


## Arthur Wright - (1896-1915)

With the last name to appear on the St Aldates Memorial belonging to a young man named Arthur Wright (*the younger brother of Ernest*), as a result of his untimely death towards end of 1915 whilst serving with the Royal Navy, Arthur would also have his name commemorated on the Chatham Naval Memorial in Kent, and the St Matthew War Memorial in Grandpont.

Born in Oxford on Tuesday 10 March 1896, Arthur was born at 13 Isis Street in St Aldates, the youngest of three sons born to Mary and John Wright, a labourer from the parish of St Ebbes. Baptised at St Aldates Church a month later, the church was to become an important factor in young Arthur's life in later years when he became a member of the church choir, and in later years becoming a member of the church bell-ringing team. Like his brother Ernest, Arthur attended the St Aldates Schools between Wyatt's and Carter's Yards in St Aldates, and on leaving his full time education, Arthur followed his brother into the printing trade, and like Ernest it seems that Arthur became a compositor working for a Mr *Sweatman* of New Inn Hall Street in Oxford. The 1911 census records Arthur as living at 49 Marlborough Road in the Grandpont area of St Aldates with his parents John and Mary, and his two surviving sisters; Nellie a *shirt-hand*, aged sixteen, and the youngest Margaret a schoolgirl at the age of twelve. Arthur himself had a recorded age of fifteen, and his occupation at this point is recorded as a (*printer*) compositor. Working at New Inn Hall Street until the time of his enlistment, it seems that Arthur had a desire to go to sea and with the First World War in its infancy; Arthur joined the Royal Navy at the age of eighteen in November 1914. His Naval career officially began on 30 November when for administration purposes only, Arthur Wright was attached to *HMS Pembroke I* at the Royal Naval dockyards at Chatham in Kent. At the time of his enlistment, Arthur was described as being of full age, with a height of 5ft 3½ inches, a chest measurement of thirty-three inches, with brown hair and grey eyes, and a fresh complexion. With a service number L/6016, after his initial training, Arthur became a third-class steward, and he joined his first ship, *HMS Natal* on the 4 April 1915, and this was where he remained until his death, just nine months later. *HMS Natal* was a *Duke of Edinburgh* class armoured cruiser which had been laid-down in 1904, at the Vickers naval shipyards at Barrow-in-Furness, and the *Natal* was reportedly the last and finest armoured cruiser ever built for the Royal Navy. Throughout 1915, *HMS Natal* spent much of the year patrolling the North-Sea, before having a brief refit at the Birkenhead shipyards of Cammell-Laird in November 1915. On Thursday 30 December 1915, *HMS Natal* was lying just off the Highlands of Scotland at the Cromarty Firth with her squadron under the command of Captain Eric Black. During the afternoon, Captain Black was hosting a film party onboard, and invited was the wives and children of his fellow officers, plus a number of nurses from the *Drina*, a hospital ship moored nearby, when shortly after 3.25pm and without a warning, a series of violent explosions tore through the rear of the ship which capsized almost immediately, and sank within five minutes. An investigation was held soon after the sinking and came to the conclusion that the most likely explanation was that a fire had started (*due to faulty cordite*) which had ignited an *after* magazine. The exact number of casualties is still debated, and ranges from three hundred and ninety; (*a total which doesn't include the woman and children aboard*) to more than four hundred and twenty. Although a large number of the casualties may have been killed in the immediate explosions, the majority would have drowned as the *Natal* went down, or would have succumbed to the freezing waters of the Cromarty Firth. Whilst most of the recovered bodies would eventually be interred in the Rosskeen churchyard near to the town of Invergordon, a smaller number were also interred at The Gaelic Chapel graveyard in Cromarty, whilst many others remained with the ship.

 you would possibly expect; at the time there was a huge amount of speculation about the loss of *HMS Natal*, and a mine-laying U-boat was thought to have been the cause; however, a

later underwater inspection revealed that massive damage had been caused from within the hull, which must have been caused by an internal explosion. Despite this, conspiracy theories abounded at the time, and German secret agents working undercover in Scotland on a sabotage mission was amongst the most popular, although there was never any real evidence to support this. Despite originally being posted as missing, it was later confirmed that Arthur Wright had unfortunately died as a result of the sinking of *HMS Natal*, and his date of death was officially recorded as the 30 December 1915, yet sadly his body was never recovered from the waters of the Cromarty Firth, or the wreck of the *Natal*, which after much of it had been salvaged; what remained was destroyed in the 1970s, to prevent the ship becoming a navigational hazard.

A little more than two weeks after the tragedy of *HMS Natal*, an informative report appeared in the *Oxford Times* of 15 January 1916, and this report contained some useful information on Arthur's life, which had cruelly been cut short by the sinking of his ship.....*Arthur Wright, - Officers Steward serving on HMS Natal has been drowned through an internal explosion on board. He was the youngest son of Mr and Mrs Wright of 49 Marlborough Road, Oxford, and was only 20 years of age. He was a compositor in the employ Mr Sweatman New Inn Hall Street for 5 years but soon after the outbreak of the war, the love of the water was too strong for him and he accordingly joined the Royal Navy in November 1914. After a sharp period of training he was drafted to HMS Natal. Arthur Wright was a keen athlete and was a good runner. He was also a member of the St Aldates Church choir and one of the bell ringers. His eldest brother is serving in the Army Service Corps, (Motor Transport) with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.* Twelve months later, the *Oxford Times* published two *In Memoriam* for Arthur, the first of which must have been placed by members of his family.....*Wright, - In loving memory of Arthur Wright, who lost his life on HMS Natal December 30<sup>th</sup> 1915, from Father, Mother, Brother, and Sisters.* The second *Memoriam* was placed by an unknown woman named Bertha; (certainly not his sister or mother), possibly a fiancée or sweetheart maybe? Sadly there's no clue whatsoever as to who Bertha was, or may have been in the actual *Memoriam* which was published as.....*Wright, - In loving memory of A. Wright, Officers Steward who lost his life on HMS Natal December 30<sup>th</sup> 1915. "We little thought that when we said goodbye, he would never return again" - Bertha.*

This in-fact would be the last mention of Arthur Wright in the local newspapers for some considerable time, yet he was to be mentioned again in the *Oxford Times* of the 21 November 1919, when an *In memoriam* from the Wright family was published the year after the death of his brother Ernest.....*Wright, - In loving memory of my dear boys, Ernest John Wright, who died in Mesopotamia November 22, 1918, and Arthur Wright, who lost his life in the sinking of HMS Natal December 30, 1915, - from their Mother, Father, and Sisters 49 Marlborough Road, Oxford. - "Hard though it is we try to say, Father, thy will be done"*

Although Arthur Wright was only one amongst the numerous casualties of *HMS Natal* - it's interesting to note that a belated Memorial to the *Natal* was erected at Durban in South Africa in 1927, and that a Memorial Plaque honouring *HMS Natal* was also unveiled at the Anglican Cathedral in Portsmouth. Eventually a Memorial Garden named '*Natal Gardens*' was laid-out in the small town of Invergordon, (near to the site of the sinking) and this contains a plaque to commemorate the huge loss of life which resulted from the sinking of *HMS Natal*.

### **CWGC Details.**

Wright, Arthur,  
Royal Navy, - *HMS Natal*,  
Rank, - Third Class Officers Steward,  
Service No, - L/6016, Aged, - 19.  
Date of Death, - 30/12/1915.  
Memorial, Chatham Naval Memorial, Chatham, Kent,  
Reference 12. Son of John and Mary Wright of 49 Marlborough Road, Oxford.

### **Medal Entitlement.**

Medals awarded to Naval personnel were the same as issued to the men of the Army.  
Medals awarded, Victory Medal,  
British War Medal and 15 Star.

As parish boundaries seem to have been quite fluid to the inhabitants of St Aldates, it's hardly surprising to find that many of the fallen were duplicated on more than one Memorial. This is what has happened with Ernest and Arthur Wright who both appear on the Memorial's of St Aldates Church and the Church of St Matthew (closer to the family home) in Grandpont.