

PRIVATE GWILYM IORWERTH DAVIES (21119)

14TH BATTALION ROYAL WELSH FUSILIERS

Gwilym was the elder brother of Thomas Owen Davies, the son of Owen Davies, carpenter and wheelwright who came from Llansanffraidd and Catherine Hughes of Eglwysbach. Their family home was Bryn Rodyn, but Owen Davies died in 1907 and the family had moved to Crafnant Cottage by the time Gwilym was killed. There were seven children in the family: an elder brother, Hugh, and three older sisters, Mary, Elizabeth and Jane, a younger sister, Gertrude, and a younger brother, Thomas, the youngest in the family, who was also killed in the war.

Before the war Gwilym worked at the aluminium factory in Dolgarrog. He was killed in the battle of Mametz July 6th 1916 aged 23 and is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.

The battle of Mametz holds an important place in Welsh History: whether it was a success or failure or whether the Welsh fought bravely or retreated in panic has been repeatedly discussed and argued over.

Mametz was part of the first Somme offensive which began on July 1st 1916 and the first major battle of the war in which the newly formed 38th Division took part. Up till then, they hadn't been involved in any major fighting. The objective was to capture Mametz wood. It was an impossible task – a dense thicket of woodland, riddled with trenches, fallen trees, barbed wire and exploding land mines. It had to be approached over open ground, first downhill from the British trenches and then uphill into the pounding guns and battery from the German army. The poet, Siegfried Sassoon, an officer in the 2nd Battalion RWF, described it as a 'menacing wall of gloom.' The attack on Mametz wood began on July 5th and continued until 12th. In the first couple of days the Welsh regiment failed to capture the wood; the incompetence of the soldiers and disorganisation of their officers were blamed for this failure. Their Commanding Officer, Major-General Ivor Philipps was replaced and the push forward continued relentlessly under constant fire from machine guns and snipers. The advance was painfully slow, not helped by bad weather, poor visibility and bombardment from the British lines as well as the enemy's. Finally on 11th July after continuous fighting the exhausted men of the 38th Division were withdrawn and a reserve Division, was left to complete the clearance of the wood, although there

weren't many Germans left in the wood by then. Undoubtedly the 38th Division fought very bravely: during the battle for the wood they attacked 7 times; 46 officers and 556 soldiers were killed; 6 officers and 579 soldiers missing; 138 officers wounded and 2668 soldiers. (*statistics from 'The Welsh at Mametz Wood by Jonathan Hicks 2016*) It wasn't unjust and inaccurate to put all blame for failure to capture the wood (onto what?) as all sorts of other factors, besides the inexperience and unpreparedness of the soldiers had to be taken into account; for example: under-estimating the strength of the enemy, poor communications between battalions and Command, death or wounding of many officers leading to lack of leadership and organisation, poor strategic decisions, like failure to let off a smokescreen, letting off a bombardment which hindered our own side and told the enemy the British position. Military historians have written a of words trying to understand and explain the battle. Nevertheless, at the time, much harm was done to the reputation of the Welsh soldiers by the chaotic failure of Mametz and by reports from the commander, Brigadier General Price-Davies, who was scathing in his condemnation, citing chaos, cowardly behaviour and panic. The result was that the Welsh Division was moved to the line just north of Ypres, opposite Pilckem Ridge where they remained until the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) when they had the opportunity to restore their reputation.

The Thiepval memorial commemorates over 72,000 men of British and S. African forces who died in the Somme sector over the course of the war and have no known grave. The majority died in the Somme Offensive 1916. It is the largest Commonwealth memorial to the Missing in the world.

Sources

England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915
1901 Wales Census
1911 Wales Census
UK, Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914-1919
UK, Commonwealth War Graves, 1914-1921 and 1939-1947

In Memory of

Private

Gwilym Davies

21119, 14th Bn., Royal Welsh Fusiliers who died on 06 July 1916

Remembered with Honour

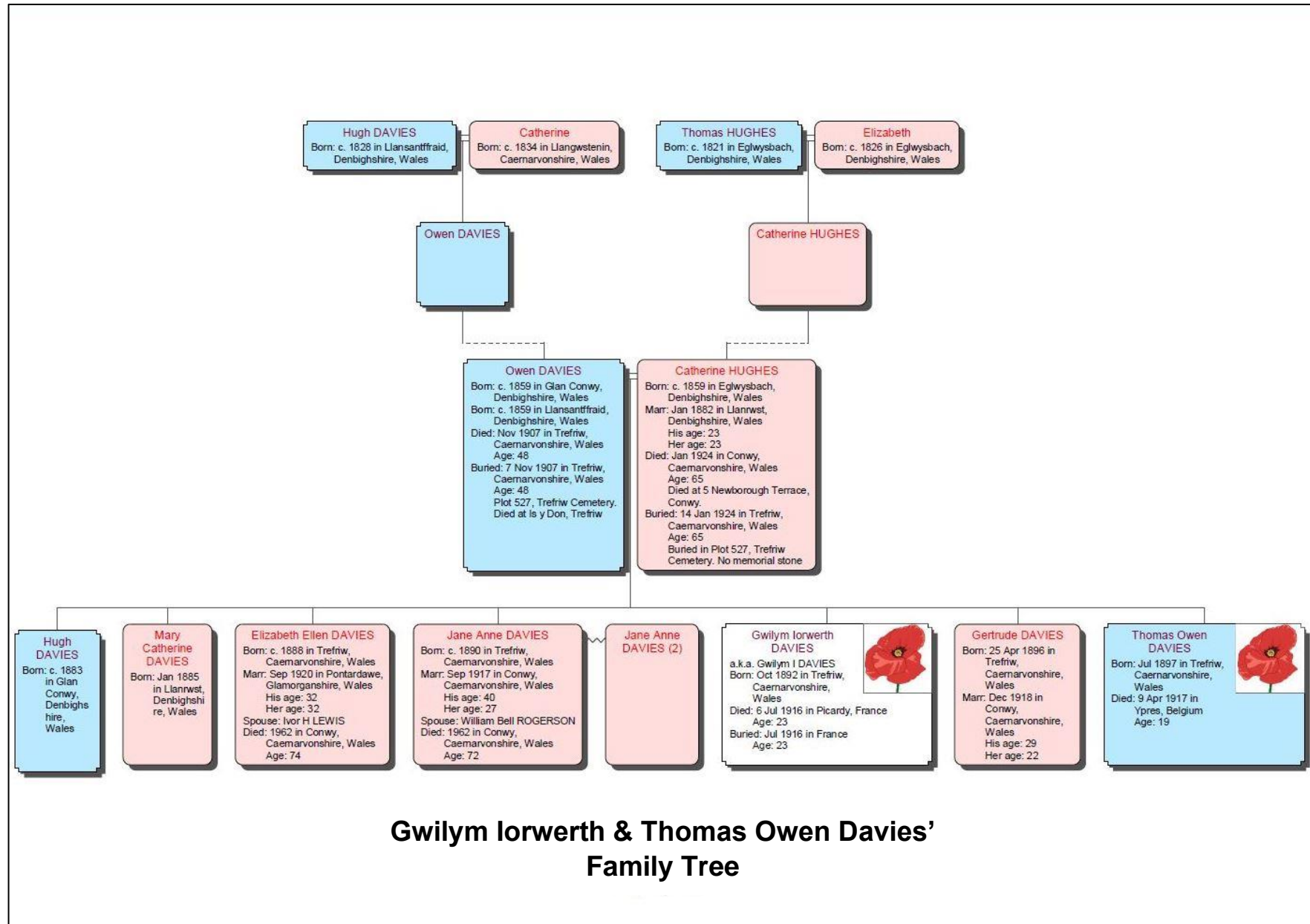
Thiepval Memorial



Commemorated in perpetuity by
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission



Crafnant House Cottage, former home of Gwilym & Thomas Davies



Gwilym Iorwerth & Thomas Owen Davies' Family Tree