his wife. Today they appreciate they have a most precious gift for Christmas ...

The couple's home, on the edge of the graveyard, comes with Fred's job. He is employed by the Brandon Council to maintain the graveyard and can often be seen mowing the grass or preparing graves. Most of the town know the couple. It is true to say most of the town also knows of one of their sons, Percy. Percy assisted the Scout leader in leading the summer parades, organising teams for sports days and was captain of their cricket team. Then war came. Percy, aged nineteen, did not hesitate to enlist with his pals, eventually going out to France in May this year. Although Percy grew up next to Brandon's graveyard it still did not prepare him for what he saw in France. This summer, while he and a mate visited the grave of a pal, an artillery shell exploded in a tree they were standing under. Wood splinters and metal shrapnel hurtled down and they were lucky to escape unscathed. It was a different story a few weeks later.

In October, Percy, of 'D' Company, 7th Norfolk Regiment, was amongst a British advance onto the German lines. Imagine if you will that bullets are flying everywhere, with men falling left, right and centre. However, through this commotion I will describe the journey of just one bullet toward one man. This bullet leaves the German lines, travelling faster than the speed of sound and hits a drummer dressed in Khaki, square onto his heart. That drummer is Percy. The passage of the bullet sees it pass through Percy's uniform, or more precisely a chest pocket, which offers no resistance. In that pocket is a wallet swollen with letters and photographs of loved ones. The bullet smashes through these and then rips through a New Testament bible, before entering Percy's chest.

By rights the following day Percy should be lying underground in a grave, like the ones his father digs. This would surely make a most dismal Christmas tale. So I am delighted to tell you that Percy miraculously survived and was taken to the General Hospital, in Rouen, France. It seems the items in his pocket reduced the speed of the bullet enough for the bible to deflect it away from his heart. Had divine intervention stepped in and saved Percy? The bible had been virtually destroyed and his treasured photographs had a bullet hole straight through them all. But do you know what? Not one person in any of the photographs was defaced. The bullet left the images of his loved ones unspoiled!

Percy was shipped over the Channel to convalesce in a British hospital. A few days ago he was awarded leave to spend Christmas with his family. At about that time the Dyer family, living on London Road, received sad news that their son James, missing since August last year, had been officially declared dead by the War Office. This heartbreaking news was not unexpected, but the timing was most unwelcome. Life is the most precious gift to be received, as both the Dyer and Wilby families can testify this Christmas.