

## **H.M.S. Vanguard - the Little Downham connection**

H.M.S. Vanguard was a dreadnought class battleship launched in April 1909. The ship was assigned to the 1st Division of the Home Fleet and was present when King George V visited the fleet in Torbay and participated in his Coronation Fleet Review at Spithead in June 1911. The first Division became the 1st Battle Squadron and the Vanguard underwent a refit before the first war broke out. When war was declared Vanguard was sent to Scapa Flow to protect the fleet from a possible surprise German attack. In April 1916 she was transferred to the 4th Battle Squadron.



H.M.S. Vanguard took part in the Battle of Jutland but was stationed at the rear of the fleet and saw little action. She then spent time patrolling the North Sea with the Grand Fleet but spent much of the time at Scapa Flow.

John Thomas Granfield was born in Little Downham on 30th July 1876, the son of William Granfield, labourer, and Ann (nee Casburn). His siblings were Amos, James and Charles. The family moved to Coys Cottage in Downham Road, Ely and father William died in 1881. In the 1881 census the rest of the family were living there along with William's father, also called William. John's mother Ann died in 1889. By 1891 John, now aged 15, was working as a servant for farmer William Norman and his wife Selina at Pygore. In 1896 John joined the Royal Navy and his service record gives a description:

Date and Period of C. S. Engagements.	Age.	Height. Ft. in.	Hair.	Eyes.	Complexion.
16 October 1896 - 12 yrs	17 1/2	5:7 3/4	Brown	Blue	Fresh
14 October 1908 - 20 yrs	✓	"	"	"	"
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John was a stoker, became a Chief Stoker in 1906 and was stationed on several ships before being posted to H.M.S Vanguard on 31st March 1914. During his visits home he stayed with his aunt, Mrs Casburn of Newnham Street, Ely.

The job of a stoker was to shovel coal, it was described as a thankless; filthy and arduous task and they were regarded as the lowest of the low. A chief stoker was a petty officer rank and would be in charge of the engines.

In the evening of 9th July 1917 H.M.S. Vanguard anchored in the northern part of Scapa Flow having spent the afternoon practising the routine for abandoning ship. At 23:20 the ship exploded and sank instantly. 845 men were on board and only two survived. They could only remember being asleep in their bunks and waking up in the water. A section of plating measuring approximately six by four feet (1.8 by 1.2 m) landed on board the battleship Bellerophon.

Subsequent investigation concluded that the ships store of cordite spontaneously exploded, possibly caused by it getting excessively hot. Cordite was a propellant, produced to replace gunpowder.



John Thomas Granfield was aboard the Vanguard when it exploded and was one of the casualties, just short of his 41st birthday. Some of the metal was salvaged from the wreck but it was declared a war grave in 1984. He is buried at Lyness Royal Navy Cemetery, Island of Hoy, Orkneys in a grave alongside his crewmate A.H. Tidmarsh. John is recorded on the Ely war memorial (his name is spelt as Cranfield). His aunt was notified of his death.

Following the centenary of the sinking there is a project to find photos of all the crewmen killed. So far John Thomas Granfield has remained elusive. If anyone knows of the existence of a picture please let me know.

**Robin Pearl**