

## **Private Arthur William Healey**

### **Distinguished Conduct Medal**

Arthur William Healey was born in Leicester on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1893, the eldest child of Eli and Sarah Ann Healey (née Bodycott). When he was baptised at St Mark's Church on 21<sup>st</sup> December the family were living at 199 Argyle Street, which was also Sarah's home address before her marriage, and Eli worked as a riveter. Both of Arthur's parents were from Leicester and in the 1901 Census Eli specifically noted his birthplace as Belgrave. They went on to have a family of four boys and a girl, but one son died in infancy. After leaving Argyle Street the family lived in Leire Street in Belgrave and Eli and Sarah were still there at the time they died, both in 1941.

By April 1911 Arthur, now 17, was working as a sewing machine fitter at the Singer Machine Company, but when war was declared in 1914 he volunteered. Arthur's army service record does not survive, but the details of his later Silver War Badge says that he enlisted on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1914, joining the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Leicestershire Regiment, with the service number 3354. They landed in France on 2<sup>nd</sup> March the following year, shortly becoming part of the 138<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 46<sup>th</sup> (North Midland) Division.

This, along with his service in the first year of the war, is illuminated in a newspaper article of August 1915:

"Pte. A. W. Healey, of the 138<sup>th</sup> Mining Section, has received a card from the Commanding Officer of the North Midland Division, to which Brigade he is attached, recognising his bravery in the field.

In a letter dated 1<sup>st</sup> August to his mother, who lives at 70 Leire-street, Belgrave, Pte. Healey gives a brief account of the deed which earned him the above-mentioned recognition. He says: 'We have been having some hard fighting. Yesterday when we were working in our mine we ran into a German mine under one of our trenches, all ready for blowing up. Five of us got every ounce of explosives out; we got 1,400lbs out, and we had to work like slaves for three hours. If we hadn't found it some poor devils would have been blown up. We have been recommended to the General, but I don't suppose we shall hear any more about it. The chap that got it all out of the mine itself deserves the V.C.'

Pte. Healey was originally in the 4<sup>th</sup> Leicesters, enlisting last October, and going out to the front in March. He has been transferred to his present branch of the service since he has been out there. When working in Leicester he was a blacksmith on the Great Central Railway."<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this courageous action, far from hearing nothing more about it, Arthur was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM), the announcement being made in the local press in January 1916, with one paper also carrying his photograph.<sup>2</sup> The formal citation read: "For conspicuous gallantry when he assisted to uncharge an enemy mine which had been discovered, tamped ready for explosion."<sup>3</sup>

However, in October 1915, before this announcement was made, Arthur was badly wounded in the arm and leg by machine gun fire during action on the Hohenzollern Redoubt where over the two days of fighting the 46<sup>th</sup> (North Midland) Division suffered 3,763 casualties.<sup>4</sup> As a result his mother was summoned to visit him in the military hospital in Bradford where he was receiving treatment.<sup>5</sup> The severity of his injuries led to Arthur being invalided out of the army on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1917 and needing to undergo periods of treatment long after the war. He was awarded the Silver War Badge, recognising

soldiers discharged through injury, together with the 1914-15 Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal.

It is not clear when Arthur was able to return to any working life after his injuries, but in late 1917 he was already active in the Leicester and Leicestershire branch of the Discharged Sailors' and Soldiers' Association. Formed early in 1917, this national organisation supported those who returned from the war with a disability and it campaigned for better pensions and employment opportunities. In 1921 it merged with three other national bodies to form the British Legion and in recognition of its pioneering role Leicester became the Legion's No 1 Branch.<sup>6</sup> Arthur appeared in a *Leicester Chronicle* photograph in October 1917 as part of the newly-formed Association's officials and committee members.<sup>7</sup> He seems to have been a very active and respected member of the organisation, as illustrated by a news report of a Church Parade of the Association at St Margaret's Church in Leicester in September 1919, after which Arthur had the honour of presenting one Corporal Wright with the Military Medal.<sup>8</sup>

At the end of 1917 Arthur married Harriet Culling, also a life-long Leicester resident. The wedding took place at the church of St Michael and All Angels in the parish of Belgrave on 26<sup>th</sup> December. Arthur was now 25 and gave his occupation as needlemaker and Harriett, aged 23, was a shoe machinist. They both gave their address as Arthur's family home at 70 Leire Street, but soon they were living at 17 Ross Walk. By 1921 they had moved to number 19 and Arthur was employed as a latch needle maker by T Grieve, hosiery machine builder, of Queen Street, Leicester. They were still residing in Ross Walk in 1939.

With over 300 Club members, including the other seven who had won medals, Arthur was present at the Belgrave Working Men's Club and Institute on the evening of Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 1919 at a supper and entertainment to welcome back all those members who had served in the Great War and to commemorate those who did not return. The Club's magnificent Roll of Honour was unveiled and each medal winner was presented with a framed photograph of the eight men together. He was noted in the press report as contributing to the musical entertainment which rounded off the evening.<sup>9</sup> In a much later article about the founding of the British Legion in Leicester, Arthur was described as one of the organisers of the Silver Badge Concert Party whose work raised considerable funds and so he seems to have been a man who both enjoyed and encouraged music.<sup>10</sup>

During the 1930s and beyond Arthur continued to be active in the work of the British Legion in Leicester, acting as competitions secretary for their various clubs, as secretary to the cricket club and as a member of the Executive Committee. From 1937 he was the branch treasurer, a role he still carried in 1943, but these endeavours were punctuated by periods of treatment for his severe war injuries. In March 1934, for example, the local press recorded his return on leave from the Ministry of Pensions Hospital in Leeds, founded in 1927 specifically to care for wounded soldiers and becoming the forerunner of the present Chapel Allerton Hospital, with many former soldiers from Leicester and its surroundings being treated there. Arthur had been undergoing two years of treatment and the press photograph shows him being welcomed home by his father, together with officials and members of the British Legion.<sup>11</sup> The work of the hospital must have been dear to his heart for in April of the following year he was amongst a group from the Leicester branch of the Legion who visited Leeds to provide a concert party and tea for the patients. The press reported how well it was received, noting that some patients amongst these 'forgotten men' would never be able to leave the hospital's care.<sup>12</sup>

Arthur was able to be at home again in November 1936 when a large Armistice Day commemoration at the De Montfort Hall was followed by the last public parade of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Leicestershire Regiment, which was about to be disbanded. On that day he himself was present at the parade of the Old

Humberstone and District British Legion and at their church service in St Mary's Humberstone, along with three other holders of the DCM.<sup>13</sup> However, the following year he was back in hospital in Leeds for an unknown period.<sup>14</sup> His links with the army clearly continued strongly for in 1939 he declared his occupation to be 'army recruiter'.

In the mid-1940s Arthur moved to live in London and when the British Legion held its national conference in 1951 the *Leicester Evening Mail* was pleased to report that Arthur was present at the gathering in Hyde Park. Here he greeted his old friend and colleague Mr J E Quain, secretary and founding member of the Leicester branch, and it was noted that Arthur retained his own membership of the branch there even though no longer resident in Leicester.<sup>15</sup>

Arthur died at the age of 59 on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1953 in King's College Hospital, close to his London home in Coldharbour Lane, Lambeth. He was described as a pensioned ex-soldier and the informant at his death was his younger brother Christopher who was still resident in the old family home at 40 Leire Street, Leicester.

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<sup>1</sup> *Leicester Daily Post*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1915, p5.

<sup>2</sup> *Leicester Daily Post*, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1916, p8.

<sup>3</sup> *The London Gazette*, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1916, Supplement 29503, p2681.

<sup>4</sup> <https://derbyshireterritorials.uk/the-great-war-1914-1918/1915-2/loos/>

There is a photo of the memorial stone commemorating the casualties on this webpage.

<sup>5</sup> *Leicester Daily Post*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1915, p5.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Association\\_of\\_Discharged\\_Sailors\\_and\\_Soldiers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Association_of_Discharged_Sailors_and_Soldiers)

<sup>7</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 6 Oct 1917, p12.

<sup>8</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 6 Sept 1919, p8.

<sup>9</sup> See *Leicester Evening Mail*, 12 November 1919, p2 and *Leicester Daily Post*, Weds 12 November 1919, p2.

<sup>10</sup> *Leicester Chronicle*, 31 Oct 1959, p3.

<sup>11</sup> *Leicester Mercury*, 29 March 1934, p14.

<sup>12</sup> *Leicester Evening Mail*, 12 April 1935, p11.

<sup>13</sup> *Leicester Evening Mail*, 9 Nov 1936, p10.

<sup>14</sup> *Leicester Evening Mail*, 7 Oct 1937, p16.

<sup>15</sup> *Leicester Evening Mail*, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1951, p2.