

## **Biog 13 The Laird Family**

### **Morag Cross 16 December 2013**

#### **\*\*\*13.1**

The street sign at Laird Place, Bridgeton bears an apparently ordinary placename, but the story behind it encompasses a family and a business who played a part in local, municipal and military life both before and during the First World War. The firm of George Laird & Son, joiners and timber merchants, was called after its founder, a cabinetmaker and upholsterer, who began business in Ann Street, Bridgeton around 1857.

#### **\*\*\*13.2**

George Laird, a working-class 'master carpenter' from Erskine, successfully expanded his company to employ 85 men and 10 boys by 1881, by which time he was living in Greenhead St with his wife and nine children. As was common with upwardly-mobile families aspiring to respectability, four sons entered 'the professions' in the 1890s and 1900s. Thomas D Laird became a doctor (eventually practising in Cambuslang), Charles M Laird was an engineer and John and James W Laird entered partnership as architects around 1904. The latter worked on Scotstoun Flour Mills, St Catherine's Leather Works, Ingram St and Bridgeton's Star Palace Cinema. **[Illustration of Cambuslang goes here**

**\*\*\*13.3 ]** However, the eldest son, George Holms Laird, and his brother Matthew J D Laird, both joined the family businesses, which by 1900 included Bridgeton Saw Mills, also in Ann Street.

[Sources: 'J W Laird & J Laird', *Dictionary of Scottish Architects*, at [www.scottisharchitects.org.uk](http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk); Censuses 1881, 1891, 1901 at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); John R Hume 1974, *Industrial Archaeology of Glasgow*, Glasgow, pp212, 272; *Glasgow Post Office Directories 1856-1930*].

#### **\*\*\*13.4**

Matthew (1875-1916) was apprenticed as a joiner, and along with his eldest brother George Holms Laird, became a director of their firm of 'cabinetmakers, house furnishers and removal contractors'. Matthew spent 'several years in The Queen's Own Yeomanry', (a precursor to the part-time Territorials), before resigning in 1903, when the business underwent reorganisation. George had meanwhile married, and had three sons of his own, another George (G H R Laird), born in 1885, William W (b 1887) and Arthur D Laird (b 1890). [*Edinburgh Gazette*, 27 Feb 1903, p219; *Glasgow Herald*, 12 July 1916, p8; *Glasgow Post Office Directories 1856-1930*; Source: Statutory Register of Births, Deaths at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk)].

#### **\*\*\*13.5**

At the outbreak of war, Matthew Laird, despite his age (39), re-enlisted in September 1914, and as might have been expected of a construction worker, became an officer 'in the Lowland Division Royal Engineers [in] December 1914', On 6 June 1915, Matthew and his Division landed at Cape Helles, Gallipoli, where he was 'promoted captain on June 8', and from where he was evacuated after the disastrous operations there, reaching Egypt in January 1916. Letters 'from officers who are prisoners of war in Turkey' reported that Laird, had been killed on 23 April 1916, 'after several hours fighting at Kantara' (defending the Suez Canal). [Sources: 'The 52nd (Lowland) Division', and 'The

Field Companies RE', *The Long, Long Trail*, at [www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net); *Glasgow Herald*, 5 May 1916, p10; 12 July 1916, p8; *The Scotsman*, 5 May 1916, p6].

### \*\*\*13.6

Brother Thomas (b 1871), a Glasgow-trained physician and surgeon, became a major in The Royal Army Medical Corps. He, Matthew and George had two sisters, who most unusually for middle class women of the time, entered the world of work, needing 'to feel they were doing something worthwhile'. Margaret (1860-1941) was teaching cookery in 1891, while Mary H Laird (1869-1937, called after a deceased elder sister), volunteered as an orderly with the Scottish Women's Hospital, 'a fully equipped hospital unit staffed by women', founded by Dr Elsie Inglis, and financed by entirely unpaid fundraising committees, again, almost all female (discussed further in Dr Louise McIlroy's story). [Sources: Census 1891, at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); Statutory Register of Births, Deaths, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); 'Major Thomas D Laird', *First World War Roll of Honour*, at [www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk](http://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk); Leah Leneman, *In the Service of Life*, Edinburgh, ppxii, 2, 29-30].

### \*\*\*13.7

Mary served with the Girton and Newnham Unit, from May 1915, in the field hospital under canvas at Troyes, France. Among her chores were 'menial tasks ... muck out the WCs, scrub the floors, peel tatties, clean the cars ...'. That autumn, the French Expeditionary Force asked the SWH to accompany them to Salonica (Thessaloniki) in Greece. During the voyage, in October 1915, 'In Malta ... Mary Laird found her brother [Matthew, Royal Engineers] ... he had been ill, and they were amazed by the chance meeting'. It was probably the last time they saw each other, as Matthew died in Egypt six months later. Mary next enrolled with The Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, a government-organised administrative and catering support service, and stayed with them until 1918. [Sources: ; Leah Leneman, *In the Service of Life*, Edinburgh, pp 29-30, 37; *The Scotsman*, Aug 29, 1916, p5; Sue Light, *Scottish Women's Hospital, Index of Names*, at [www.scarletfinders.co.uk](http://www.scarletfinders.co.uk); 'Women's Organisations', *The Long, Long Trail*, at [www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net); John Simkin 2013, 'Women's Auxiliary Army Corps', *Women at War*, at [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk)].

### \*\*\*13.8 a and b {use both as inscription important}

Before the war, two of George's sons had followed him into Laird's joinery, with Arthur acting as a 'timber measurer' (similar to a quantity surveyor and estimator), and William a 'wright' in 1911. G H R Laird practised as a solicitor with Laird and MacKenzie, but all three sons lived 'at home', moving from Belmont St, Hillhead, to the affluent Park Drive, Woodlands area around 1912. [Source: Census 1911, at [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); *Glasgow Valuation Roll VR 1913-14*, Ward 15, p35, at [www.theglasgowstory.com](http://www.theglasgowstory.com); *Glasgow Post Office Directories 1856-1930*].

### \*\*\*13.9a and b [use both they are not alternates]

G H R Laird had joined the 6th Battalion, The Highland Light Infantry, a part-time local unit, in 1913-14, and consequently was mobilised as soon as war was declared. He 'was sent with the Mediterranean Force to Egypt and left Alexandria for the Dardanelles in June', where he was seriously wounded at Gallipoli on 12 July 1915. He was still in Glasgow recuperating, when he received news of his brother Arthur's death seven months later. [Sources: 'What was the Territorial

Force', and 'The Highland Light Infantry', *The Long, Long Trail*, at [www.1914-1918.net](http://www.1914-1918.net); *Glasgow Herald*, 20 July 1915, p10; 3 Feb 1916, p11].

### \*\*\*13.10

Arthur Laird served with the 17th (Chamber of Commerce) Battalion, The Highland Light Infantry, largely drawn from white-collar office-workers. A former captain of Glasgow Academy's football, rugby and cricket teams, he featured in several inter-unit matches while in France, as reported in early 1916: '17th HLI Officers v 16th HLI O. Played Somewhere in France, on a very hard pitch with a strong wind blowing ... A most amusing game much appreciated by fully 1500 spectators ... Laird worked very hard. The defence was most erratic. The 16th thoroughly deserved to win'. [Source: *The Outpost (17th HLI Magazine)*, May 1916, p59; *The Scotsman*, 11 July 1916; *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, October 1916, p161].

### \*\*\*13.11

Arthur became 'the first casualty among the officers', of the 17th HLI when he was slightly wounded in January 1916, but recovered, only to die in action on 1 July, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Although 'The Somme' has since become proverbial for mud and 'hell on earth', even at the time it seems to have been recognised as something supremely awful. 'At 7-26 [am] the artillery commenced ... the ground shook, and a solid sheet of steel seemed to rush overhead. The individual detonations ... were indistinguishable ... A small tape worm wriggled up the side of the trench ...' The 17th Battalion's chaplain, A H Gray, wrote: 'For an hour or two we were almost persuaded to believe in the 'walk over' ... rapid advances at small cost ... [but then] we were told of the merciless machine gun fire ... [it] mowed them down like rabbits.' 'If ever there was a busy place in this world, it was that hospital'. [Sources: *The Scotsman*, 4 Feb 1916, p4; 11 July 1916, p6; *Glasgow Herald*, 3 Feb 1916, p11; 7 July 1916, p10; *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, Aug 1916, pp132-4; Oct 1916, pp148, 161].

### \*\*\*13.12

Other HLI eyewitnesses: 'The German trenches ... [showed] up black against the skyline, with the morning sun ... behind them ... They [British military strategists] had reckoned without Fritz and his twenty-five foot dug-outs ... a machine-gun ... started off ... an officer pitched forward and dropped all huddled up ... his hands clutching the ground on either side... Another ran ... his steel helmet flew into the air as if shot from a catapult, and he too, spun round and dropped.' In the enemy dugout, a German was found, 'crouching in the last stages of terror and despair, watching our every movement with panic-stricken eyes.' Survivors arrived in Glasgow's Central Station five days later, 'the clay of the trenches still adhering to their clothing'. [Source: *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, Aug 1916, pp136-7; *Glasgow Herald*, July 1916, p7].

### \*\*\*13.13 a or b gravestone alternative images choose one

George Laird's third son, William, served with The Royal Field Artillery in Palestine in 1916, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel, and, like G H R Laird, resumed business in Glasgow after the war. Two memorial services held in Glasgow in 1917 commemorated the campaigns of Gallipoli and the Somme, which had so affected the Laird family, among many others. Capt G H R Laird attended both, and read the lesson for Gallipoli, where he was wounded. [Source: 'W W Laird', *British Army WWI*

*Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920* [Online Resource], at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk); *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, October 1917, p130].

\*\*\*13.14

The military padre, Rev A H Gray, preached 'There can be no sufficient memorial to [the fallen] but a different and better Scotland. The monuments ... of this war are not yet up ... they will be only brass plates and marble slabs, but ... they deserve a better monument ... a better Britain.' [Source: *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, October 1917, p130].

\*\*\*13.15 a or b or both whatever is needed but use at least one

When George Laird & Son Ltd moved their joinery yard from Ann St to larger premises around 1917, they were leaving a site they had occupied for almost 60 years. Ann Street was renamed 'Laird Street' in the 1930s, in recognition of their former importance to the neighbourhood. Laird Street has now been demolished, but the name and some of their memories are preserved in the present-day 'Laird Place'. [Source: *Glasgow Post Office Directories 1856-1930*].