

“Kirkpatrick’s” — a Simpson memorial with a difference

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THERE ARE MANY MEMORIALS to John Simpson Kirkpatrick (1892–1915), the famous Anzac stretcher-bearer remembered in the phrase “Simpson and his Donkey”. The most revered is his headstone at the Beach Cemetery, Anzac Cove. Simpson’s grave is perhaps the spot most visited by Australians and New Zealanders today who make the pilgrimage to Gallipoli. But there is another memorial to Simpson that is

much frequented — a public house in South Shields, Tyneside, named “Kirkpatrick’s” in his honour. The pub, opened in 1990, stands beside a bronze statue of Simpson and his donkey that was erected in 1988, Australia’s bicentenary year.

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There can be little doubt that the man himself would have approved of a pub as a memorial. Before his service at Anzac Cove in April and May, 1915, Jack Kirkpatrick (as he signed himself) had been a ship’s stoker, a cane cutter in north Queensland and a coalminer in New South Wales.¹ It was a rough life. In a letter to his mother dated 7 January 1912, he described how he and his fellow stokers (of the SS *Kooringa*) became inebriated in Melbourne on 25 December 1911, and had enjoyed a violent fracas:

We had goose and Plum Pudding and brandy sause [*sic*] and of course we drank each others health quite a number of times until each man thought he was Jack Johnson champion of the world then my mate suggested going over and having a fight with the sailers [*sic*] of course that was heriled [*sic*] as a noble idea and as the sailers feeling a bit lively themselves from sampling the bottle too much things went pretty lively for the next half hour. You couldn’t see anything for blood and snots flying about until Mates and Engineers came along and threatened to log all hands forward...we all had trophies of the fray someone bunged one of my eyes right up and by the look of my beak I think someone must have jumped on it in a mistake when I was on the floor but as they say alls well that ends well ...”

A short life

John Simpson Kirkpatrick was born on 6 July 1892 at 10 South Eldon Street, South Shields, the son of Robert Kirkpatrick, a seaman, and a domestic housekeeper, Sarah Simpson. The family moved six times during his childhood. He attended two primary schools at South Shields, and at the age of 12 became a delivery boy for a local milk vendor.

On 14 October 1909, two days after the burial of his father, Simpson went to sea on the SS *Heighington*. On 12 February 1910 he enlisted on the SS *Yeddo* as a stoker; and sailed with her to Australia via South America. He “jumped ship” at Newcastle in New South Wales on 13 May 1910 and worked his passage to north Queensland. He tried cane-cutting for a week, followed by cattle-mustering, but found both jobs too demanding in the overwhelming heat and humidity north of Cairns. He went south as a ship’s stoker and became an underground coalminer at Coledale and later at Corrimal, south of Sydney. He then returned to his life as a ship’s stoker for three years until he enlisted, on 25 August 1914, at Perth, as “No. 202 J Simpson”, a stretcher-bearer with C Bearer Section of 3 Australian Field Ambulance. That unit was to be commanded at Gallipoli by the Brisbane doctor–soldier Lt Colonel Alfred Sutton.² It was Colonel Sutton who, “recognising the value of his work, allowed him to carry on as a completely separate unit”.³

The legend of Simpson’s deeds at Gallipoli was forged in only 24 days at Anzac Cove. It is believed that he rescued and retrieved some 300 casualties, sometimes as many as 20 in one day, many under conditions of mortal risk to himself. On 29 May 1915, while making his fourth rescue of the day under heavy fire, he was killed instantly by machine gun fire at a point known as Bloody Angle in Shrapnel Gully. His donkey, “Duffy”, still carrying the original casualty, returned alone to the Advanced Dressing Station of 3 Field Ambulance. One of his biographers, Sir Irving Benson, wrote:

He has become the symbol of valour, courage and ingenuity which characterised the Australian [and New Zealand] soldier throughout the [Gallipoli] Campaign. It is significant that this young and unknown man should have attracted the glowing admiration of the troops ... and through their stories of him, the affection of all.¹

Kirkpatrick’s

The pub Kirkpatrick’s is a Victorian building with a history of its own. The building was originally the South Shields College for Mariners, built and then funded in his will by Dr Thomas Masterman Winterbottom (1766–1859), now remembered for Winterbottom’s sign (enlarged posterior cervical lymph nodes as an early manifestation of African trypanosomiasis or “sleeping sickness”).⁴ Winterbottom was also born in South Shields. He graduated in medicine from the University of Glasgow, served in Sierra Leone (1792–1795) and returned to Tyneside to become a leading figure in medicine and social good works for the last five decades of his life. He founded the Master Mariners’ Asylum in South Shields in January 1839,



“Kirkpatrick’s”, a public house in Ocean Road, South Shields, Tyneside. In the foreground is the statue of John Simpson Kirkpatrick. The statue was designed by the Tyneside sculptor William Olley, and cast in 1988. The plinth bears the inscription:

John Simpson Kirkpatrick
“The Man with the Donkey”
202 Pte. J. Simpson
Aust. Army Medical Corps
Born South Shields, 6 July 1892
Died Gallipoli 19 May 1915
A Hero of the Great War

and later built the college for apprentice mariners that is now Kirkpatrick’s.

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