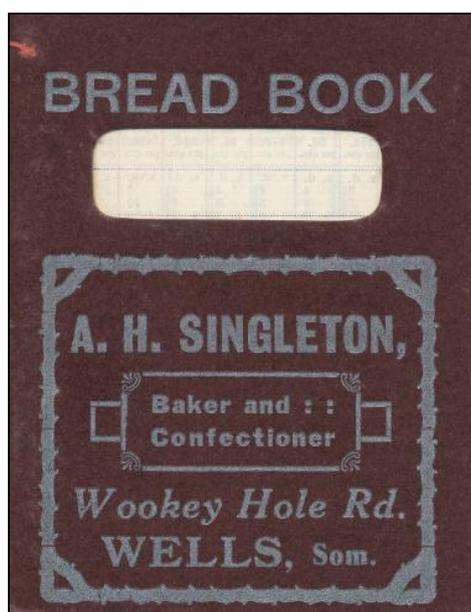


Corporal Esma Beatrice SINGLETON

Service number 2065034
Women's Auxiliary Air Force
Died on 3 March 1943, aged 23

Esma was born in Australia but was raised from an early age in Wells, where her parents ran the bakery and grocer's shop on Wookey Hole Road. She was educated at Oakleigh School and, like her parents, was an active member of the United Church, where amongst other things she was a Sunday School teacher. She joined the WAAF and at the time of her death from an illness was a corporal in the motor transport section at an RAF base in Hampshire.



A Bread Book from Singleton's Bakery and Shop
© Wells City Council Archives

Esma was Australian by birth. She was born in Maclean, New South Wales, on 22 August 1919, to Alfred Henry Singleton and Beatrice Mary née Smith. She had one brother, Donovan Frederick, who was born in 1915 in Grafton, New South Wales.

When her parents met, her father, who was from Lancashire, was working as a harness maker for Mr Noble in Sadler Street, Wells, and he was lodging with Beatrice's family who ran a bakery at what was then 8 and 10, Wookey Hole Road. In 1912, Alfred and Beatrice got married in Wells, and on 2 August 1912, boarded the SS Orsova in London bound for Sydney, New South Wales. There Alfred ran his own business as a harness maker.

On 4 October 1921, the family returned to England on board the SS Omar and landed at Plymouth. They came back to Wells and in a couple of year Alfred took over his father-in-law's bakery on Wookey Hole Road.

The premises comprised an old farmhouse and a separate bakery. As well as selling bread they sold cakes and general groceries. Behind the house were orchards and a tennis court which was used by the United Church's Tennis Club. It was also used for many other church events over the years, and during the war it was the site of Sunday School outings. Where their house and bakery was is now Singleton Court, near where Ash Lane joins Wookey Hole Road.

Esma attended Oakleigh School, which in 1926 was at its new location on Cathedral Green. She was a member of the school's Junior Red Cross section. In 1932, the section went to Montacute House to take part in an inspection and march past of the Somerset detachments of the Red Cross in front of Princess Mary, and Esma co-lead the Oakleigh section in its march past. In August 1933, she was

awarded the school's Founder's Cup, which was awarded each term to the pupil who had most successfully striven to fulfil the founder's ideal of "Nothing but the best". In 1934, she passed her higher division Associated Board Examination of the Royal Academy of Music. Outside of school, she went to the United Church Sunday School.

Sadly, her brother Donovan was fatally injured on 16 March 1931, while on his way to school at the Boys' Blue School, which was then in the building now called the Little Theatre on Portway. An unattended milk van ran down Kennion Road for 400 yards, mounted the pavement on Wookey Hole Road, hit the embankment and tipped over onto Donovan. He was taken to Wells Cottage Hospital and died the next day.

The *Wells Journal* of 12 March 1943 gives some idea of Esma after she left school:

Like her parents, Miss Singleton took a keen interest in the activities of the United Church ... She was a member of the Church, of the choir and a Sunday School Teacher. She also belonged to the Church Tennis Club and was ever ready to help in the many church activities.

In September 1939 she was still living with her parents at the General Stores at 8, Wookey Hole Road. Her father was a bread baker and in the ARP, and Esma ran the family shop. Alfred had been a Civil Defence Warden since 1938 and was Post Warden of the 'B.B. Post' (his premises) throughout the war.

Esma volunteered for the WAAF in July 1940 and enlisted after May 1941. At the time of her death she was based at an RAF base in Hampshire. Her death was reported in the *Wells Journal* of 12 March 1943:

In a letter to her parents the Flight Officer in charge of her station writes: I would like you to know what a high opinion I had of her character and capability. She took her duties as a corporal in the motor transport section very seriously and in every way proved reliable and trustworthy. Although she had not been well for the past few months she has not complained at any time and whenever I visited her in sick quarters she was always cheerful ...

The funeral took place on Saturday [6 March] afternoon the first part of the service being held at the United Church, and attended by many friends. The many church organisations were represented and also the A.R.P. Warden Service, Mr. Singleton being Post Warden. Three members of the W.A.A.F. representing her Section also attended ... Four Deacons of the United Church acted as bearers.

Among the principal mourners was Frank Rowland, who must have been a special friend.

Esma is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section C, Row H, Grave 34 along with her brother and her parents. She is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

We would like to thank Mrs Jan Stubbins for her contribution to this article.