

WHAT HAPPENED

On the morning of Friday 24 August, Lieutenant Colonel Chatterley and over 600 of his men from the Royal Warwickshire regiment, set off on a route march from their camp to the nearby town of Blyth on the Northumberland coast, just a few miles away. It was a hot day, and Colonel Chatterley called a halt at the beach for 20 minutes to allow the men to bathe and cool off. As there were several hundred of them, they took up most of the beach between the West Pier and the Link House. Hot and sweaty in their serge uniforms, it was not long before the young soldiers had stripped off and rushed into the inviting water. None of them were aware that the tide was ebbing and that in that part of the bay a number of deep channels cut into the sand by the currents caused the water to rush out with irresistible force. On that particular day there was a strong westerly wind and a strong sea running. The tide here runs South to North and 'pushes' out to sea. Coming from the Middle Shires, many of the men had never seen the sea some could not even swim. They were totally oblivious to the dangers.

Within minutes some of the men of 2nd Lt Brown's Company appeared to be in difficulty and shouted for help. Further out than the rest, they appeared to be swimming frantically against strong currents, but making no headway and being taken out to sea. There was an immediate response from the shore as men who considered themselves strong swimmers went to help their colleagues. These men, too, got into difficulties, and in a short time there were about 15 battling hopelessly against the currents. 2nd Lt Brown quickly organised the men into lines and, joining hands, they waded out to try and rescue the now drowning soldiers. The Chaplain, Captain Verschoyle, did likewise and between them, and with the assistance of Sergeant John Riley, they managed to get seven of the men out of the water. Three of the rescued men were completely exhausted, if not unconscious, and were immediately put into vehicles and taken from the beach.

The undercurrent was so strong that it was almost impossible even to wade, and in trying to reach another of his men 2nd Lt Brown was swept off his feet. He clung on to the man next to him but, unable to retain his grip, was swept away by the swirling water. Captain Verschoyle tried desperately to save him, but in vain, and found himself in severe difficulties. He was dragged from the sea, gasping for breath and utterly exhausted. There were no boats immediately available, either in the bay itself or on the shore. After the alarm was raised, the Harbour Commissioner's steam launch, the Water Witch, and other boats came to the scene, but they were too late to save any of the men.

In all, nine men including 2nd Lt Brown lost their lives. Sergeant John Riley (25) was due to be married the following day, having just returned from 18 months at the front, and his clothes and rail warrant were ready in his room for him to catch the train that evening. The other six were all very young soldiers: Private George Beavan (18), Private Jesse Blunn (17), Private Thomas Forley (18), Private William Henderson (18), Private Gordon Moy (18), Private Fred Shale (18) and Private Henry Southern (18). Later that day, teams from the Royal Navy searched the area with boats and, using lifelines held by others on the shore, managed to recover six of the bodies. Unfortunately, those of Kenneth, Jesse Blunn and William Henderson were not among them. Over the course of the next few days, two of the three bodies were found, although 2nd Lt Brown's was not recovered until 6 September, when it was discovered close to the Link House by John Dent, a Gunner in the Royal Artillery.

The Coroner for the area, Mr Henry Rutherford, held an inquest into the tragedy. It was not the first time people had drowned in the bay and he made some strong recommendations. In future, he said, officers contemplating sending their men bathing at Blyth should seek local advice as to the state of the tide and the currents. He also noted that many of the soldiers could not swim and many had not even seen the sea before.

The Chaplain's name was The Reverend George John Foster Verschoyle, MA. Apparently he was recommended for the Royal Humane Society Medal for gallant conduct in saving the life of a drowning man. Rev Verschoyle was the Curate of the Parish of Cradley, Staffordshire. He served as a Temporary Chaplain to the Forces 4th Class (equivalent to a Capt) from 1916 - 19. After the War he became a Curate at St George's Dublin from 1919-25. He was commissioned as Temporary Chaplain on 4th January 1917 (Army List).

2nd Lt Brown's attempts to save his men, and his subsequent inability to retain his grip, were probably explained by the fact that he had been seriously wounded at the Quadrilateral on the First Day of the Somme. He was hit by a bullet just above his right elbow, which then fractured. Although the exit and entry wounds healed, he was left with limited movement in his right arm. It was brave of him even to try to rescue his men in his condition.

Most of the bodies were returned to their relatives in the Midlands by train transported to the station by military wagons covered in the Union Flag and watched by many local people. The body of Lieutenant Kenneth Brown, which was only recovered from the sea several days later, is buried in Horton Churchyard.