

John Spencer Whitham (1885 – 1950)

John Spencer Whitham, the son of a boot and shoe maker, was born in Haworth. His father died when he was eight and soon after the death of their mother, 11 years later, John and his two brothers moved from Haworth to Farnhill.

John was a keen sportsman, winning a number of medals and prizes.

During the war he served as a stretcher bearer and was awarded the Military Medal for great bravery and acts of gallantry on the field.

After the war he moved around quite a bit, eventually settling, with his wife, in Cowling.



Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Pauline Pettitt

Well respected in the village of Cowling where he worked in one of the mills, he was also verger at the church and caretaker of the school.

He died suddenly in 1950, predeceasing his wife by 16 years. She continued to live in Cowling, with their unmarried daughter, until her death.

Pre-war life

John Spencer Whitham was born in Haworth on 15th April 1885 and was baptised in Haworth Church about six weeks later. He was the youngest child of Joseph Spencer Whitham, originally from Addingham, and Elizabeth (nee Smith) who was born at Kildwick Grange.

Joseph and Elizabeth were married, in Kildwick, in October 1876. Children quickly followed; all born in Haworth. John had three siblings:

- William Benjamin, b. 18/9/1877
- Hannah Elizabeth, b. 17/8/1878
- Harold Wilson, b. 13/7/1883

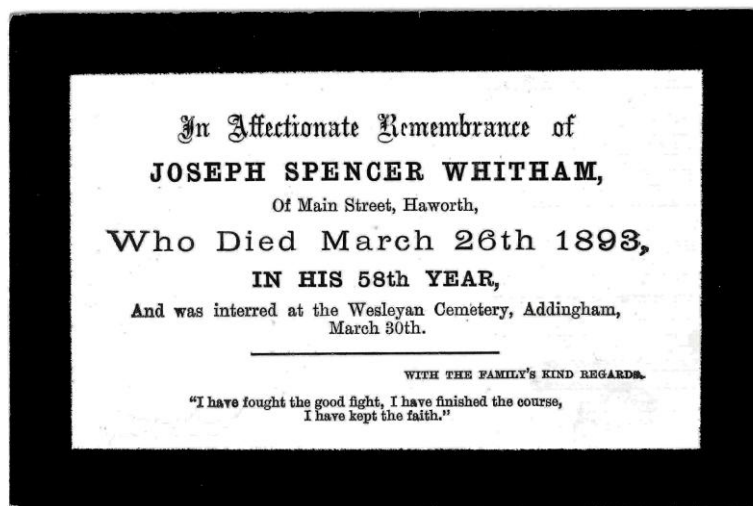
Joseph Spencer Whitham was a maker of boots and shoes. The 1881 census records the family, with just the two eldest children, living in Kirkgate, Haworth. The family group photograph shown below must have been taken at about that time.



Joseph Spencer Whitham and family c. 1881
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Pauline Pettitt

The family subsequently moved to 85 Main Street, which was the address recorded on the 1891 census (when John was 5).

John's sister Hannah died in October 1887, aged just nine; and, in March 1893, his father also died.



Joseph Spencer Whitham remembrance card
Courtesy of Mrs Pauline Pettitt

John's mother died on 14th July 1904, when John was 19, and was buried alongside her husband in Addingham. John's brother William, who began to keep a diary from the start of 1903, records her deterioration from the start of the month and notes that she died peacefully, with himself and John present. It was the day after her youngest son Harold's 21st birthday.

The three brothers continued to live together but early in May 1905 they move from Haworth to 9 Bucklar Hill, Farnhill.

Less than a fortnight later, John joined Sutton Athletics Club. He appears to have been a good athlete and won a number of medallions and prizes, including silver medals with the Yorkshire Amateur Gymnastics Association, Bradford District, in 1907-8, 1908-9, 1910 and 1911. He was also presented with a barometer in 1910 and a clock in 1911, both at competitions held in Silsden.



John Spencer Whitham's athletics medallions
Courtesy of Mrs Pauline Pettitt

John also joined the Farnhill branch of the St. John's Ambulance Association and, In February 1914, successfully passed an examination in "home nursing".

WW1 service

John attested his willingness to serve in the Army in December 1914. William's diary records that he went, along with Charles Slack, also of Farnhill, to sign on at Skipton and was assigned to the 6th Reserve battalion of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment. A week later he was inoculated (a precaution performed on many of the Farnhill WW1 Volunteers).

On 1st January 1915, he was transferred to the stretcher bearer company and on 2nd March he began his training with 2/6 battalion in Derby.

There then began a period of almost two years of training during which John was moved from camp to camp around the country. These were assiduously recorded by William in his diary:

| | |
|------------|---|
| 2/3/1915 | <i>John moved to Derby with 2/6 Battalion</i> |
| 12/4/1915 | <i>John moved to Doncaster</i> |
| 19/5/1915 | <i>John moved to Thoresby Park Newark</i> |
| 6/8/1915 | <i>John moved to Babworth Park</i> |
| 10/9/1915 | <i>John at Totley near Sheffield for Shooting Classes</i> |
| 21/10/1915 | <i>John moved to Gainsborough</i> |
| 24/11/1915 | <i>John moved to Newcastle on Tyne</i> |
| 6/1/1916 | <i>John moved to Salisbury Plain</i> |
| 11/6/1916 | <i>John moved to Henham Park Wangford in Suffolk</i> |
| 3/11/1916 | <i>John moved to Bedford</i> |

The war diary of 2/6 battalion records that an inspection was carried out by the GOC (General Officer Commanding) of the Northern Army at its Bedford headquarters at 12:45pm on 3rd February 1917, and later that day it received the order to embark on the 5th.

The battalion, a total of 33 officers and 953 men – including Private John Spencer Whitham, sailed from Southampton to Le Havre on three vessels: Mona's Queen, Caesarea and Huntscraft, arriving at 8am on 6th February 1917. By the 17th they were in the front line.

John remained in France until early November 1917, when he came home on leave. On the 16th, the West Yorkshire Pioneer reported:

***On Furlough** – Pte. J.S. Whitham (Duke of Wellington's Regiment) is at present home on leave from the Western Front. Pte Whitham has had some interesting experiences at first-aid posts, and also whilst doing duty as a stretcher-bearer.*

He returned to the front at the end of the month, where he continued to serve with 2/6 battalion until it was disbanded, in France, at the end of January 1918, at which time he was transferred to the 5th battalion.

It was while serving with his new battalion, in July 1918, that John carried out acts of bravery for which he was awarded the Military Medal – one of just two awarded to Farnhill WW1 Volunteers. The award was reported in the local newspapers, including the Craven Herald (20/9/1918):

***Military Medal Winner** – Private John S. Whitham, of 9, Buckler (sic) Hill, Farnhill, has been awarded the Military Medal for the following acts of gallantry in the field:- "For great bravery as a stretcher bearer on July 20th 1918. With great coolness he personally organised search parties for the wounded, and undoubtedly was the means of many lives being saved. Again in an attack on July 22nd he was a conspicuous example of gallantry in attending to the wounded under heavy fire. He was himself wounded whilst attending to a comrade." Signed K. SYKES. Captain and Adjutant. ...*

[Full news report.](#)

20th July 1918 was the first day of an operation by the British against German forces southwest of Reims. The 5th battalion Duke of Wellington's Regiment was in the front line of the attack and the regimental diary records that enemy shelling and artillery fire was very intense, with two companies sustaining 25% casualties. The fighting continued on the 21st and 22nd, by which time the battalion had lost 5 officers and 150 men.

The attack was resumed on 28th July with the battalion again sustaining casualties as a result of enemy artillery fire "which was very intense at times". It was during this action that John was wounded for the second time in a week – on this occasion severely enough to be admitted to hospital in Rouen.

It is unclear how long he was in hospital but it seems that it must have been some time, as the Craven Herald news report, mentioned previously (dated 20/9/1918), continues on to say:

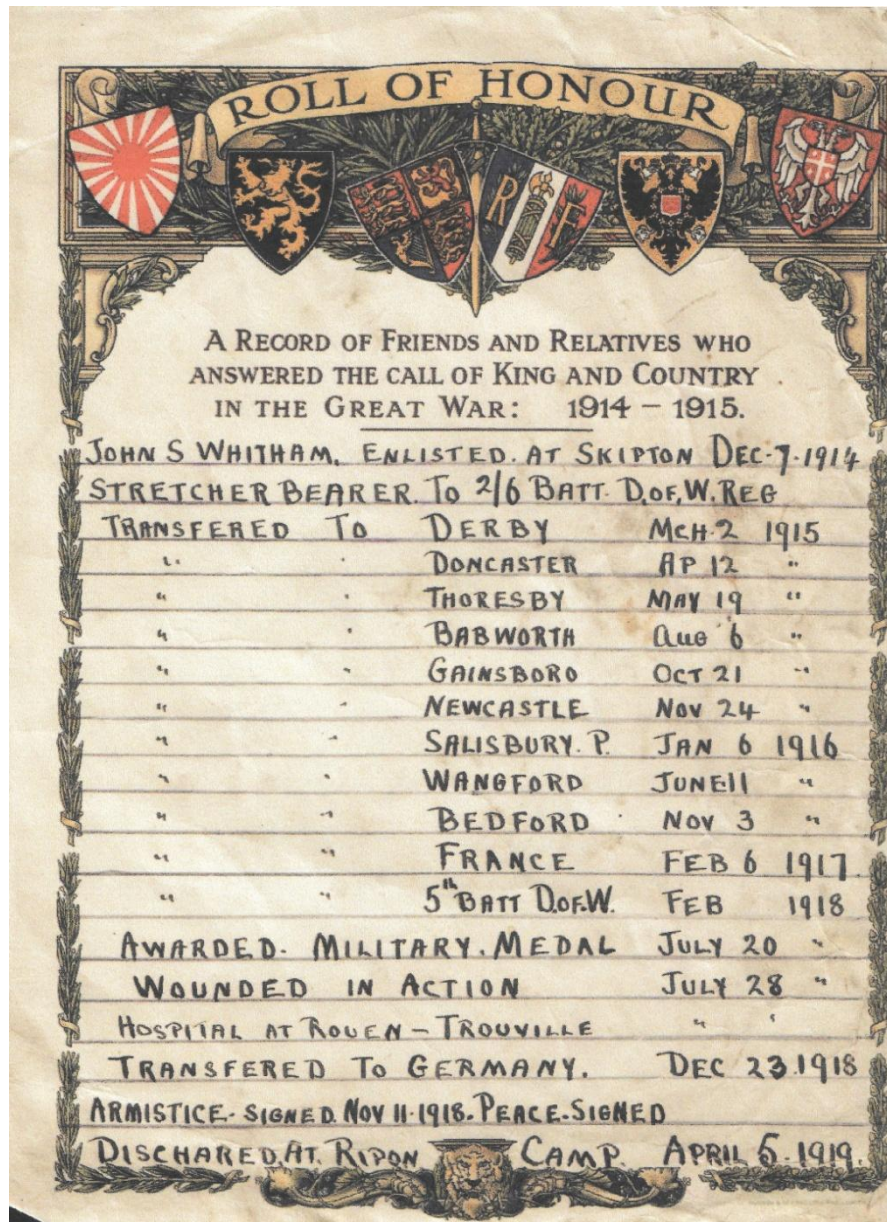
... In July he was wounded in the arm and chest, and is now convalescing at a rest camp in France. The following letter has come to his home in Farnhill, where he resided with his two brothers, "Congratulation from the Battalion on a well earned Military Medal, of which we are proud. I hope you are getting on well, and we send you our best wishes. Yours truly, JAMES WALKER, Lieut.-Colonel, 5th West Riding Regiment.

This wound was effectively the end of Private Whitham's front line service. In early November 1918, after being discharged from hospital, John was given a month's leave at home, which meant that he was in Farnhill when the Armistice was signed.

He returned to France on 20th November 1918 and the battalion was transferred to Germany on 23rd December 1918.

John's overseas service ended on 23rd March 1919 at Mechernich, near Cologne. He was returned to England and the formalities of his demobilisation completed in Ripon on 5th April 1919. (In his diary, his brother William, perhaps as a sign of relief, goes so far as to record the exact time. It was 4:30pm.)

A Roll of Honour compiled later, perhaps with information from William's diaries, records John's war service.

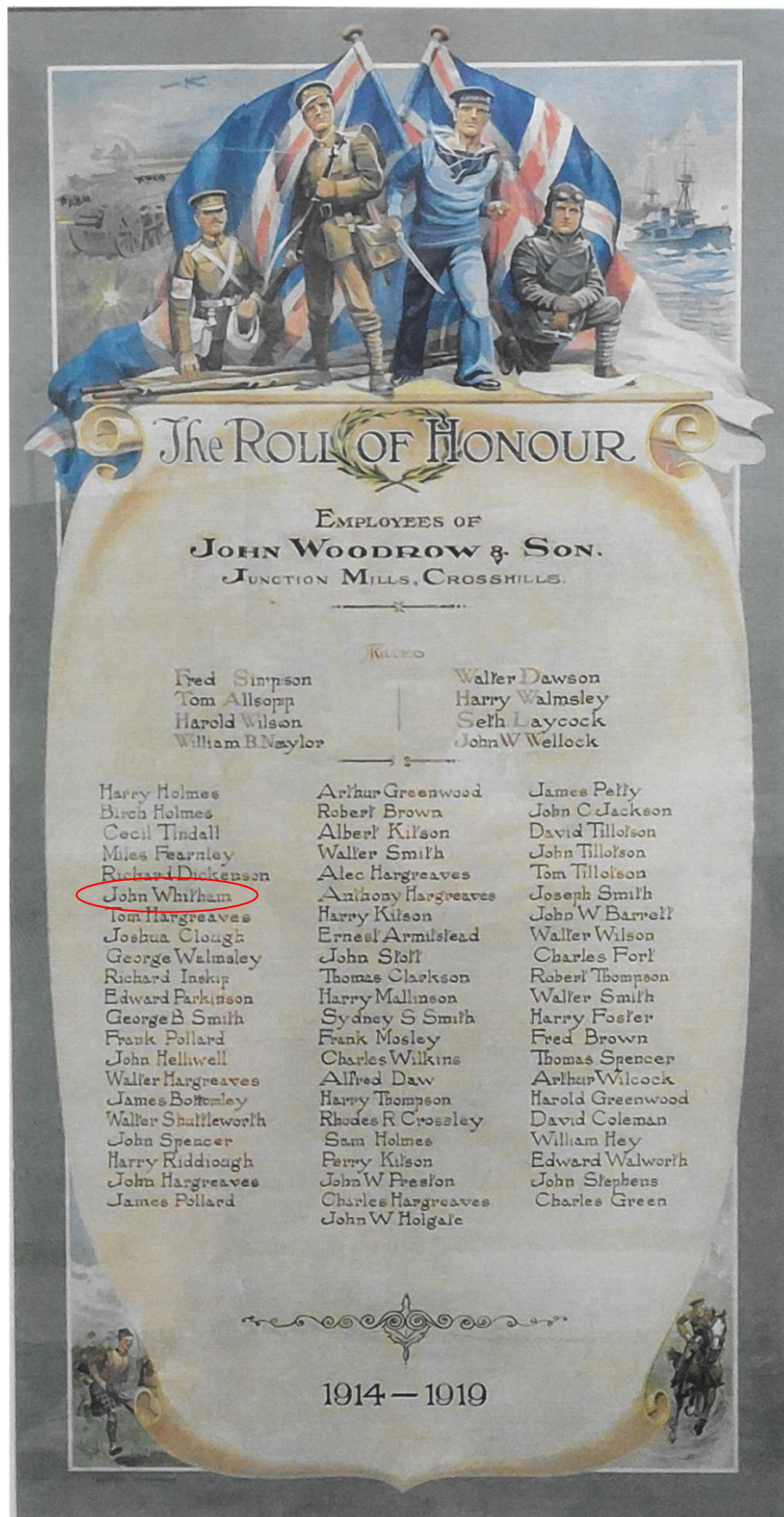


John Spencer Whitham's WW1 military career
Courtesy of Mrs Pauline Pettitt

Post-war life

Although he returned to Farnhill after demobilisation, John did not return to Woodrow's Mill, where he had worked before the war.

However his name was included on the recently discovered WW1 Roll of Honour of men employed by Woodrow's Mill at Junction.



With thanks to Burberry Group, PLC

In July 1919, John wrote to the War Office to ask them to send him his Military Medal.

9 Bucklar Hill
Farnhill Kildwick
N^r Keighley
July 7 19

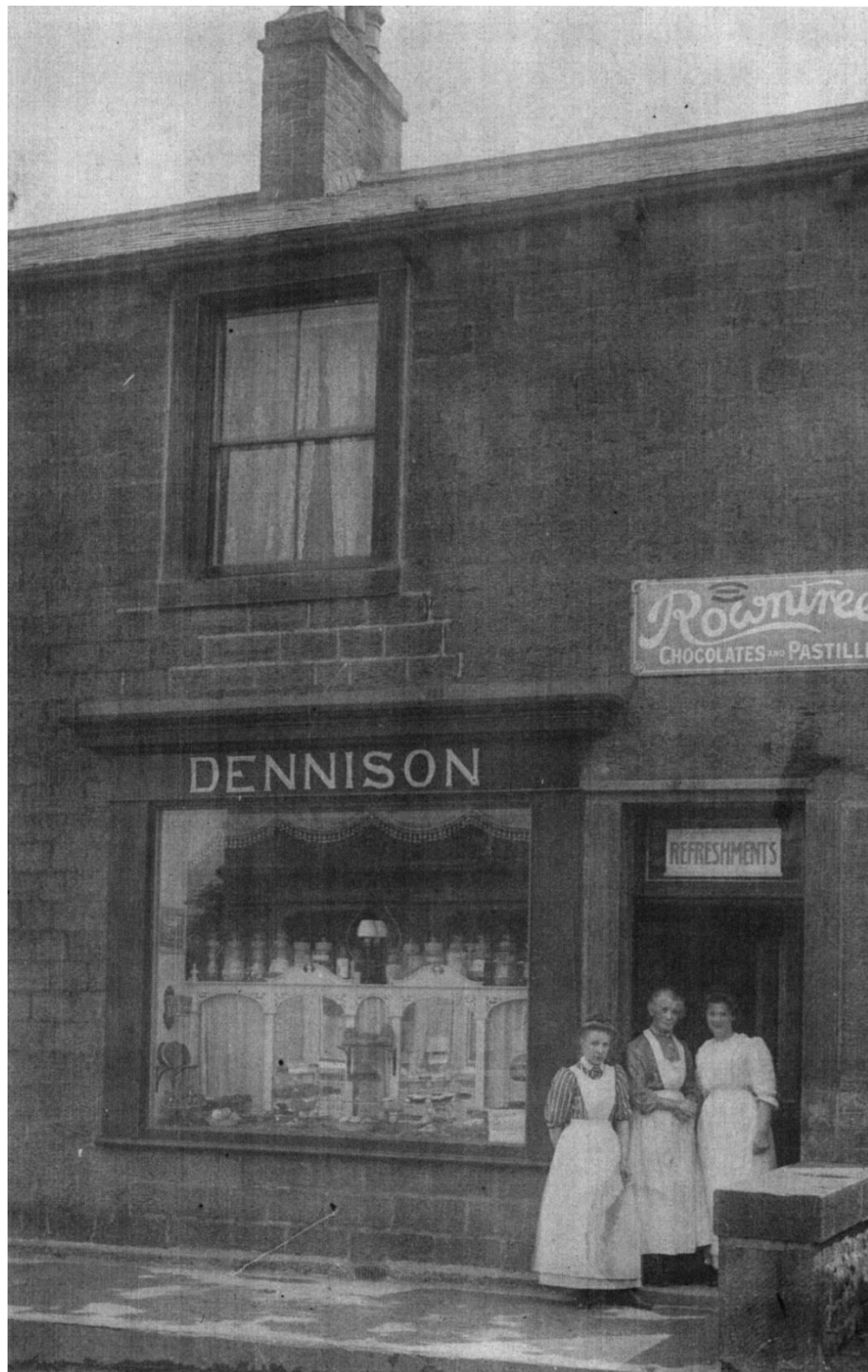
To Director of Personal Service
London.

Will you kindly send to the above
address. The "Military Medal" awarded
to me in July 20th & 22nd 1918. and which
was gazetted in the London Gazette 11/12/19
Thanking you
I remain
John S Whitham
266187 5th Batt D of W R

Recd 14 - 7 - 19

In September 1919, after helping out with hay making on Silsden Moor, he applied for a job with the Midland Railway. He was unsuccessful and instead took up a job at Lord Derby's War Hospital, in Warrington, where he stayed until March 1920.

In April 1920 John started work at Moira in Leicestershire, close to the Derbyshire border. This was near the home of Sarah Jane Beadman, who he would later marry. However if this move had been designed to allow them to spend more time together this was unsuccessful as, in June, Sarah Jane came to Crosshills to work at Dennisons, a cake shop in Station Road.



Dennison's shop, Station Road Crosshills
Photograph from the Farnhill and Kildwick History Group archive

John Spencer Whitham married Sarah Jane Beadman on 20th November 1920 at St. Hilda's Church in Moira. He was aged 35 and his wife 34. His brother William was best man and the bride was given away by her father.

Back in Yorkshire, the wedding was reported in the local press:

WEDDING: WHITHAM – BEADMAN

The marriage was solemnised last week at St. Hilda's Church, Moira, of Mr. John S. Whitham, M.M., of Kildwick, and Miss Beadman, of Appleby Magna, Leicestershire. The bride, who was given away by her father, Mr. J. Beadman, was attended by Miss K. Beadman (sister of the bride) and Miss M. Evans, of Derby, as bridesmaids. The best man was Mr. W.B. Whitham, of Kildwick (brother of the bridegroom), and the officiating minister was the Rev. C.R. Bramley, vicar of Donisthorpe. The presents, which were numerous and costly, included a silver-mounted fruit dish from the Girls' Guild of All Saints' Church, Derby, where the bride has been a prominent worker. The bridegroom was well known in Kildwick. He served four years in the war and received the Military Medal for services as stretcher bearer and for tending wounded under shell fire. Before the war he was a member of Sutton Athletics Club, and trainer of the Silsden Bethesda Church Athletics Club.



Sarah Jane Beadman, later Whitham, in Girl Guide uniform
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Pauline Pettitt

The 1921 census records the couple living in Overseal, Derbyshire, which is where where their daughter, Elizabeth Marian, would be born on 19th November of that year. John was working as a Surface Man at the Marquis Colliery in Moira.

In July 1922 William Whitham's diary recorded his brother and family moving back to Yorkshire, living for a while in Haworth before settling at 16 Ickornshaw, in May 1923.



Ickornshaw – Number 16 is closest to the camera
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Pauline Pettitt

This move was most likely prompted by John getting the job of vergers at Cowling Church. He held this post until 1927, when he became the caretaker of Cowling School. He must also have had a job at one of the Cowling mills as, on the register created in September 1939 in preparation for WW2 rationing, the occupations of both John and Elizabeth (then 17) were recorded as being "Weaver – Cotton & Art Silk Manufacturer".

In 1936, the family moved to 5 Middleton, Cowling. This would be the family home until after John's death.

John Spencer Whitham died suddenly, of a brain haemorrhage, on 17th July 1950, aged 65. He was buried in the graveyard of Cowling Church.

Obituaries appeared in the Keighley News (28/7/1950):

THE LATE MR. J.S. WHITHAM

The funeral took place yesterday week of Mr. John Spencer Whitham, of 5, Middleton, Cowling. Aged 65 years Mr. Whitham was a native of Haworth, where he lived for many years, before removing to Farnhill. There he resided up to joining the Services for the 1914-18 war, during the whole of which he served as a stretcher-bearer. He was awarded the Military Medal for attending the wounded on the field while himself wounded. Shortly after the war he came to live in Cowling having obtained the post of vergers to the Cowling Parish Church, and he held this post until being appointed caretaker to the Cowling Council School 23 years ago. He was an active worker for the Cowling Parish Church, where his daughter is organist. He leaves a widow and one daughter. Services were conducted at the house and at Cowling Parish Church by the Vicar, the Rev. W. Monks, and a memorial service was held on Sunday evening.

and in Cowling Church parish magazine:

A SAD LOSS

It is with deep regret that we have to announce this month the death of one of the most regular and devoted members of our Church, John Spencer Whitham. Quiet in his manner and never seeking the lime-light, Mr. Whitham was always ready to put his Church in the forefront of his life. Its worship was one of his chief joys. The tragic suddenness with which his end came was a tremendous shock to all of us. We shall miss him much, but will for long remember his life of quiet, consistent Christian character. He was a man I have been pleased to know. To Mrs. And Miss Whitham we would extend our deepest sympathy. May they find comfort in the thought that Mr. Whitham has left behind a much respected name both in the Church and the village, and that his name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Postscript

John's wife and daughter continued to live in Cowling; Sarah Jane died on 4th July 1966, aged 80, and Elizabeth Marian on 17th April 2011, aged 89. Elizabeth remained unmarried, and there are no direct descendants. They are buried with John, in the graveyard of Cowling Church.



Whitham family grave, Cowling church graveyard



Whitham family at Netherseal, Derbyshire – probably mid 1930s
Photograph courtesy of Mrs Pauline Pettitt

John's brothers lived in Farnhill, at 9 Bucklar Hill, until their deaths. William died on 17th December 1937, aged 60, after being run-down by a van on the Skipton Road. Harold died on 17th July 1956, aged 73. Neither brother married and there are no direct descendants.

Members of the Beadman family continue to live in Leicestershire.

John Spencer Whitham – a life in summary

Born: 15/4/1885, Haworth
Baptised: 31/5/1885, Haworth
Died: 17/7/1950 **Aged:** 65
Home address: 5 Middleton, Cowling

Parents

Father: Joseph Spencer; b. 7/12/1835, Addingham; bapt. 3/1/1836, Addingham St. Peter;
d. 26/3/1893, Haworth
Mother: Elizabeth (nee Smith); b. 9/12/1844, Kildwick; bapt. 19/12/1844, Kildwick;
d. 14/7/1904, Haworth
Married: 31/10/1876, Kildwick

Siblings

William Benjamin; b. 18/9/1877, Haworth; d. 17/12/1937, Farnhill
Hannah Elizabeth; b. 17/8/1878, Haworth; d. 3/10/1887, Haworth
Harold Wilson; b. 13/7/1883, Haworth; d. 3/10/1956, Farnhill

WW1 service

Service period: 7/12/1914 to 5/4/1919
Regt.: 2/6, later 5th battalion Duke of Wellington's (West Riding) Regt.
(Private, nos. 3461 & 266187)
Medals: British War Medal; Victory Medal; Military Medal (MM)
Home address: 9 Bucklar Hill, Farnhill

Relationship to other volunteers

Ben Thornton Smith – they were cousins (Ben's father, Charles Smith, and John's mother, Elizabeth Smith, were siblings)

Although it is unlikely that they knew it, John may also have been distantly related to Thomas Beckwith Spencer. John's grandmother was called Elizabeth Spencer; and she had a brother called Beckwith.

Marriage

Wife: Sarah Jane Beadman; b. 7/3/1886, Appleby Magna, Leicestershire; d. 4/7/1966, Cowling
Date: 20/11/1920; St. Hilda's, Moira, Leicestershire

Children

Elizabeth Marian; b. 19/11/1921, Overseal, Derbyshire; d. 17/4/2011, Cowling

