

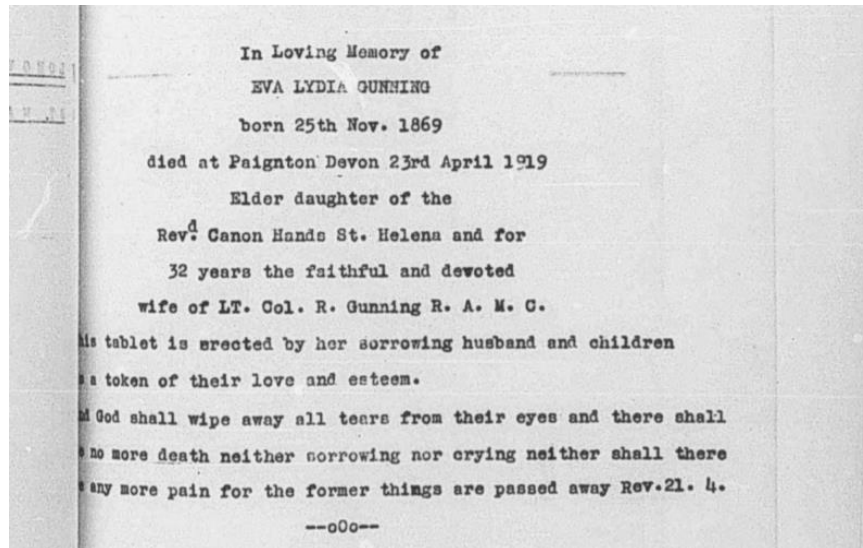
Robert Cardwell Gunning

This whole tale starts on St Helena – in the South Atlantic – an unlikely 5,000 miles away from Paignton.

Several years ago, St Helenan schoolchildren undertook a survey of every burial site on the island and, as part of my own Chimes family research, I was reading through it in detail. It was quite a surprise to find a memorial to an Emily Louise Jackson, nee Warren, who had been born in Paignton – but no further details were available.

Even more surprising was a second Paignton-related memorial - to Eva Lydia Gunning (nee Hands) who was born to one of the Vicars on St Helena in 1869, and who married

Enniskillen-born army surgeon, Robert Cardwell Gunning, in 1887, while he was stationed on St Helena. Robert was aged 33 and Eva just 17. At this stage I was still more interested in the Hands family – Eva's father John had been the officiating Vicar at my own great grandparents' wedding on St Helena, but then it became apparent that her husband had had a significant role in a chapter of Paignton's history.



Above is a copy of the St Helena inscription which uncovered this whole tale.

Robert Gunning served the army around the world, including postings at St Helena, Bengal, Gibraltar, Chester, and South Africa during the Boer War. By 1904 he was officially retired, as a Lieutenant-Colonel, and 1911 saw the Gunnings resident at Redhill in Cleveland Road. They had four children – two girls and two boys. At the time of the 1911 census the eldest, Norah, was married to John McDowall, a surgeon at the Royal Naval Hospital in Plymouth. The elder son, Cardwell, was 22 and described as a student. Lurline and Edward, aged 11 and four respectively, were still at school.



More research is required on their home: since 1911 Cleveland Road has changed markedly but it looks likely that the former Redhill is, in 2022, No. 7, named Mandalay. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 propelled Robert Gunning to break his ten-year retirement. In September he was installed as Commandant of the American Women's Army Hospital at Oldway Mansion. Thousands of wounded soldiers passed through the hospital from 1914 to 1919, after Paris Singer turned Oldway over to the military for the duration. Queen Mary visited the Hospital in November 1914, which caused quite a stir in Paignton. The visit was intended to be private but thousands of residents turned out to greet the Queen.



November 1915 & Queen Mary (6th left) at the Army Hospital, Oldway. Robert Gunning (5th right) was accompanied by his wife, who may be 4th right in this photo.

Friends of Oldway undertook a project to document the sterling work of the Hospital at Oldway. The brilliantly informative website can be found at:

<https://americanwomenswarhospital.com>

and there is a static exhibition, currently in storage, but which will be displayed as soon as space becomes available for it in Oldway Mansion. The website includes plenty of interesting articles and snippets, and is peppered with many fascinating photos.

Robert Gunning retired for a second time in 1919, and continued to live in Cleveland Road. His wife Eva died within weeks of the hospital's closure, at the South Eden Nursing Home (pictured here) on Paignton seafront which was situated in the terrace of buildings between Sands Road and Adelphi Road. She was 49. Eldest daughter Norah was living in Tarraway Road in 1918 with husband John but by 1923 they were resident in Plymouth, where John died in 1955. Norah died in Surrey twelve years later.



The Gunnings' elder son, Cardwell Sinclair had a lengthy career in the Indian Civil Service, and married in Calcutta in 1922. He was awarded an OBE, and died in 1951.

The third child, Lurline, married in Totnes, in 1921. She, too, died in Surrey, in 1970.

The youngest child, Edward, spent almost all of his childhood in Paignton. He died tragically young, aged 22, in India.

Robert Gunning, meanwhile, remained in Paignton for a while following the death of his wife but, by the time of his own death in 1930, he was living near his two daughters in Surrey. His death was reported in the British Medical Journal.

Researching my personal family tree unexpectedly led to a Paignton connection, which was quite significant in terms of the town's history too. Robert Gunning's importance in Paignton's Army Hospital during World War I has also left an exceptional variety of photographs.