Recuperation trip proved unlucky for Robert

The original memorial for the 305 Board of Trade men who died in the first world war between 1914 and 1918 may be lost. But their names will once again be rightfully remembered when the DTT’s replacement rolls of honour are unveiled next month. One of those names is Robert Williams whose story is recounted here by Anne Morrison of SSM.

Robert Williams was a rifleman with the 1st Battalion Rifle Brigade. He died on 17th November 1917 when the hospital ship he was on – the Anglia – was sunk by a German mine in the Channel. Robert, along with other soldiers and nurses who lost their lives, was being shipped back to Britain for treatment and recuperation from the Western Front. Robert Williams was very unlucky – he had contracted appendicitis while in France and was being sent home to recuperate after the operation. It must have seemed to him as a reprieve from the monotony, interspersed with frenetic action, which characterised life in the trenches. But it didn’t work out that way.

In reply to a Parliamentary Question in the House of Commons Bosmar Law reported that the Anglia had carried many ‘cot cases’. The walking wounded were in the main, able to scramble off the ship and were picked up by ships nearby but the severely injured would have been lodged in the body of the ship itself and were not able to escape. The nurses who died had bravely stayed with their patients instead of leaving them and racing to safety. Ironically, the Red Cross flag could still be seen flying on her mast after the Anglia sank. A ship sent to the Anglia’s rescue was also sunk. Luckily, all the crew of this second ship, the London Collier, were saved.

The sinking of the Anglia caused a great deal of speculation – the King had been a passenger on a recent sailing. Were the mines set in order to catch other royal visits to the front? There was particular interest in the fate of the Anglia in North Wales; she was a Holyhead steamer which had been requisitioned for cross-channel crossings and in Caernarfon, Robert’s hometown. The sinking of the ship was seen as a local blow.

Her sister ship, the Tara, had been sunk in the Channel only a week earlier. Robert was not the only local to lose his life in the sinking of the Anglia. Tom Parry, another Caernarfon lad and a member of the ship’s crew, also lost his life. One can only imagine theashed eggs in The Ship and Castle pub – the home of Robert’s parents in Caernarfon – in those days following the Anglia’s sinking.

Robert Williams was born in Caernarfon in 1889. He had worked in the Labour Office there before enlisting in Penarth. In the newspaper article describing his death he was described as "a general favourite" there. He would have worked in an office within a small local community almost certainly bilingual in Welsh and English.

His death in 1917 is recorded on the Hollywood Memorial in Southampton and the War Memorial in Caernarfon. His home, The Ship and Castle pub is still open.

As we go to press, arrangements are in hand for the delivery and unveiling of the new DTT war memorial early in November. A small number of tickets for staff to attend the ceremony will be made available to staff through directors general and agency chief executives.

Retired staff who are interested in attending can register their interest now with the head of the DTT Hospitality Unit, Geoffrey Taylor, by telephoning 020 7215 6720.