

95: William Niven

Basic Information [as recorded on local memorial or by CWGC]

Name as recorded on local memorial or by CWGC: W. Niven

Rank: Master

Battalion / Regiment: Mercantile Marine, Master of 'Gretaston'

Service Number: ?

Date of Death: 11 April 1917 #

Age at Death: 61

Buried / Commemorated at: Tower Hill Memorial, Trinity Square, London

Additional information given by CWGC: Son of Peter Niven, of Nitshill, Renfrewshire; husband of Mary Niven, of Grange Lodge, Gateacre, Liverpool

There is some dispute on the date as other records suggest that the *Gretaston* was sunk by a submarine on Sunday 15 April 1917

William Niven, a son of Peter, was born in the mining village of Nitshill ¹, then in Renfrewshire but since incorporated into the south-western suburbs of Glasgow. Born, probably, in 1857 William appears to have been baptised at Paisley High Church although no details of his family are known. However, William had moved to Wirral by late 1883 when he married Mary Paterson - also from Scotland – at a Civil Marriage in Birkenhead but neither has been located for certain in the 1881 census in the UK. William Niven was a merchant seaman and so would have been at sea for much of the year; although Mary and her children were living at 24 Marlborough Grove, Claughton in 1891 William was not at home:

Mary Niven	Wife	M	35	born Scotland
Margaret D.	Daughter		5	born Birkenhead
Peter	son		4	born Birkenhead
Mary P.	Daughter		10 (?) months	born Birkenhead
Margaret Paterson	Mother-in-law		72 (?)	born Scotland
Margaret Ann Cropper	General servant		16	born Liverpool

1891 census (extract) – 24, Marlborough Grove, Claughton, Birkenhead

Mary Niven	35		born Scotland
Margaret D.	5		born Birkenhead
Peter	4		born Birkenhead
Mary P.	10 (?) months		born Birkenhead
Margaret Paterson	72 (?)	mother-in-law, widow, own account	born Scotland
Margaret Ann Cropper	16	general servant (domestic)	born Liverpool

Margaret Paterson, Mary's mother, died in Birkenhead in early 1900 aged 87. Her address was recorded as 24 Marlborough Grove and her will (the Effects were valued at £410) was administered at Chester by her son, James Denholm Paterson who was a bank teller.

¹ Nitshill Colliery was the scene of one of Scotland's worst mining disasters when, on 15 March 1851, an explosion at the Victoria coal pit killed 61 of the 63 men and boys in the mine at the time. Two survivors were rescued 45 hours after the explosion. [Wikipedia]

At the time of the 1901 census Mary's children were living in the same house in Claughton:

Margaret Denholm Niven	Head	S	15			Cheshire Birkenhead
Peter	do	Brother	S	14		do
Mary Paterson	do	Sister	S	10		do
Jane Young	do	Sister	S	7		do
Edith May Barnett	Serv	S	18	General Servant (Domestic)		do

1901 census (extract) – 24, Marlborough Grove, Claughton, Birkenhead

Margaret Denholm Niven	15	head	born Birkenhead
Peter	14		born Birkenhead
Mary Paterson	10		born Birkenhead
Jane Young	7		born Birkenhead
Edith May Barnett	18	general servant (domestic)	born Birkenhead

Neither Mary nor William Niven have been found in the 1901 census. Although Margaret was shown as the 'head' she was only 15. Peter Niven, the son recorded in 1891 but not recorded on the 1911 census in Neston was born in Birkenhead in the 2nd quarter of 1887 - his army record with the Canadian Infantry [see below] notes his birth date as 22 March 1887.

By the time of the 1911 census the family, when William was again absent from the family home, had moved to a location believed to be close to present-day Turner's View on the western side of Leighton Road in Neston:

1	Mary Niven	Wife	55	Married	27	4	4														Leamthorpe, Carmichael	19	
2	Margaret D. Niven	Daughter	25	Single																		Cheshire - Birkenhead	17
3	Mary P. Niven	Daughter	20	Single																		Cheshire - Birkenhead	
4	Jane Y. Niven	Daughter	17	Single																		Cheshire - Birkenhead	

(To be filled up by the Enumerator.)

I certify that—
 (1) All the ages in this Schedule are entered in the proper sex column.
 (2) I have entered the males and females in Columns 3 and 4 separately, and have compared their sum with the total number of persons.
 (3) After making the necessary inquiries I have completed all entries in the Schedule which appeared to be defective, and have corrected such as appeared to be erroneous.

In Title of Enumerator: *E.E.S.*

Total:

Males	Females	Persons
—	54	54

0

(To be filled up by, or on behalf of, the Head of Family or other person in occupation, or in charge, of this dwelling.)

Write below the Number of Rooms in this Dwelling (Kitchens, Parlours, or Apartments). Count the kitchen as a room but do not count gallery, landing, lobby, closet, bathroom, storeroom, office, shop.

10

I declare that this Schedule is correctly filled up to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Signature: *Mary Niven*
 Postal Address: *Aguilas Neston, Cheshire*

1911 census – 'Aguilas', Leighton Road

Mary Niven	55	born Carmichael, Lanarkshire
Margaret D.	25	born Birkenhead
Mary P.	20	born Birkenhead
Jane Y.	17	born Birkenhead

Although Mary's husband is not recorded here, Mary had been married for 27 years and all four children had survived. No occupations were recorded in this census return.

Margaret Denholm Niven was born in Birkenhead in the 2nd quarter of 1885. Interestingly, the birth of a Margaret Denholm Paterson was registered in the Birkenhead area in the 2nd quarter of 1889. Mary Paterson Niven was born in Birkenhead in the 2nd quarter of 1890. Jane Young Niven was born in Birkenhead in the 3rd quarter of 1893.

Newspaper reports indicate that the Niven family was living in Neston, and were active within the Presbyterian Church, by late 1902. Progressively, members of the family became involved in a range of activities and organisations in Neston.

Before and during WW1 the Niven family was prominent in the social life of Neston; the following newspaper articles show their association with other local families who had losses during the war:

Kelly's Cheshire Directory of 1914 lists, for Leighton, Neston: *Niven Capt. William, Aquilas*. Captain Niven was, clearly, away from home for long periods, and may have been accompanied by his wife on some occasions.

LEIGHTON-ROAD IMPROVEMENT.

Captain Niven's contract for the sale of 372 yards of land in Leighton-road, signed by him, had been submitted to the Roads Committee. It was reported that the chairman of the Roads Committee and the surveyor thought that a further thirty odd yards should be purchased from Captain Niven. The committee, however, recommended that the 372 yards were sufficient, and that the contract, as it stood, should be sealed.

Mr. Woodward pointed out how bad the corner affected in the improvement is, and on his suggestion a small committee was appointed to inspect it, and come to a decision in the matter.

Cheshire Observer - 11 October 1902

NESTON EVENING CLASSES.

EXAMINATION RESULTS.

The results of the examinations of the students in the Neston and Parkgate Evening Classes, which were carried on during last winter, has just been received as follow:—Elementary Practical Cookery: 1st class, Florence Davies, F. Garnham, M. Heaton, M. P. Niven, Hilda Payne; 2nd class, S. Jones and Mary Pyke. Advanced Practical Cookery: 1st class, E. T. Morris, P. Morris (with distinction), S. Morrison (with distinction), A. P. Jones, M. D. Niven (with distinction), H. Tickle (with distinction). Principles of Cookery: 1st class, M. A. Lowden (with distinction), M. D. Niven (with distinction), H. Tickle; 2nd class, A. P. Jones, E. T. Morris, M. P. Niven; passed, P. Morris and Mary Pyke. Shorthand: Passed, A. J. Basnett, E. Coventry, N. Coventry, R. K. Coventry, C. B. Gill, E. E. Hollis. Book-keeping: 1st class, none; 2nd class, C. N. Pakenham-Walsh, S. Chrimes; passed, F.

Cheshire Observer - 30 June 1906

THE PRESBYTERIAN GUILD.—The Neston Presbyterian Guild opened their new session, 1907-8, on Wednesday evening with a social in the Presbyterian Lecture Room. There was a large attendance, and the interest taken in the proceedings augurs well for the forthcoming gatherings of the Guild. The tables were very prettily decorated with flowers, and an excellent tea was served by the committee. A special address was given by the Rev. F. W. Anderson, of Chester, and the following musical programme was capitally rendered by some Chester friends of the Guild:—Song, "My Gentle Child," Miss Armstrong; song, "The Old Soldier," Mr. Dring; song, "Down the Vale," Miss Williams; song, "Three for Jack," Mr. W. Armstrong, junior. Mr. Armstrong, senr., contributed some impromptu remarks, and Mr. Dring was an excellent pianist. The Rev. J. Towert, in thanking those who made the evening a success, and particularly the friends from Chester, paid a special tribute to Miss Katie Gamon, the president of the Guild, describing her as one of the most active workers in the district, and one whose delight had always been in good works. A vote of thanks to the Chester musical party, proposed by Miss Gamon and seconded by Mrs. J. R. Hughes, was received with loud applause. A capital working committee was elected during the evening, with Miss M. D. Niven as hon. secretary.

Cheshire Observer - 28 September 1907

SALE OF WORK AT NESTON.

A successful sale of work on behalf of the funds of the Neston Young Women's Guild was held in the Presbyterian Lecture Room on Wednesday evening. The Guild has been established for several years, and has proved itself one of the most valuable social institutions the district has known. The popular lectures, refined entertainments and social gatherings are invariably well attended, and the keen interest taken by the members in the working of the Guild is maintained session after session. While the cost of membership is little more than nominal, the engagement of special lecturers and artists often entails considerable expense, and with a view of relieving the strain upon the finances a committee of the members arranged for the sale of work. A quantity of shrubs and plants were kindly lent for the occasion by Messrs. Jamieson and Basmott, and these added to the effective decorations and the gaily-decked stalls quite transformed the building. There was a very good attendance, considering the inclement weather, and the result of the brisk

sales will substantially benefit the funds of the Guild. The sale was opened by Mrs William Niven ("Agnika") with a few encouraging remarks, and the stallholders and workers were as follows:—White stall, Miss Katie Gamon (president) and Miss Dayas; stationery and fancy stall, Miss Niven (hon. secretary) and Miss Lizzie Scott; fancy stall, Miss Thomson and Miss Mary Niven; flower stall, Miss Dot Fleming; baby linen, Mrs. J. R. Hughes; advertisement stall, Miss Clara Fleming; confectionery stall, Miss Connie Smith; refreshment stall, the Misses D. English, E. Fleming, Dodd, Nora Walsh and L. Swift; competition—postcard competition, Miss Towell (Birkenhead); polishing penny competition, Miss M. P. Niven; cake competition, Miss Belle Hough; bran pie, Miss Janey Niven; Oxo competition, Miss May Fleming. During the intervals some capital pianoforte solos were rendered by Mrs. and Miss N. P. Niven and Miss Pretorius (Mostyn House), and several excellent vocal items were rendered by Miss English. Mrs. Pakenham Walsh and Mr. R. E. Calder also gave invaluable assistance in the general arrangements.

Cheshire Observer – 2 November 1907

A history of the Neston & Parkgate Presbyterian Church (now the URC) written in 1933 notes that:

A record in November, 1902, tells us that Captain and Mrs Niven and Mr and Mrs Anderson join the membership of the congregation. The names of Anderson and Niven are both commemorated on the War Memorial.

and that The Girls' Guidery was begun in or about 1905. Its first guardian was Mrs Niven. [The Story of the Presbyterian Church of England at Parkgate and Neston,

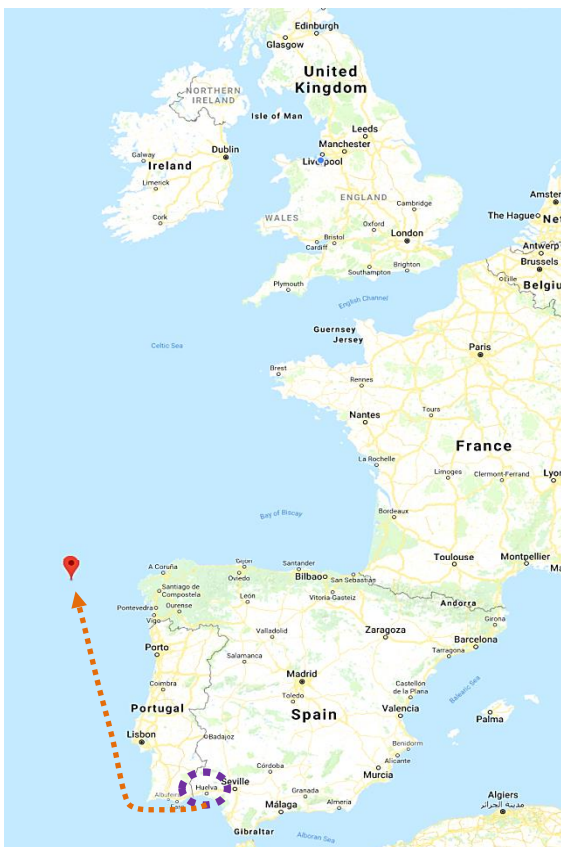
1858 – 1933 Charles Cowan Lundie 1933 R. Aikman & Son, Manchester]

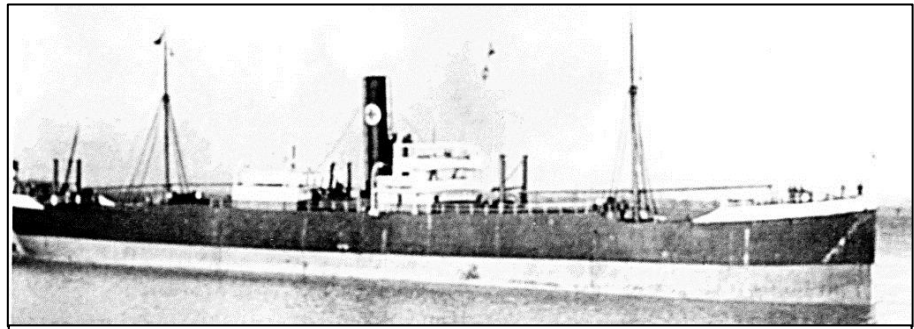
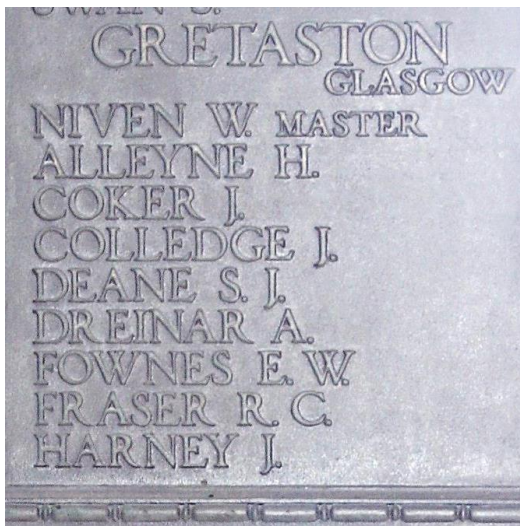
The only clue we have of William Niven's death comes from the CWGC note that he was "'Gretaston', Mercantile Marine" and that he died (presumed drowned) on 11 April 1917. In fact it has been recorded that the

SS Gretaston, built by W. Gray & Co. Ltd., West Hartlepool in 1901 and owned at the time of her loss by Gretaston SS. Co. Ltd. (W. S. Miller & Co.), Glasgow, was a British steamer of 3395 tons.

On April 15th, 1917, Gretaston, on a voyage from Huelva to Garston with a cargo of copper ore, was sunk by the German submarine UC-27 (Gerhard Schulz), off the Iberian coast. 29 persons were lost.

Huelva, to the SW of Seville, is encircled in purple. The location of the wreck of the SS Gretaston at 43° 08'N, 11° 32'W is shown by the red symbol [map source: Google Maps]





When launched in 1901 the 331-foot vessel was the SS *Vauxhall Bridge*. The ship's name was changed to the SS *Gretaston* in 1912. [source: Hartlepool Museum Service]

The top section of the plaque commemorating the *Gretaston* on the Tower Hill Memorial with W. Niven as the Master [Source: <http://www.benjidog.co.uk/Tower%20Hill/WW1%20Grecian%20Prince%20to%20Guide.html>]

Huelva is a city in southwestern Spain and,

presumably, Garston refers to the Garston Dock in Liverpool. Brief details of all the crew (the vessel was armed and carried two crew from the Royal Navy), the youngest of whom was 16, are given at the website

<https://www.wrecksite.eu/peopleView.aspx?10622>.

Interestingly, whilst the CWGC records that William Nevin and the other crew perished on 11 April, the *Gretaston* was torpedoed and sank immediately on Sunday 15 April 1917; indeed, it seems to have left Huelva the previous day.

Of William and Mary Niven's children:

Margaret Denholme Niven (Maggie) married William Paterson at a Civil Marriage in the Toxteth Park area of Liverpool in late 1921. It is not clear whether William Paterson was a relative - Margaret's mother, Mary, was a Paterson before her marriage.

No record of children has been found but Margaret died on Wirral, aged 68, in late 1957.

Peter Niven (born 22 March 1887), the only son of William and Mary, served with the 62nd Battalion Canadian Infantry during WW1. Peter appears to have emigrated to Canada as he enlisted for the army on 30 August 1915 at Vernon, British Columbia and had the Service Number 464191. At the time of his enlistment, when he was aged 28, he was unmarried and he stated that he was a prospector. It is recorded that he achieved the rank of Sergeant but nothing further is known of him; it is not clear whether he remained in Canada after WW1 (no Naturalisation Record has been found) or whether he returned to Britain. [Military data from the Canadian Great War Project]

Mary Paterson Niven (born 10 May 1890) remained unmarried and in the 1939 Register she was living with

0 of 273 11 18. duplicate
No. 64191.
Folio.

TRIPPLICATE ATTESTATION PAPER
CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

QUESTIONS TO BE PUT BEFORE ATTESTATION.

1. What is your name? Liver, Peter
2. In what Town, Township, or Parish, and in what County were you born? Birkenhead, Cheshire Eng.
3. What is the name of your next-of-kin? (Mother) Mary
4. What is the address of your next-of-kin? Agar Road, Birkenhead, Cheshire Eng.
5. What is the date of your birth? March 22nd 1887
6. What is your trade or calling? Prospector
7. Are you married? No
8. Are you willing to be vaccinated or vaccinated? No
9. Do you now belong to the Active Militia? No
10. Have you ever served in any Military Force? No
11. Do you understand the nature and terms of your engagement? No
12. Are you willing to be attested to serve in the CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE? Yes

P. Niven (Signature of Man.)
P. Paterson (Signature of Witness.)

DECLARATION TO BE MADE BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, Liver, Peter, do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and that I am willing to fulfil the engagements by me now made, and I hereby engage and agree to serve in the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force, and to be attached to any arm of the service thereon, for the term of one year, or during the war now existing between Great Britain and Germany should that war last longer than one year, and for six months after the termination of that war provided His Majesty should so long require my services, or until legally discharged.

P. Niven (Signature of Recruit.)
P. Paterson (Signature of Witness.)

Date: AUG 26 1915

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, Liver, Peter, do make Oath, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, and that I will as in duty bound honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of all the Generals and Officers set over me.

P. Niven (Signature of Recruit.)
P. Paterson (Signature of Witness.)

Date: AUG 26 1915

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE.

The Recruit above-named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the above questions he would be liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act.

The above questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence.

I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to, and the said Recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken the oath before me, at VERNON B.C. this 26th 1915 day of AUG.

M. Niven (Signature of Justice.)

I certify that the above is a true copy of the Attestation of the above-named Recruit.

C. Grant (Approving Officer.)

her mother at Grange Lodge and was recorded as a secretary to special school. Mary died on 16 September 1971, aged 81. Although her death was recorded on Wirral her home address was 12 Reservoir Road, Woolton, Liverpool.

Jane Young Niven (Janie) died at the Royal Infirmary in Liverpool on 22 February 1962, aged 68. She was living with her sister, Mary, at 12 Reservoir Road, Woolton and her Effects were valued at £2364 9s 1d.

Mary Niven and her daughters were very active in Neston during the war, assisting in numerous church activities and musical events in the town. In addition, the daughters were very active in the local Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), a section of the Red Cross which had been established as early as 1909². Individual members of a VAD were, themselves, often called 'VADs'.

Many branches of the Red Cross, including Neston, established VADs with the volunteers providing a wide range of services, both medical and auxiliary (transporting patients, driving vehicles, cooking and organising 'events'). Those VADs who were involved in medical care had to pass exams to receive their first aid and home nursing certificates - both Mary and Jane Niven obtained these and worked at the Parkgate hospital - but there was frequently an uneasy relationship between the paid, professional, medical staff and the VADs. In Neston two hospitals, at Parkgate and the Institute on Hinderton Road, used VADs to assist men (not necessarily local to this area) who had been brought back from the fighting zones for treatment or recuperation.

Mary Niven, William's widow, died in South Liverpool, aged 86, on 3 July 1942; she probably died at her home, 'Grange Lodge', Gateacre. Probate was granted on 10 October to each of her three daughters. Her Effects were valued at £4889 6s 7d.

The 1939 Register (22 September) records no one named Niven in Neston and only one person of that name, seemingly unrelated, on Wirral.

472, Grange Lodge, Grange Lane, Gateacre
The section of the stone building on the left dates from 1653, the central section from 1720 and the right section from the 1820s.
The half-timbered roadside section dates only from the 1890s.
The house was built on the site of a 'grange' outpost of Stanlow Abbey.
[Google StreetView]



² The VAD system was founded in 1909 with the help of the Red Cross and Order of St. John. By the summer of 1914 there were over 2,500 Voluntary Aid Detachments in Britain. Of the 74,000 VAD members in 1914, two-thirds were women and girls. By 1916 the military hospitals at home were employing about 8,000 trained nurses with about 126,000 beds, and there were 4,000 nurses abroad with 93,000 beds. By 1918 there were about 80,000 VAD members: 12,000 nurses working in the military hospitals and 60,000 unpaid volunteers working in auxiliary hospitals of various kinds. Some of the volunteers had a snobbish attitude towards the paid nurses.

At the end of the war, the leaders of the nursing profession were agreed that untrained VADs should not be allowed onto the newly established register of nurses. [Wikipedia]