

Cheltenham & Gloucester Branch  
of  
The Western Front Association

Remembering one of Gloucestershire's Fallen



Lieutenant Colonel Reverend Bernard William Vann VC,  
MC & Bar, Croix de Guerre

1/6<sup>th</sup> Battalion Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire & Derby Regiment)

**Bernard William Vann** was born at Rushden, Northamptonshire on 9 July 1887, the fourth of a family of five sons born to Alfred and Hannah Vann. Both his mother and father were qualified teachers.

After the death of her husband in 1906 Hannah Vann went to live with her unmarried brother, who was the Rector of Coates, a village near Cirencester.

Bernard was a talented sportsman, who appeared for Derby County in the Football League in 1906/7 and also a keen debater and public speaker. He pursued all these interests after leaving his job as a teacher to go up to Jesus College, Cambridge in 1907. After university he took up Holy Orders and became Chaplain and

Assistant Master at Wellingborough School in 1913.

Upon the outbreak of war he applied to join the Army Chaplain's Department, stating his address to be the Rectory at Coates. They were slow to reply and in early September 1914 he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the 1/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire & Derby Regiment). He was sent to France with them on 25 February 1915.

In July 1915 he was awarded the Military Cross and suffered a severe gunshot wound during the Battle of Loos, one of several wounds received in the course of action. He saw rapid promotion and in June 1916 was Acting Major with the 1/7<sup>th</sup> Sherwood Foresters. For leadership of a

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daring raid on enemy trenches in September 1916 he was awarded a Bar to his MC. In September 1917 he assumed command of 1/6<sup>th</sup> Battalion (139 Brigade, 46 Division) and became Acting Lieutenant Colonel on 6 October 1917.

On 29 September 1918 Bernard led the 1/6<sup>th</sup> Sherwood Foresters during an attack on Bellenglise. Single handed he knocked out a German field gun and showed great gallantry and leadership in encouraging his men forward across the St Quentin Canal in the face of heavy fire. For this action he was awarded the VC. On 3 October he was shot through the chest by a sniper and died instantly.

Bernard Vann left a widow and a small son, whom he never saw. His obituary in

*The Wellingburian*, the magazine of Wellingborough School, stated: *He never forgot that he was a priest of God, for it was his greatest joy to be able to do the double duty of commanding his battalion and giving Communion to the sick and wounded.*

The chalice that Bernard Vann used to administer Communion in the field is still used today at special services at St Matthew's Church, Coates.

Bernard Vann was the first priest to be awarded the Victoria Cross as CO of an infantry battalion and is the most highly decorated of those who now lie in Bellicourt British Cemetery. His grave was visited as part of the 2012 Branch Battlefield Tour and a poppy cross placed in his memory.

