

THE fascinating story of a British soldier, who joined the Australian Army and died at the bloody and muddy Battle of Passchendaele has been revealed thanks to volunteers at a charity shop in Tavistock.

When Robin Hoare and David Hatwell, who work for Tavistock Area Support Services at Tassbar, the book, art and record store in Barley Market Street, came across a 1906 bible belonging to a Sinclair Bennitt May, which had an inscription of a moving scriptural passage written by his friend E Rawdon Reilly, they wanted to know more about the book's owner.

Thanks to some astute research by Robin he was able to find that there is a plaque dedicated in St Paul de Leon Church, in Staverton, Totnes.

It reads: 'In loving memory of Sinclair Bennitt May, private, 44th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force. Elder son of Colin M E May of the parish and of Mabel his wife.

Killed at Hill 40 near Ypres on October 4, 1917 in the Passchendaele advance, aged 19 years 7 months. Buried at Zonnebeke (Belgium).'

Further research by Robin revealed through a local newspaper obituary that Sinclair, although born in Staverton in 1898, was sent to school in Sussex to be educated and then progressed to St Lawrence College, Ramsgate, in Kent.

While there he won the cross-country steeplechase champion cup in 1913.

He left school and joined the Merchant Navy, serving in the British-India Steamship Company on the Australian route. However, war was declared in 1914 and young Sinclair found himself in Australia and so enlisted with the 44th Australian infantry battalion. Its brigade were known as the 'Old Bill's Thousand' - named after its first commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel William Mansbridge.

Robin, who was a crime scene investigator before he retired, even managed to track down a copy of the war diary of the 11th Australian Infantry Brigade from the actual day Sinclair was killed in action — October 4, 1917.

The report even mentioned Hill 40, the infamous place on the battleground where the young Devonian was killed.

Robin was full of admiration for what Sinclair and his fellow soldiers endured at the time. After arriving on the Western Front on December 29, 1916 the Australian battalion fought with distinction at Messines, Broodseinde Ridge before being engaged in the Passchendaele battle, where Sinclair lost his life.

Robin said: 'What we read in the war diary was quite horrendous.

'When you think this man was marching across Belgium from battle to battle, knowing that he could be killed any moment. In one month alone the 44th had 1,322 casualties.'

But the research did not end there. Robin, through the 1911 census, found Sinclair's family, who lived in Staverton, including his sisters Nora, who married a Robin J Tuke of Tavistock,

and Patricia, who married a Charles Morse - who also went to live in Tavistock. It is through these connections that Sinclair's bible may have come to the West Devon town.



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