

## **In Memoriam – Major Howard Graeme Gibson RAMC**

**Victim of pandemic Spanish Flu, 12 Feb 1919, age 35**

**He died that others may live**



*Major Howard Graeme Gibson, 20 May 1883 - 12 February 1919*

Howard Graeme Gibson was the only son of Arthur Stanley and Mary Gibson of Newport, Isle of Wight. He was educated at Felsted School where he won Lord Rayleigh's prize for science. He went on to study medicine at Guy's Hospital, taking the diplomas of MRCS and LRCP (London) in 1907.<sup>1</sup>

He was appointed Lieutenant on probation in the Royal Army Medical Corps on 28 January 1907, having come 6<sup>th</sup> out of 78 candidates in the examination on 24 January for commissions into the RAMC. Only 30 candidates were accepted. He was amongst the very first military medical officers to attend classes at the brand new Royal Army Medical College, Millbank, which had commenced courses shortly before its formal opening on 15 May 1907. He was confirmed in rank in June 1907.

After a tour of duty in Malta (1908 – 1912), where for a time he was Officer in charge of the Station Hospital Valletta, he returned to the UK, and in 1914 to Millbank, where he specialised in pathology and bacteriology. He was inspired no doubt by the likes of Colonel David Bruce FRS (renowned for his work on Malta Fever, and editor of the new Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps between 1904 – 1908, wherein Bruce had regularly published Reports of the Mediterranean Fever Commission which elicited that goat's milk was responsible for transmission of Malta Fever).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnici, Walter. RAMC Officers of the Malta Garrison – Howard Graeme Gibson 1883 – 1919. [www.maltaramc.com/ramcoff/g/gibsonhg.html#1912](http://www.maltaramc.com/ramcoff/g/gibsonhg.html#1912) (Colonel Bonnici has collated extensive information on Major Gibson, all from primary sources. I have drawn on his work for some of the information in this article)

<sup>2</sup> Vassallo, DJ. The Corps Disease: Brucellosis and Its Historical Association with the Royal Army Medical Corps. *J R Army Med Corps* 1992; 138: 140-150

***‘There can be little doubt that it is in the investigation of disease with a view to its prevention that our foremost duty lies’***

Colonel David Bruce FRS, Editorial in Journal of the RAMC, April 1904; Vol 2, p.604

These words, and their underlying ethos, must truly have resonated with Graeme (as he was known) as much of his career in the RAMC, sadly cut short after barely 12 years, was dedicated to the investigation and prevention of disease.

On the outbreak of the Great War, he mobilised with the 12<sup>th</sup> Royal Lancers and deployed to France with the British Expeditionary Force in August 1914. On 30 October he was seriously injured at the First Battle of Ypres when he sustained a concussion of the spine from the bursting of a high explosive shell, and was evacuated to England. On recovering from his injuries he was posted to the Vaccine Department of the Royal Army Medical College Millbank for two years, where he developed his anti-dysenteric sero-vaccine. The College was now a major vaccine development centre.

In November 1917, he was declared fit for service and joined Colonel William Leishman in France as Assistant Adviser in Pathology at headquarters (GHQ France). He investigated the effects of the typhoid-paratyphoid A and B inoculation and the use of anti-tetanic serum. On the outbreak of the influenza epidemic in autumn 1918, Colonel Stevenson Lyle Cummins, who had succeeded Leishman as Command Advisor in Pathology BEF, appointed him head of a research team in the epidemic. Together with his colleagues Major F B Bowman CAMO, Captain J I Connor AAMC and Major C E Sundell RAMC, he succeeded in transmitting the disease to monkeys and other animals by the inoculation of filtrates of infected material, proving that influenza was due to a filterable virus.

He co-authored a preliminary account from his Army laboratory at Abbeville, near Etaples, in the BMJ in December 1918 reporting this discovery of a filterable virus during the autumn epidemic of influenza (the deadly second wave of the 1918 – 1920 pandemic).<sup>3</sup> Worn down by his long hours in the laboratory and ‘his self-forgetting efforts to solve a problem of pressing military and general importance’, he caught influenza himself, and died of pneumonia as a result at No. 2 Stationary Hospital, Abbeville before the seminal follow-up report was published in March 1919.<sup>4</sup> He was buried at the Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension, grave V. F. 33.

### **He died that others may live**

In the words of the Daily Chronicle of 15 March 1919 (see figure),  
*‘The work inaugurated by the late Major Graeme Gibson, whose enthusiasm and devotion in research cost him his life, ably carried on as it has been by Captain Wilson, renders it more than probable that a vaccine will shortly be marketable which will protect us in future from the ravages of this dreaded scourge.’*

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<sup>3</sup> Gibson HG, Bowman FB, Connor JI. A Filtrable Virus as the cause of the early stage of the present Epidemic of Influenza. *Br Med J* 1918 Dec 14; 2(3024): 645–646 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2342374/pdf/brmedj06974-0003.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Gibson HG, Bowman FB, Connor JI. THE ETIOLOGY OF INFLUENZA - A Filtrable Virus as the Cause, with some Notes on the Culture of the Virus by Noguchi's Method. *Br Med J*. 1919 Mar 22; 1(3038): 331–335 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2340986/pdf/brmedj06988-0003.pdf>

## A hopeful note – the waning of the pandemic

ONICLE, SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 1919.

A  
GRACEFUL  
CAPE IN  
GREY AND  
YELLOW

**INFLUENZA WANING.**

WAVE WHICH BEGAN WITH THE NEW  
YEAR NOW AT AN END.

**PERIOD OF IMMUNITY AT HAND.**

By Our Medical Correspondent.

Modern influenza, the Spanish variety, has, so far, shown a definite periodicity. In conformity with this feature the present visitation already shows a very definite decline.

We have come to the end of the wave which began with the New Year, and we may now hope to enjoy immunity for at least several weeks to come.

I should like to have written "for ever," but although there is every reason to believe that we have at last got the microbe by the tail, so to speak, and shall thus henceforth and forever more be in a position to scotch him and harry him, it will, I fear, be several generations before we can consider him with the same assurance of mastery as we now consider, say, his friend the bacillus of typhoid.

**VACCINES.**

The work inaugurated by the late Major Graeme Gibson, whose enthusiasm and devotion in research cost him his life, ably carried on as it has been by Captain Wilson, renders it more than probable that a vaccine will shortly be marketable which will protect us in future from the ravages of this dreaded scourge.

There are now in existence vaccines against the complications of influenza, but so far there is no vaccine against influenza itself. That the latter will soon be forthcoming I have very little doubt.

In the meantime the best vaccine against a possible return of the epidemic is the philosophic calm which is begotten of confidence. Fear breeds all kinds of disease, more especially epidemic disease. A fit of rage will induce an attack of gout; a sudden fright may provoke St. Vitus Dance. These emotions alter the blood, a truth long since recognised by the French.

If you would avoid influenza, tell yourself that inasmuch as you have escaped it so far, the betting is enormously in your favour for the future. If you have not escaped it, then cultivate confidence in the vaccine which is now so close at hand.

into favour, and this



'Influenza Waning' – A hopeful note, in the Daily Chronicle, 15 March 1919

## Memorials to Major Howard Graeme Gibson



*Memorial plaque to Howard Graeme Gibson, Church of the Holy Spirit, Newtown, Isle of Wight*

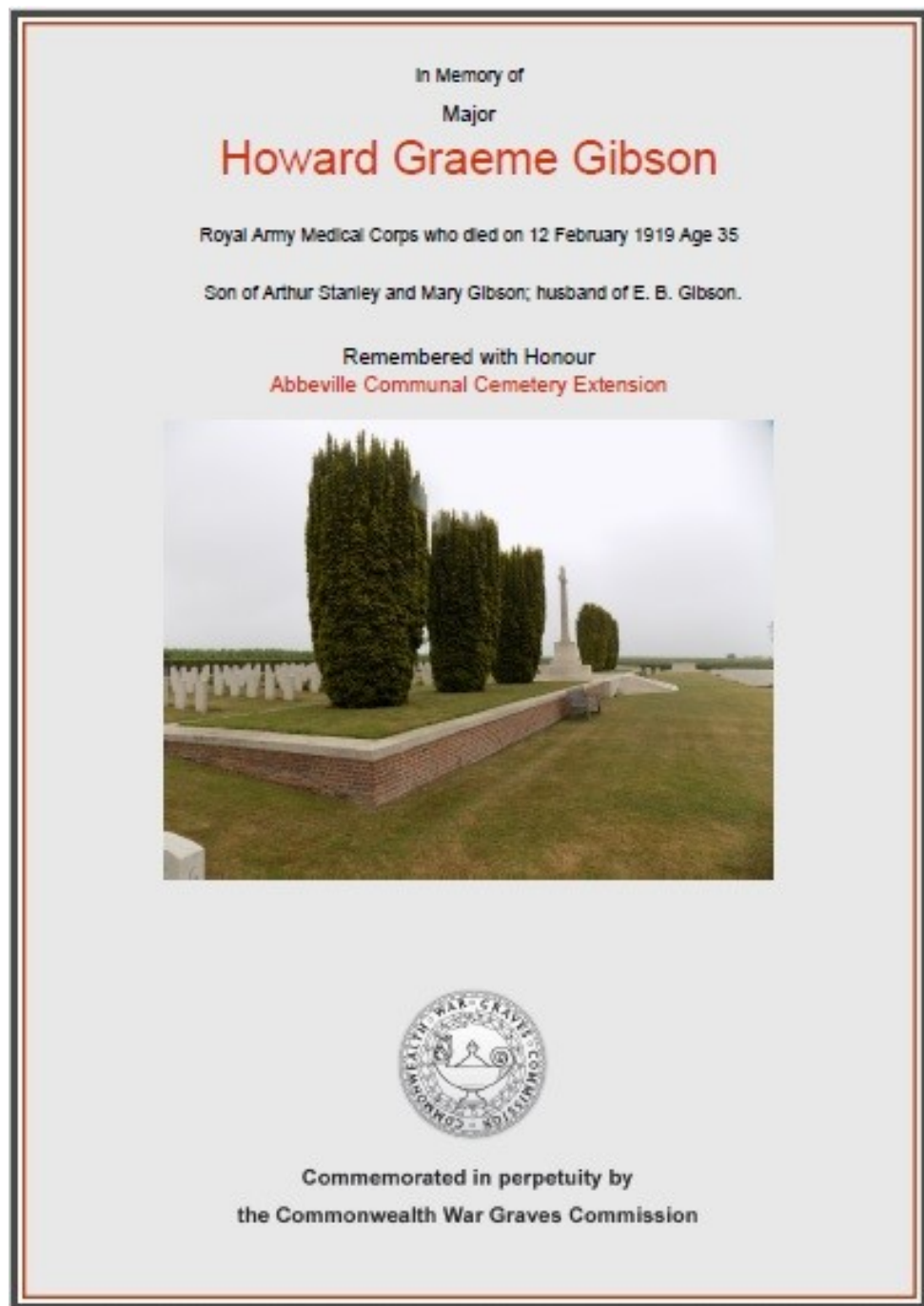
*He had married Evelyn Blanche Provis, from Newtown,, in 1911*



*Major Howard Graeme Gibson is listed on the [Guy's Hospital War Memorial](https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/community/1301) in Southwark commemorating the students and staff from Guy's who died in the First World War<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> IWM – Guy's Hospital War Memorial <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/community/1301>

## **We shall remember him**



*CWGC Commemorative Certificate for Major Howard Graeme Gibson*<sup>6</sup>

## **Further Reading**

For an overview of the Spanish Flu pandemic, and progress made in preparedness and response for further pandemics, such as the current coronavirus / COVID-19 pandemic, see the CDC website.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/78609/gibson,-howard-graeme/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>

## Bibliographical sources

1. Bonnici, Walter. *RAMC Officers of the Malta Garrison – Howard Graeme Gibson 1883 – 1919*.  
[www.maltaramc.com/ramcoff/g/gibsonhg.html#1912](http://www.maltaramc.com/ramcoff/g/gibsonhg.html#1912)
2. Drew's Roll: Entry No: 558. Drew R. 1968. Commissioned Officers in the Medical Services of the British Army 1690–1960. Vol. II. Roll of Officers in the Royal Army Medical Corps 1898–1960, London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library.
3. Obituary. Br Med J (1919); 1:294 (Published 8 March 1919)
4. Obituary. J R Army Med Corps xxxii (1919); Corps News March 1919 p.77 (March 1919)
5. The Times (London, England), Monday, 24 February 1919; p 16; Issue 42032
6. IWM Lives of the First World War – *Howard Graeme Gibson*  
<https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/lifestory/1341379>
7. A Street near you – *Major Howard Graeme Gibson*  
<https://astreetnearyou.org/person/78609/Major-Howard-Graeme-Gibson>

### Additional links from A Street near you:

- [Grave or memorial picture from The War Graves Photographic Project](#)
- [Howard Graeme Gibson - biography from Surrey in the Great War:   
https://www.surreyinthegreatwar.org.uk/person/96939](#)
- [Master record from Isle of Wight War Memorial Index](#)
- [Master record from Isle of Wight War Memorial Index](#)
- [Major Howard Graeme Gibson. Major Howard Graeme Gibson, whose death was recorded in the St Andrew's, Oxshott, parish magazine. - story from Surrey in the Great War](#)
- [Oxshott Memorial Cross - memorial or cemetery record from Surrey in the Great War](#)
- [St Andrews Church, Men of Oxshot and Canadian Forces Memorial - memorial or cemetery record from Surrey in the Great War](#)
- [Guys Hospital - WW1 and WW2 Arch - memorial or cemetery record from Surrey in the Great War](#)
- [Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension , France - memorial or cemetery record from Surrey in the Great War](#)
- [War Memorial record from Isle of Wight War Memorial Index](#)
- [Every One Remembered - record for Howard Graeme Gibson](#)
- [Men Of Oxshott And Canadian Forces Memorial \(WMR 23431\)](#)