

An Edwardian Family and their Tragedies: Lt George Archer-Shee, 1st South Staffordshire Regiment (1895-1914)



Lt George Archer-Shee

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The Edwardian era's reputation as a society of privilege, extravagance and excess that was to be destroyed by the Great War can mask family tragedies to which the war only added its own stratum of pain and despair. The mother and widowed head of one such family was Helen (or Nellie) Archer-Shee, who in the years leading up to the war endured a series of calamities that were to culminate when her only son was reported wounded and missing on 31 October 1914, one of the most crucial days of the war. How she responded to this tragedy is one theme of this article, but it is set within the wider contexts of a reputable and prosperous upper middle-class family beset by misfortune and the desperate efforts of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to defend Ypres in October and November 1914. On the surface, there is little to distinguish the Archer-Shees from thousands of families of their class who suffered loss in the war, except for the fact that son George is now better known as 'The Winslow Boy', the naval cadet who was accused of theft, was the subject of a dramatic court case and was in 1946, many years after his death, the subject of a famous play by Terrence Rattigan.

George's father was Martin Archer-Shee, an agent for the Bank of England who was born in Marylebone, London in 1846. He was a Roman Catholic, with the family's roots in Ireland. In April 1872 he married Edith Pell, an American from New York.¹ They were to have three children, one a boy also called Martin, who was born on 5 May 1873. Edith unfortunately died in 1890, but at the end of 1892 Archer-Shee remarried. Helen Treloar was twenty-six years his junior, having been born in salubrious and fashionable Blackheath in South London on 31 July 1872 (less than a year before her step-son). Her father was a coconut fibre manufacturer (the product was used in mats and brushes). The Archer-Shees moved to Bristol, living in the Bank of England residence in Broad St where they had three children, Annie, born in 1892, George, born on 6 May 1895, and Helen, born in 1899.² When the father retired, they moved to an early eighteenth-century house in South Woodchester, a small Gloucestershire village.³

¹ Her full maiden name was Elizabeth Edith Dennistoun-Pell. *The Times*, 7 January 1935.

² A copy of George Archer-Shee's birth certificate is in the Service Record of George Archer-Shee, TNA PRO WO 339/8986.

³ Little House was a six-bedroom dwelling. It was renamed Winslow House in 1970. *Daily Telegraph*, 10 June 2000.

The family had links to the armed forces. While working in London Martin Archer-Shee Snr served with the 1st Volunteer Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, reaching the rank of Captain by 1891. His son Martin, after a period at the Oratory School in London, became a cadet on the old wooden sailing ship HMS *Britannia*, the training school for Royal Navy officers moored on the River Dart in Devon. He passed out in July 1888 and served a few weeks as Midshipman on HMS *Agincourt* in the Channel Fleet before transferring to HMS *Cleopatra*, a 3rd Class cruiser that sailed from Devonport for the South-East American station off Brazil.⁴ He remained with the ship until September 1890 when, presumably following the death of his mother, he returned to England on compassionate leave. A fortnight later he resigned his commission.⁵

It is unknown whether family expectations or his loss of interest in the navy precipitated this move, but Martin Jr still desired a career in the armed services, for he was accepted as a Gentleman Cadet at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, receiving his commission as a 2nd Lieutenant on 15 March 1893 and being posted to the 19th Hussars.⁶ He was to serve in India and in South Africa during the Second Boer War, being awarded the DSO in 1901 and suffering a very serious wound at Roodepoort, near Johannesburg, in February 1902.⁷ In 1905 he married Frances Pell, possibly an American cousin, and resigned from the army. In 1910 he was elected Conservative and Unionist MP for Central Finsbury. He was to remain in Parliament until 1923, at which point he was knighted. He had re-joined the army at the outbreak of war in 1914 and was to be mentioned in despatches four times (to go with the three mentions during the Boer War), wounded at Ypres on 9 May 1915 and thereafter given command of no fewer than four infantry battalions on the Western front.⁸

Although the circumstances were to be very different, George Archer-Shee was destined to follow in his half-brother's footsteps, for after attending the Catholic school of Stonyhurst he was accepted, following a competitive examination, as a naval cadet. Since Martin's time Dartmouth Royal Naval College had undergone major changes. In 1903 Lord Selbourne and Admiral Sir John Fisher began to reform the navy's educational system. HMS *Britannia* was replaced by a school on shore, but during the building phase younger cadets received their schooling at the Royal Naval College, Osborne, on the Isle of Wight. A cadet, starting between the ages of twelve and thirteen, would spend two years at Osborne before moving on to Dartmouth.⁹

George started at Osborne in January 1908 and it was not until October that his life was turned upside down. A fellow cadet, Terence Back, whose dormitory bed was next to George's, received a postal order for five shillings, which was stolen and cashed, according to the local postmistress, by an Osborne boy who also bought a postal order for fifteen shillings and sixpence. Only two boys visited the shop that afternoon and one was exonerated, leaving Archer-Shee, who had bought a postal order of that value, as the only suspect. The school authorities, without informing his parents, declared him a thief and a forger and the Admiralty demanded his removal from the school. Both his father and his half-brother were certain of his innocence and the latter, using his contacts in the Conservative Party, sought the services

⁴ Service Record, Martin Archer-Shee, TNA PRO ADM 196/43; UK Navy Lists, 1888-1970, p. 206, Ancestry.co.uk.

⁵ Service Record, Martin Archer-Shee, TNA PRO ADM 196/43.

⁶ *London Gazette*, 14 March 1893, p.1616.

⁷ Anglo Boer War website,

https://angloboerwar.com/index.php/component/content/?option=com_grid&gid=2_vg_0&p=570. He was one of the defenders during the siege of Ladysmith.

⁸ *The Times*, 7 January 1935.

⁹ Jane Harrold, "'From Dartmouth to War': The Midshipman in the First and Second World Wars", www.oceanides-association.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/From-Dartmouth-to-War.pdf. I am also grateful for advice from "seaJane" and "Horatio2" on the Great War Forum, <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com>.

of Sir Edward Carson, one of the greatest advocates of the time. Carson, a diehard Protestant Ulster Unionist, interviewed George and, equally convinced of his innocence, took up the case.

It took nearly two years of complex legal manoeuvring, including the use of an ancient procedure known as a Petition of Right, before the case—Martin Archer-Shee Snr sued the Admiralty—came before a jury. It became clear that the prosecution's case was weak, based almost entirely on the evidence of the elderly postmistress. On the fourth day the Solicitor-General Sir Rufus Isaacs, leading the prosecution case, admitted defeat and informed the judge and jury that the Admiralty now accepted that George Archer-Shee had not stolen the postal order, nor had he cashed it. They acknowledged his complete innocence.¹⁰

It was not until the summer of 1911 that, following several discussions in Parliament, the Admiralty paid Martin Archer-Shee damages and costs to the amount of £7120.¹¹ By then George had returned to Stonyhouse, too old to continue his naval cadetship. The case had been an enormous strain on the family and in March 1913 the father died, aged 67. That same year Helen Archer-Shee's younger daughter and namesake, Helen, also died.

On leaving Stonyhouse, where he had been a Sergeant in the Officer Training Corps, George received a commission, on probation, in the army's Special Reserve and undertook his six months' training with the 3rd South Staffordshire Regiment. On 9 December 1913 his commission was confirmed.¹² Almost immediately, however, George left the country. Although it was very common for young men at that time to travel overseas after leaving school—the Edwardian version of the modern gap year—it seems likely that George's decision to go abroad so soon after his father's death was at least partly related to the notoriety of his court case. He arrived in New York on SS *Carmania* in January 1914 and took up a position in the banking firm of Fisk and Robinson in Wall St.¹³ No doubt family connections in the city had helped to smooth his path, but it left his mother to mourn recent family tragedies without his support.

How long George intended to stay in the United States remains unknown, for as soon as war was declared on 4 August 1914 the army recalled him. He responded with alacrity, arriving in Liverpool less than a fortnight later.¹⁴ The BEF, including the 2nd Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment, had already deployed to France. The 1st Battalion was in South Africa, but began its return to Britain on 21 August, arriving in Southampton on 19 September.¹⁵ They moved to Lyndhurst Camp in the New Forest, which is where Archer-Shee would have joined them. He was given command of a platoon in B Company.

By this time reinforcements were desperately needed by the BEF, who were shortly to move from the Aisne to the north around Ypres. Two new divisions were being formed at home (the 7th and 8th) and the 1st Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment became part of 22 Infantry Brigade, 7th Division. The 7th Division was deputed to assist in the defence of Antwerp and on

¹⁰ The best account of the case and the trial is Edwin R. Keedy, 'A Petition of Right: Archer-Shee v. The King', *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, Vol. 87 (1939), pp.895-931.

¹¹ *The Times*, 1 August 1911.

¹² *London Gazette*, 2 May 1913, p.3152, 9 December 1913, p.9085.

¹³ SS *Carmania*, 5 January 1914, New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1957, Ancestry.co.uk; 'George Archer-Shee – *British Cause Célèbre*', <http://www.militarian.com/threads/george-archer-shee-british-cause-c%3%A9%3%A8bre.7715/>.

¹⁴ SS *St Paul*, 15 August 1914, UK, Incoming Passenger List, 1878-1960, Ancestry.co.uk.

¹⁵ War Diary, 1st South Staffordshire Regiment, TNA WO 95/1664. The War diary up to 26 October 1914 comprises a diary kept by the CO, Lt Col. (later Brigadier-General) R.M. Ovens. There is no record at all for the period 27 October to 9 November. Ovens was wounded either on the 30th or 31st October 1914 by shellfire. I am grateful to 'clk' (Chris), Martin Gillott and 'HolymoleyRE' (Andy) of the Great War Forum for information on Ovens' fate.

7 October 1914 it arrived in Zeebrugge.¹⁶ It was too late; the Belgian army was already withdrawing from the besieged port, which surrendered on 10 October.¹⁷ Now part of IV Corps (comprising just 7th Division and 3rd Cavalry Corps) under the command of Lt-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, the 1st Battalion moved to Ghent via Ostend. Their situation has been described thus:

Here was an isolated division, with practically no base and with no available reinforcements, operating entirely by itself, while large bodies of the enemy were reported in every direction. But for the information, which was regularly supplied by the aircraft, such a position would have become impossible.¹⁸

As German pressure built up the Division withdrew, first to the River Yser and then to Ypres by 14 October, where it would join up with the main body of the BEF. These days of retreat were ‘most trying’, with everyone ‘so done up and beat to the world’.¹⁹

Integrated into the BEF and soon to be transferred to I Corps, the 1st South Staffordshires had little time to rest, for the allies planned to advance into Belgium again. Unknown to the military authorities, however, the Germans were massing troops for an attack on Ypres, using the forces freed up from Antwerp, including heavy artillery, and deploying on the northern front the *Sixth Army*, brought up from the south, and a new *Fourth Army*. This gave the Germans a 2:1 advantage in manpower and huge artillery superiority. The allied advance soon turned into a desperate attempt to defend Ypres. In what came to be called the Battle of Langemarck (21 to 24 October 1914) the 7th Division had a daunting task, to cover a dog-leg seven-mile line that ran partly eastward from Zandvoorde to Kruike and then northward to Zonnebeke, facing several German *Cavalry Corps* along the first part and the *XXVII Reserve Corps* along the rest.²⁰

George Archer-Shee is mentioned only once by name in Ovens’ War Diary account of the 1st Battalion’s actions. On 23 October:

Captain Dunlop and part of “B” Company with Lieuts. Archer-Shee and Bartlett went up to reinforce the Wiltshire Regt., which were giving way. These men were under very heavy fire, shrapnel; our men got into the Wiltshire trenches and remained there for the day – if this party had not been reinforced they would have capitulated. ... The party under Captain Dunlop retired to join the battalion at dark.²¹

On the following day B Company reinforced the Northumberland Hussars in a wood close to battalion headquarters. Archer-Shee was not mentioned by name, but the company was involved in an attack on a farm house in a clearing in the wood and drove out the Germans. In this action Dunlop was killed.

On 25 October the battalion moved towards Kruike and was attached to 20th Brigade, in reserve and digging trenches behind 1st Grenadier Guards. Ovens thought ‘the 25th and 26th October were the most trying days the Battalion had seen during the campaign to date’. With fifteen German battalions attacking the badly weakened 20th Brigade in the early morning of

¹⁶ Ian F.W. Beckett, *Ypres 1914: The First Battle* (Harlow 2006), p.26; Ovens, ‘Diary’, in War Diary, 1st South Staffordshire Regiment, TNA WO 95/1664, p.4.

¹⁷ J.E. Edmonds, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1914*, 2 Vols. (London 1924), ii, p. 50.

¹⁸ Sir Frederick Ponsonby, *The Grenadier Guards in the Great War of 1914-1918*, 3 vols (London 1920), i, p.92.

¹⁹ Ovens, ‘Diary’, pp.6-9.

²⁰ Edmonds, *Official History 1914*, ii, p.155.

²¹ Ovens, ‘Diary’, p.16.

the 26th, assisted by massive artillery support, some got through the British line and their shouts in English to retire caused the 1st Battalion to withdraw.²² According to Ovens, ‘All Corps, numbering about 250 men and officers were making a retirement in a disorderly mob’. Rallied by South Staffordshire Captain and Quartermaster White, they were brought back and were able to keep ‘the general line intact’.²³

The climax of the German onslaught came on 31 October, one of the most critical days of the war for the BEF and, according to the *Official History*, for the British Empire.²⁴ It was also the day that George Archer-Shee was last seen alive and he was subsequently reported to be wounded and missing on the official casualty list of 16 November 1914.²⁵ The publication of this list was the first official notification of George’s status that his mother had heard. She had earlier received some disturbing information privately from the regiment but, although the War Office admitted to having received the casualty list on 8 November, when she attended the War Office on the 16th she had been given no information. The official response was that they had not known the address of Archer-Shee’s next-of-kin, but in truth they were overwhelmed by the scale of losses in the BEF at this time. Their failure to cope with the hundreds of missing officers in 1914 was to come back to haunt them in the immediate aftermath of the war.²⁶

Helen Archer-Shee was understandably very anxious about her son and angry with the War Office’s apparent lack of action. But she did have an *entrée* into the Casualties Office through Captain H.J.C. Stanton who, like her, lived in Woodchester.²⁷ He was working in M.S. 3 Casualties, the War Office section responsible for officer casualties. In December she asked him if ‘*anything* [is] being done to trace [George]? as it seems to me that unless one takes steps *oneself* nothing is done to help lessen one’s anxiety’.²⁸ Stanton replied that a system of special enquiries about the missing that were to be sent to Berlin, via the American Embassy, had just been publicized and he sent her a form to fill in details of her son.²⁹ There was inevitably a long delay between the form being sent and an answer being received, but in the meantime the War Office remained silent. This was because no further information had become available, yet Helen Archer-Shee found the wait, understandably, intolerable. On 29 January 1915 she again contacted Stanton, complaining of the lack of news and appealing on behalf of the many suffering mothers and wives of the missing. I would be glad to know, she wrote:

what steps (if any) are taken in your department to trace the missing and wounded, or whether only those who have the *means* and can employ outside agencies are able to learn the ultimate fate of their relations. There are thousands in England (sic) waiting anxiously week after week – month after month – who if they are fortunate enough to be able to *pay* for enquiries to be made finally learn what has become of their relatives who have given their services and often their lives to their country

²² Beckett, *Ypres 1914*, p.120.

²³ Ovens, ‘Diary’, p.20. The *Official History* states that only a few of the South Staffordshires were affected by this German *ruse de guerre*. Edmonds, *Official History 1914*, ii, p.246.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.303. Although first published in 1966, an excellent account of 31 October can be found in Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *Death of an Army* (Ware 1998), pp.149-167. See also Adrian Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914* (Oxford 2013), pp.243-254; Beckett, *Ypres 1914*, pp.159-199.

²⁵ See, for example, *Lichfield Mercury*, 27 November 1914.

²⁶ In 1919 the War Office came under significant pressure from relatives of Regular officers missing in 1914 and early 1915 to undertake new enquiries, a subject that I am currently working on.

²⁷ I am grateful to Charles Messenger and ‘HarryBrook’ of the Great War Forum for information on Stanton. For his obituary, see *Gloucester Journal*, 5 March 1927.

²⁸ Helen Archer-Shee to Captain Stanton (War Office), 14 December 1914, Service Record, Lt George Archer-Shee, TNA PRO WO 339/8986.

²⁹ The Enquiry form was completed by Helen’s daughter, Anna.

and who meet with scant attention from the War Office, who should be the first to do all in their power to assist.³⁰

Stanton, who was sympathetic to her plight, felt it necessary to answer her query regarding the War Office's actions regarding the missing and sought advice within the department. 'Can you suggest something?', he asked one of his superiors, as he had promised an enquiry to be directed at GHQ in France. 'No, I am afraid that I cannot', came the reply. 'You know what we are doing, i.e. special individual enquiries and circulation of lists in quarters from which information may be obtainable'.³¹ The link between the War Office and the Red Cross, who were undertaking their own enquiries, had not yet been forged. In defence of the Casualties Department, they were a record office, not a detective agency, with just four staff in August 1914. Helen Archer-Shee was thus informed that, as far as the War Office knew, outside agencies offering to assist relatives of the missing for payment obtained no more information than that which came through official channels.³²

By January 1915 Helen Archer-Shee had received some disturbing but unofficial information on the fate of her son. The evidence was inconsistent but not contradictory. On 21 December 1914 the father of Lt Hugh Willoughby informed her that he had received a letter from his son, then in a POW camp in Germany, in which he had written:

If you see an advert for Archer-Shee of my regiment will you answer it and say I was with him when I was taken, but regret to say he was badly wounded twice – in arm or chest and knee. I did what I could for him but was knocked out myself while at it. I was taken away from him and the last I saw of him was on Saturday 31 October at about 5pm.³³

Subsequent enquiries made by George's half-brother Martin within the battalion elicited a letter from Colonel Savage Armstrong, who wrote that:

During the retirement of the Division (October 31) [George] was in charge of a platoon in a very exposed part of the line. Other units it seems had received orders to retreat but the order had not reached him. Someone pointed out to him that the units on each side of him were retiring, he replied he did not care what they did, but not one of his men was to retire till he gave them orders to do so. And so they held on against great odds. Later a message reached him and he gave the order ... to retire as best they could. He was the *last* to retire and a man since killed reported he looked round and saw him lying face downward on the ground motionless as though killed instantly, his head towards the enemy.³⁴

Another report came via Sir Edward Worthington, RAMC, who had been on the staff of the BEF since the war began. A patient in hospital in Rouen had told Worthington that George had been 'so terribly wounded he would not have lived many moments'.³⁵ Finally, on 2 March a reply arrived in the War Office from Berlin: they had no information concerning a George Archer-Shee. There were no more avenues to follow.

³⁰ Helen Archer-Shee to War Office (M.S. 3 Cas.), 29 January 1915, *ibid.*

³¹ Memos dated 31 January and 4 February 1915, Service Record, Lt George Archer-Shee, TNA PRO WO 339/8986.

³² War Office to Helen Archer-Shee, 8 February 1915, *ibid.*

³³ Willoughby to Helen Archer-Shee (copy), 21 December 1915 (*recte* 1914), *ibid.*

³⁴ Col. Savage Armstrong to Major Archer-Shee (copy), *ibid.*

³⁵ Helen Archer-Shee to War Office, 2 May 1915, *ibid.* For Worthington, see *British Medical Journal*, 25 April 1953, p.943.

After agonizing for two months Helen informed the War Office that she now accepted that her son was dead and asked for his name to be placed on the official list of the dead (what the War Office called the Roll of Honour).³⁶ In private letters to Stanton she revealed some of what she had gone through while waiting for news. ‘All these months of torture’, she wrote, ‘only to end in this way!’. She attempted, however, to show a brave face: ‘I try to feel more pride than sorrow’.³⁷ She inserted notices in many newspapers, saying that there was no hope of his being alive and quoted his CO’s condolence letter in which George was praised as ‘a most promising young officer’ who had earned the love and respect of both officers and men and who, by his bravery and example ‘contributed largely to the success of the battalion in the actions near Ypres’. The affair at Dartmouth was not hidden, but used to emphasize his good character.³⁸ Helen also inserted an obituary in the newspapers, a final recognition that all hope had disappeared.³⁹

Ironically, although the War Office said that George’s name would be placed in the Roll of Honour as being presumed dead, they could not accept his death for official purposes, that is, for the purpose of taking his name from the Army Lists and winding up his financial affairs. War Office policy was that only an official report from France—from GHQ, or 3rd Echelon (the BEF’s administrative branch), or from the Base—could make his death official. In George’s case he was still officially wounded and missing, *presumed* dead. It was only to be in September 1915 that the M.S. 2 Casualty Branch of the War office was prepared to accept his death, on the grounds of lapse of time. Helen’s response to this news was she had given up ‘all hope of his safety many months ago’.⁴⁰ Two months later, however, she again contacted the War Office, asking why his name had not been officially published in the Roll of Honour since September. With the best intentions friends were still contacting her under the impression that he was still missing, not dead. ‘I shall be worried by letters’, she wrote, ‘which only tend to aggravate one’s loss’.⁴¹ The Casualty Department’s response was that they did not place a name on the Roll of Honour twice. Why do you not put your own obituary in the newspapers, they unhelpfully suggested?⁴²

Throughout her ordeal Helen had kept herself busy, first by working at the Station Canteen set up for troops at Rouen by Lady Mabelle Egerton and then at the Red Cross Hospital in Wincanton. After so many tragedies it must have been a consolation and a chance to move on with her life when, early in 1917, she married John Noel Buchanan, a Captain in the Royal Marines serving in the Royal Naval Division with the BEF.⁴³ Tragically, the marriage was to last only a few months. On 6 July 1917 Helen died of heart failure following an attack of typhoid.⁴⁴ Her only remaining child, Anna, who worked as a nurse at Guy’s Hospital during the war, subsequently married a doctor and moved to Scarborough. She alone from Martin Archer-Shee’s second marriage was left to mourn the short but eventful life of her brother George. The family’s tragedies that occurred after 1911 were not to be part of Terrence Rattigan’s successful play.

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³⁶ Helen Archer-Shee to War Office, 2 May 1915, Service Record, Lt George Archer-Shee, TNA PRO WO 339/8986.

³⁷ Helen Archer-Shee to Stanton, 2, 9 May 1915, *ibid*.

³⁸ See, for example, *Dublin Daily Press*, 4 May 1915; *The Globe*, 4 May 1915.

³⁹ See, for example, *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 8 May 1915.

⁴⁰ Helen Archer-Shee to War Office, 20 September 1915, Service Record, Lt George Archer-Shee, TNA PRO WO 339/8986.

⁴¹ Helen Archer-Shee to War Office, 14 November 1915, *ibid*.

⁴² M.S. 2 Casualties to Helen Archer-Shee, 25 November 1915.

⁴³ UK, Navy Lists, 1888-1970, Ancestry.co.uk.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 11 July 1917.