

## Two Young Victims of the Great War? By Liz Walton



The two small dark stones in the foreground of the picture above mark the last resting place of Arthur Dickson and Harry Bateman at Guernsey's Fort George Military Cemetery. On the afternoon of Sunday, 13<sup>th</sup> February, 1916, the two boys had decided to go for a walk around the Fort with some friends. They must have known the area well, as 9 year old Arthur David Dickson, was the son of Mr John Dickson, a clerk at the Ordnance Office at the Fort. His friend, Lichfield born Martin Henry (Harry) Bateman, age 8, was the son of Sergeant Martin Bateman of the 4<sup>th</sup> (Extra Reserve) Battalion, the North Staffordshire Regiment, which had been garrisoned there since war broke out. Arthur Dickson was Guernsey born, and in 1911 lived at the Croutes Havilland, just across the Fort Road with his parents and older brother Charles. Young Harry's father had come to Guernsey with his unit which was formed in Lichfield, Staffordshire in August, 1914 and which would remain garrisoned at Fort George until October, 1916 when it moved to Marske in North Yorkshire. Both boys attended the Fort School. On that Sunday afternoon Sergeant Bateman was away for the weekend, attending a rifle shooting course at Hayling Island.

According to the local newspapers<sup>1</sup>, a group of boys were playing and collecting sticks at the cricket field at the Fort when either Dickson or a boy called Pederson found a hand grenade, which they initially left in the soft earth ear some trenches. It appears that they eventually decided to take it with them when they left, and one of them dropped it whilst walking through the Croutes Havilland Lane at about 5.30 pm. Bateman was trying to pick it up when it exploded. It was immediately obvious that Dickson and Bateman had been badly injured. Bystanders carried Dickson, who

<sup>1</sup> The Guernsey Star and the Guernsey Weekly Press, February and March 1916.

had leg injuries, into his home where Messrs. Whelan, Renouf and Willis administered First Aid. Bateman was more severely injured, with wounds to his abdomen and he was carried by a Sergeant of the North Staffordshires to Fort George Hospital. His injuries were considered to be too severe to be dealt with there so he was taken by motor car to the Victoria Cottage Hospital, a Grade 'A' Military Hospital with full surgical facilities. Here he was X-rayed and his stomach wound was said to contain "no foreign bodies" so he was treated and kept in hospital. Dickson was also taken there later where he had a toe amputated and stitches put in other parts of his feet. A large splinter of wood was also removed from his thigh. The other boys appear to have escaped unscathed.

The *Star* newspaper in its first report on Monday, 14<sup>th</sup> February stated that Bateman was doing as well as could be expected but on the following day it reported that he had died as a result of shock and the trauma to his stomach wall, and that his father had since been recalled to the island. An inquest into his death was held on Thursday, 17<sup>th</sup> February at the Police Court. One of the first witnesses to be called was Bateman's mother, who said that she was out calling her children when the bomb exploded near her house. The next witness was Sergeant Major Southwood of the Royal Army Medical Corps, who examined Bateman at Fort George Hospital and decided that he needed to be transferred to the Victoria Cottage Hospital into the care of the senior surgeon, Doctor Robinson. Doctor Robinson described how he cared for the boy, who sadly died of heart failure as a result of shock on the afternoon of Monday, 14<sup>th</sup> February.

The boy Pederson was interviewed next. He described how they were all playing on the Fort Field near some trenches when he found a brass tipped stick which he put in the hedge. He said that they had not been warned not to go near the area. They returned later so that he could collect the stick and take it home, and Dickson picked up the grenade at the same time. Pederson said that the grenade was in soft ground near the trenches and he had seen it in the area the previous weekend. Three other boys, John Ingram, David Ingram and William Hennessey gave similar evidence, though John Ingram said that the Master of the Fort School had warned the boys not to go near the trenches.

Second Lieutenant Schnadhorst was then called to give evidence as to how the grenade came to be there. There had been a practice on 28<sup>th</sup> January when "bombs" had been thrown, several of which had failed to explode. It was reported to him that one unexploded grenade was unaccounted for, so he ordered a search. However nothing was found. Sergeant Pearce, Royal Engineers (RE) was responsible for checking the number of grenades issued and returned and he also noted that one was unaccounted for. Corporal Matthews of the North Staffordshires who had been in the class involved in the bombing practice reported that when one grenade failed to explode, others were thrown at it and it was assumed that it had exploded along with the others, so they eventually stopped searching. Mr JH Morgan who lived in the Croutes Havilland, where the explosion took place, expressed his concern at the fact that the field was not fenced off in any way and there were no notices stating that it could be dangerous to go there, nor were there any sentries posted.

However in their summing up the Jurats decided that no blame for the incident could be attached to anyone but "...perhaps the military authorities would see that every

precaution in the future was taken to account for any of these missing dangerous missiles. Perhaps also the military authorities would see that as far as possible the field was kept for their own use." The Court extended its sympathies and that of the Lieutenant Governor, to the parents. The Bailiff recorded a verdict of accidental death, and suggested that the authorities should safeguard the field as far as possible and that boys should be warned of the dangers of picking up dangerous objects. Bateman was buried in the Military Cemetery at Fort George, with the Reverend Penfold, Vicar of St James, the Garrison Church, conducting the graveside service which was attended by a contingent from the North Staffordshire Regiment as well as Bateman's family and schoolmates from the Fort School.



"Harry" Bateman's Headstone

On 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1916 the *Star* newspaper reported another inquest, that of 9 year old Arthur David Dickson, the second victim of the grenade accident who had died at the Victoria Cottage Hospital on the previous Saturday. The boys who had given evidence at Bateman's inquest repeated the process for Dickson, giving more or less the same information, as did Lieutenant Schnadhorst and Sergeant Pearce. In addition, Quarter Master Sergeant Shelley who lived in Croutes Havilland reported helping Dickson and putting him to bed and Mr Whelan, a chemist, reported removing Dickson's damaged boots, seeing to his wounds and administering brandy and warm milk for shock. Dickson was then transferred to the Victoria Cottage Hospital. After Dickson's father had given evidence, Colonel Churcher, the Staff Officer, said that since the accident the Lieutenant Governor Sir Reginald Hart, VC, had instructed that notices should be placed around the practice ground forbidding children to enter the area. Sentries were to be placed on the ground and buglers would sound "Commence" and "Cease Fire". The Commander RE was also instructed that all bombs had to be accounted for. It was felt that these added precautions should be enough to prevent any more such tragedies.

Dr Robinson, the Island's Medical Officer of Health was the next to be called to give evidence. He told the inquest that although Dickson's foot injuries were quite severe he was doing well until Saturday, 26<sup>th</sup> February when tetanus set in. Tetanus was extremely rare in Guernsey, and Dr Robinson had only seen eight cases in the thirty two years that he had been in practice on the island. There was a serum available but it was difficult to obtain as since the outbreak of war it had been commandeered by the military authorities. The court again delivered a verdict of accidental death, after expressing their condolences to Dickson's parents. They also said that they were pleased to hear that precautions had been taken to prevent the recurrence of such an "unfortunate accident".



Arthur Dickson's Headstone

Dickson's funeral, like Bateman's, took place at the Military Cemetery at Fort George, the coffins having been taken there on foot from his home by his schoolfellows from the Fort school. The Reverend BV Penfold again officiated at the graveside ceremony and the coffin was lowered by Sergeants of the North Staffordshire Regiment. The boys are buried side by side, and small blue granite stones engraved simply with their names, ages and the dates of their deaths mark their graves. They are not listed as casualties of war as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission did not commemorate civilian casualties at that time. However in 1939, because of the increased number of civilians who died as a result of the Second World War, Winston Churchill agreed with Sir Fabian Ware, the founder of the CWGC who proposed that the Commission also maintain a record of Commonwealth civilian war deaths.

These civilians are commemorated in a different way from those who died as a result of military service. They are listed in the Civilian War Dead Roll of Honour located in St George's Chapel in Westminster Abbey. This contains the names of nearly 67,000 men, women and children, and has been kept in Westminster Abbey since 1956. Had this accident happened 25 years later, the sad deaths of these two boys would probably have been recorded there but as it is their story was only rediscovered from a fragment on the edge of a photo of a page of a local paper, taken whilst researching something totally different.

Incidentally there are several small granite grave markers identical to those of Dickson and Bateman at Fort George. They appear to be quite modern. Many of them mark the graves of children but some carry the names of soldiers and are in the main dated before the Great War. Does anybody know whether they are in fact a later addition and if so how they came to be erected? Initial research hasn't yet come up with any answers.

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