

Lieutenant Hugh Randolph Ryan-Bell

“I died in hell (They called it Passchendaele)” by Siegfried Sassoon

The Ryan-Bell family can trace the origins of their name to John Ryan, a farmer from Parsonstown (now Birr), Ireland and his son Thomas Ryan.ⁱ The 1841 census records that Thomas was aged 20 years, a musician, and had made his way from Ireland to settle in Leamington Priors. He was lodging at Victoria Terrace. For reasons unknown, Thomas had adopted a new surname 'Bell', retaining his original surname as a middle name. This is evidenced by advertisements that started to appear in the local papers from 12th December 1846, announcing himself as a 'professor of music' and an agent for musical instruments from his home address at 3, Victoria Terrace, Leamington.

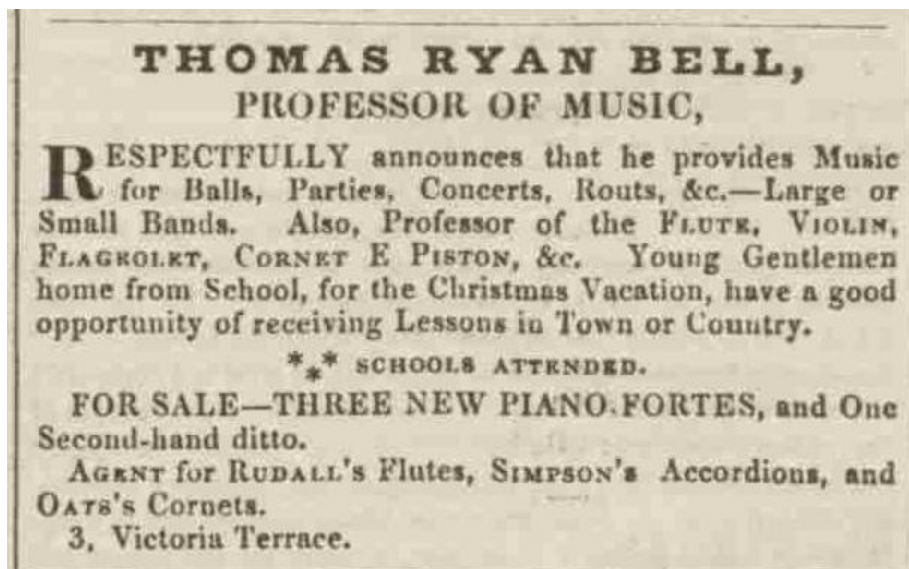


Figure 1: An 1846 newspaper advertisement for Thomas Ryan Bell

On 9th April 1850, Thomas married Ann, the second daughter of Joseph Cattell, a farmer from Wroxall, at Hatton Church, Warwickshire. The marriage certificate confirms the addition of 'Bell' to Thomas's original surname of Ryan,ⁱⁱ

No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the Time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
62	April 9	Thomas Ryan Bell Ann Cattell	full age full age	Bachelor Spinster	Musical —	Leamington Hatton	John Ryan Joseph Cattell	Farmer Farmer

Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of England by me, Thos Hope

his Marriage was solemnized between us, Thomas Ryan Bell and Ann Cattell in the Presence of us, William Lewis and Ann Cattell

Figure 2: Details of the marriage of Thomas Ryan Bell and Ann Cattell

The couple resided at 40, Regent Street, Leamington, Warwickshire, after their marriage. In the 1851 census, Thomas was described as a 'music setter'. Their first child, Ann Mary Cathleen, was born later that year in 1851ⁱⁱⁱ, followed by a second child, Thomas Ryan, on 6th July 1853. Thomas was baptised two weeks later at St Peter's Apostle Roman Catholic Church, Leamington Spa.^{iv}

An advert from a local newspaper in 1855 indicates that Thomas senior's profession as a music teacher was thriving to the extent that he had to offset the commercial side of his business to Mr Harvey Knight based at 12, Newbold Street, Leamington.

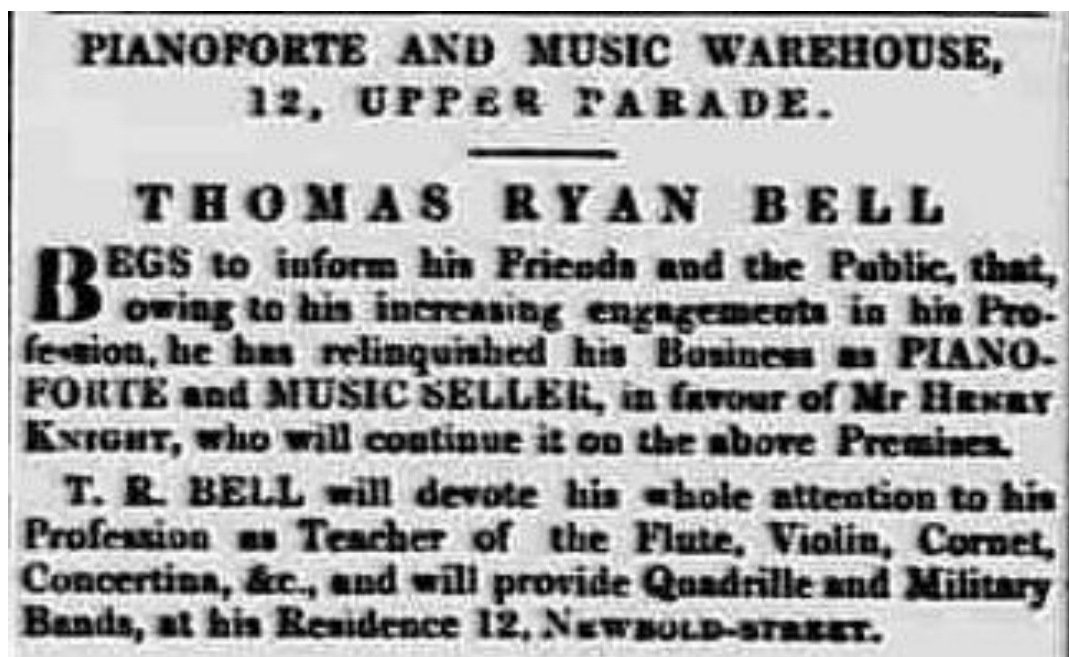


Figure 3: Newspaper article from 1855

By 1861, the family had moved to 4 Bellevue Terrace, Milverton, Leamington Spa. Two further children had been born, John Ryan around 1856 and Randolph Ryan in 1858. A daughter, Hannah Cattell, was born later that the year. The census notes that Thomas had become deaf. For a musician this must have been a devastating disability. What happened to Thomas after this is unclear. There is a record of the death of a Thomas Ryan Bell in Dudley in 1863.

By 1871, Ann is recorded as a widow living with her children at 75 Anderton Road, Sparkbrook, Birmingham. Her son Thomas was noted as an invalid. He died the following year aged just 19 years old.^v Ann's eldest daughter, Ann, was an English governess at Applegate House, Worcester and the youngest children John and Randolph were both in work as clerks. Hannah the youngest daughter was still a scholar.

In 1881 Ann senior was living somewhere on the Stratford Road, in the Sparkhill area of Birmingham. The census records two boarders at the address in addition to her eldest daughter, Ann, a professor of music like her late father and John, a banker's clerk.

1886 was a good year for Ann senior. On 29th April, her son John Ryan married Annie Jane, daughter of Charles Messingham Shepherd at Christchurch, Westminster and two and a half months later, on 13th July, her youngest daughter Hannah Cattell married the Reverend Alfred Henry Samuel Johnson at Yardley Parish Church, Birmingham.^{vi}

John and Annie Ryan Bell are recorded in the 1891 census as living at 100 Sampson Road, now in Sparkbrook, Birmingham. The house was the former Vicarage of St Agatha's Church and now Grade II* listed. John was a bank cashier. The couple had two children at that time, Hugh Randolph Ryan (known as Jack in the family^{vii}), born 23rd May 1887 and Ralph John Ryan, born in 1889. Both children were baptised at Christ Church, Sparkbrook, Birmingham.

By 1901, John was the bank manager of the Sparkbrook branch of Lloyds bank on the Stratford Road and had moved to Moseley, Birmingham.^{viii} His residential address was Aberfoyle, Forest Road. The family had increased to five children including Douglas Howard Ryan, Edgar David Ryan and Marjorie Annie, born in 1891, 1894 and 1897 respectively.



Figure 4: John and Annie Ryan Bell (seated) with baby Edgar and their three other children, Hugh (8), Ralph (6), and Douglas (4) taken around 1894



Figure 5: Newspaper cutting announcing Hugh's commission in August 1915

Hugh was educated at Woodroughs School under Miss Kind before he was admitted to King Edward's School (KES) as a foundation scholar in 1897. His brothers were all scholars at KES, then in New Street, Birmingham.

Hugh left school in 1904 and became a 'tube manufacturer's clerk' at Stewart & Lloyds of Easy Row, Birmingham.^x The 1911 census also notes that he was living with his parents and siblings at 122 Church Road, Moseley. Hugh was a member of Moseley Ashfield Cricket Club and Kings Norton Golf Club.^x

After the outbreak of war on the 4th August 1914, Hugh enlisted for 'Three Years Short Service' with the Colours on 9th September 1914 with the 14th (Service) Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment (1st Birmingham Pals). He became Private H R R Bell, No 14/487. His attestation papers record that he was aged 27 years and 4 months old, 5' 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ " tall, with blue eyes, brown hair and a fresh complexion. At some time Hugh had been operated on for appendicitis as it was noted in his medical records as a 'distinctive mark'. His home address at the time was Hampden Lodge, Church Road, Moseley. Hugh had been a cadet in the Birmingham University Officer Training Corps before enlisting.

On 10th July 1915, Hugh applied for a commission in the Territorial Force and was appointed 2nd Lieutenant, a month later, on 8th August 1915 in the 3/8th Battalion Worcester Regiment. On completion of his officer training, Hugh was posted to the 1/8 Worcester Regiment in France but the exact date is not known.^{xi}

On 18th November 1916, Hugh, then a Lieutenant, married Maude Marie, youngest daughter of Mrs Chapman of Wheelwright Road, Erdington at Erdington Parish Church, Birmingham, by Special Licence while home on leave.^{xii} Maude was a telephonist, then a skilled and 'genteel' employment.^{xiii}



Figure 6: Lieutenant Hugh Randolph Ryan Bell

In 1917, Hugh took part in the Third Battle of Ypres, later known as Passchendaele. The front line of the 1/8 Worcester Regiment had changed little since the failure of the first attack commencing 16th August 1917, known as the Battle of Langemarck. As a result a more systematic attack was planned.

On the 25th and 26th August the 1/8 Worcester Regiment came back into line holding an area with the 1/7 Worcester Battalion from Hillock Farm to beyond the Triangle (see Figure 7). The 1/8 Battalion was on the right. The planned attack was intended to break the enemy's main line of defence beyond the Langemarck Road, a strong position defended by outpost fortresses of Springfield and Vancouver.

The night of 26th/27th August was one of heavy rain and intense darkness, broken only by the blaze of bursting shells from a continuous barrage and heavy bombardment from the enemy when the platoons made their way forward into the assembly trenches.

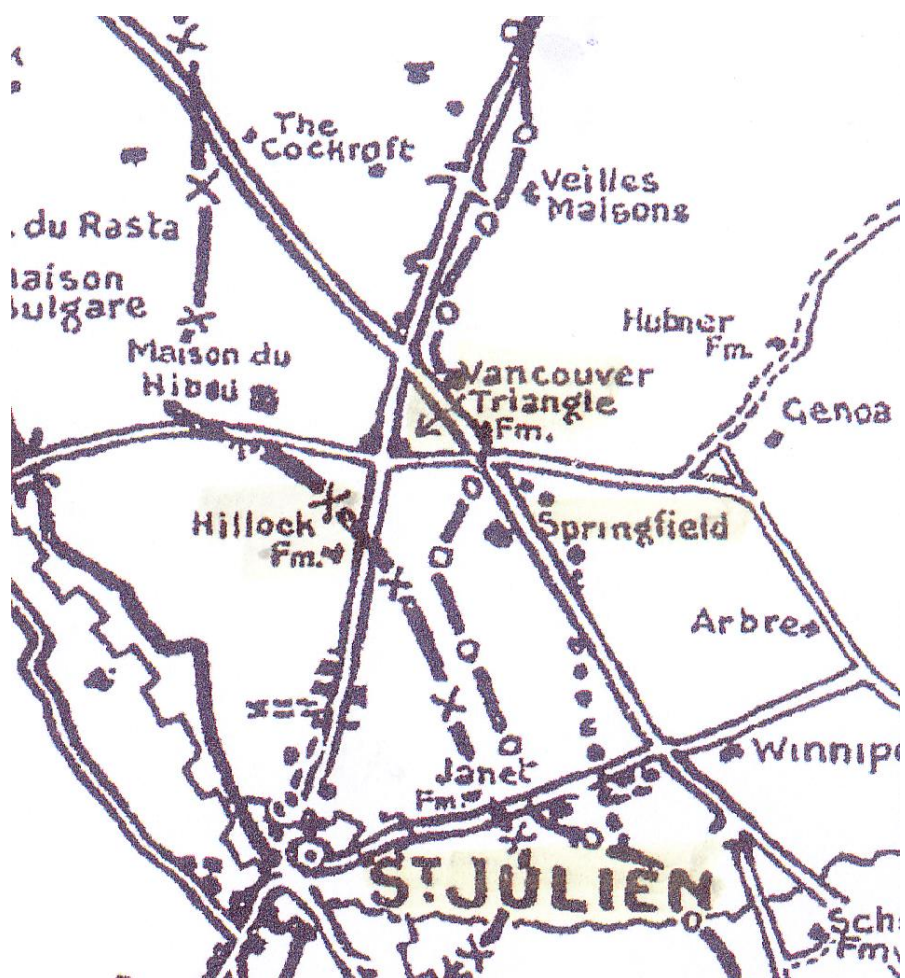


Figure 7: Map showing the positions of the Triangle, Vancouver, Springfield near St Julien in August 1917

The following morning, 27th August brought further downpours making the state of the ground even worse than before. The great bog of shell-holes had become almost impassable. At midday and at 1.55 pm the British artillery set up an intense barrage of fire along the line of where the enemy was thought to be dug in. As the 1/8 Battalion advanced, fierce bursts of machine-gun fire from Springfield Farm enfiladed the attack and held it up.

The Regimental War Diary relates that, as night fell, Hugh, as platoon leader of 'D' Coy, was sent from the reserve by Colonel Carr, to take the farm in a flanking movement. The attack from the north was successful and the farm was captured after a fierce struggle, but Hugh was mortally wounded.^{xiv}

The Captain of his company wrote:

Lieutenant Bell led the company with great dash and was within a few yards of the farm when he was unfortunately hit by a sniper. The farm was taken thanks to his excellent leadership.^{xv}

He must have continued fighting as later information from the Chaplain after Hugh was admitted to hospital the following day, 28th August, reveals that he suffered a shell wound which was the immediate cause of his death on 29th August 1917.

A letter to Mrs Bell (Hugh's mother) from the Church of England Chaplain, Gerrard M Davidson CF, attached to No 4 Casualty Clearing Station said:

It is with profound regret that I write to tell you of the death of your gallant son, 2nd Lt R Ryan Bell, 1/8 Worcesters at 8 pm last night. I officiated at his funeral this morning. The place of Burial and particulars of Grave may be obtained from the Graves Commissioners. The Base. BEF.

Although the standard letter goes on to say that, '*I am indeed sorry that I can give you no particulars as to how he met his death*', the Chaplain inserted a hand written explanation.

He received a shell wound in the right buttock and a fractured femur. All that skill, care, attention can do was done for him by our nurses and doctors and assurance that he was too ill to feel much pain. He sent no messages but then the severely wounded hardly ever do so.^{xvi}

Hugh was buried at Dozingham British Cemetery, north-west of Ypres. He was 30 years old when he died. Had he lived he would have received the Distinguished Service Order.^{xvii}

Hugh is also commemorated at St Agnes Church and St Mary's Church, Moseley, Moseley Ashfield Cricket Club, Kings Norton Golf Club, King Edward's School, Edgbaston and is on the Roll of Honour in Birmingham's Hall of Memory

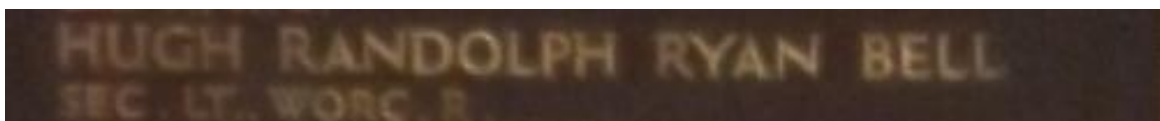


Figure 8

- (Top left) The first simple wooden cross marking Hugh's grave
- (Middle right): The final Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone
- (Top right) Kings Norton Golf Club
- (Middle left): St Agnes Church WW1 memorial
- (Middle centre) St Mary's Church WW1 memorial
- (Middle right) Moseley Ashfield Cricket Club WW1 memorial
- (Above): King Edward's School, Edgbaston, WW1 memorial

Hugh's widow Maude Ryan Bell married Robert Cecil Wansbrough in Meriden, Warwickshire in 1922. Robert's elder brother, Evelyn, was killed in action in 1916. Robert had also enlisted and joined the Royal Warwickshire Regiment in 1914. He later transferred to the South Staffordshire Regiment on commission to 2nd Lieutenant. He served in Armentieres and on the Somme Front before joining the Royal Flying Corps and ended the war as a Captain and Adjutant of No 8 School of Aeronautics. He joined the Royal Air Force on its inception and went on to have a distinguished career retiring as an Air Commodore. As a mature student he read engineering at St Catharine's College Cambridge in 1928-30. The couple had a son, Peter, born in 1924 who was killed in WW2 serving as a Pilot Officer in Bomber Command.^{xviii}

Hugh's brothers also served.

Ralph John Ryan Bell, an insurance surveyor with the Royal Insurance Company in Bennett's Hill, enlisted in 'D' Squadron, 2/1 Worcester Yeomanry in 1909 as a private, No 1630. When war was declared he was called up and served until 7th February 1916 when he was discharged after completing his 7 years of engagement.

Douglas Howard Ryan Bell did not serve due to ill health

Edgar David Ryan Bell, a motor tester/electrician for the City of Birmingham, Electric Supply Department, enlisted for Short Service on 22nd February 1916 at Stoney Lane Barracks, Birmingham and was posted on 30th September 1916 to Mesopotamia. He was struck off strength on 22nd July 1917 and invalided to India. He arrived in Bombay five days later, 27th July, and served with the 3rd Wireless Signal Squadron in Upper Topa, and Rawalpindi, Bangalore until 13th December 1918. He was then sent to Deolali, on 19th January 1919 as an 'invalided rank' ready for embarkation home from Bombay on 29th January 1919.^{xix}

The family surname in the KES, census and BMD records was recorded as 'Bell', but on Hugh's Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone his surname was engraved as 'Ryan-Bell'.

**Written and researched by Edwina Rees, Moseley Society History Group.
With thanks to Alison Wheatley, archivist, King Edward School,
Edgbaston, Lesley Patience, Hugh's great-niece and Geoffrey Skelsey,
great nephew of Robert Cecil Wansbrough's mother, Gladys Wansbrough**

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Endnotes

- i 1851 census
- ii *Royal Leamington Spa Courier and Warwickshire Standard*, 13.4.1850
- iii 1861 census
The 1911 census records the full name as Ann Mary Cathleen living with her sister Hannah and her husband Reverend Johnson
- iv England, Roman Catholic Parish Baptisms, Birmingham Archdiocesan Archives Ref P194/1/1
- v England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837-1915
- vi *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 6.5.1886
Manchester Times, 17.7.1886
- vii *Birmingham Daily Post*, 5th September 1917
- viii *Birmingham Weekly Post*, from the archives of King Edward's School, Edgbaston
- ix 1911 census
Lesley Patience
- x From the archives of King Edward's School, Edgbaston See also vii (BWP)
- xi The National Archives, Officers after 1913, Ref WO 374/59951
- xii *Birmingham Daily Post*, 5.9.17
- xiii Geoffrey Skelsey
- xiv The Worcester Regiment in the Great War (1914-1919), p 283-284
- xv See viii

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- xvi Letter written to Hugh's mother by the Chaplain at No 4 Casualty Clearing Station submitted to KES archives by Lesley Patience
- xvii See xiv
- xviii Geoffrey Skelsey
- xix British Army Service Records

Illustrations

- Figure 1 *Royal Leamington Spa Courier and Warwickshire Standard*, 19.12.1846
- Figure 2 Warwickshire, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1910
- Figure 3 *Royal Leamington Spa Courier and Warwickshire Standard*, 2.6.1855
- Figure 4 Bell family photograph submitted by Leslie Patience to the archives of King Edward's School, Edgbaston
- Figure 5 Newspaper cutting around August 1915 from the archives of King Edward's School, Edgbaston.
- Figure 6 Lieutenant Bell photograph submitted to the KES archives by Leslie Patience
- Figure 7 *The Worcester Regiment in the Great War (1914-1919)*, p 278-279
- Figure 8 Hugh's grave photographs are from the archives of King Edward's School, Edgbaston, submitted by Leslie Patience
Kings Norton Golf Club memorial from the secretary of the club, Sheila Richardson