

Elspeth Vicars pays tribute to her grandfather, Francis Wilkie

Like many people of my generation I never knew either of my grandfathers. Everything I know of them is contained in a small wooden box and the article below shows photocopies of all the letters, document and medals relating to my paternal grandfather.

My grandfather Francis Wilkie was born on 11th June 1889 in Edinburgh and, although there are numerous old photos in the box, none of them are named or dated so I don't know if any of the small babies, young boys or young men are of him.

The letter below contains the earliest record of him and refers to the booking of the Minister of Tynecastle Parish Church to conduct the marriage of my grandfather to Janet McAlpine Ford on 5th June 1914 just before the start of WW1.

On 12th April 1915 my father, Francis Wilkie, was born and almost 2 years later on 4th April 1917 his little brother John. They are pictured below with my grandmother.

The next contents of the box reveal that my grandfather was the 3rd Engineer on the steamship SS Minorca, built in 1892 by Ramage and Ferguson Ltd. in Leith and owned by Leith, Hull and Hamburg Steam Packet Company Ltd. We know from the postcards (pictured on the next page) to his wife and two young sons that on 2nd December 1917 he was in Genoa and about to depart for Carthage under ballast.

Whether these were received by the family at home before the letter from the steamship company arrived is unknown¹. The collection of the three postcards and the Steamship company letter I find particularly poignant.

10 BELGRAVE PLACE,
EDINBURGH.
8th May 1914

Dear Mrs. Ford,

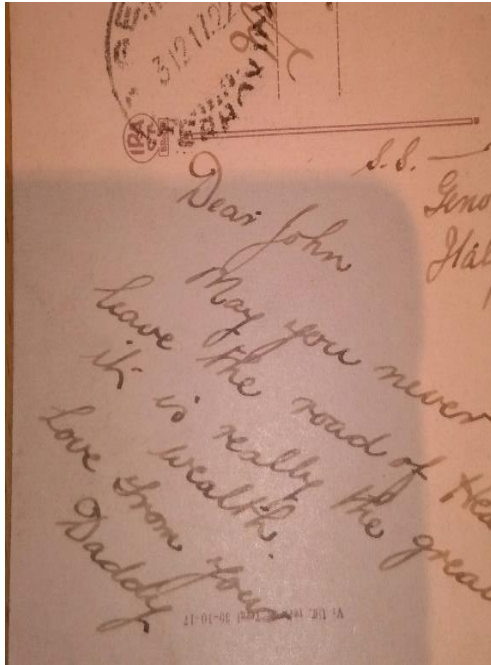
I have seen Mr. Bell Nicoll,
the minister of Tynecastle Parish, and
he will be very glad to perform the
marriage service at 23 Dundee Terrace
on Friday evening, 5th June, at
7.30. He has a marriage to
perform in his own house that evening
at 7 o'clock, but if you will
send a cab for him to his address
90 Craighouse Road
about 7.20 P.M. he will be able
to arrive in time.

Please explain to Jessie my regret
that I am not able to come myself
that evening.

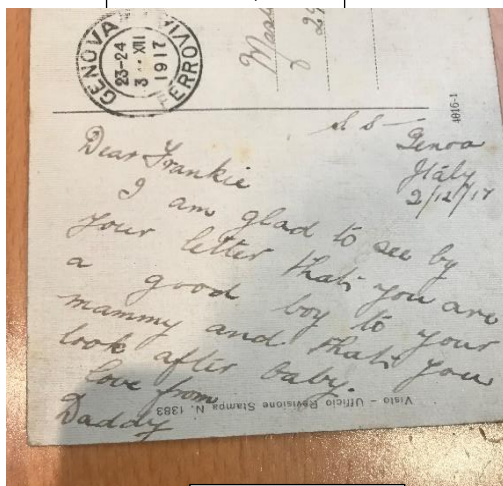
With all good wishes for her
I am
Yours sincerely
Francis L. Pagan

¹ The letter from the steamship company is on page 15, and refers to the loss of Francis Wilkie at sea.

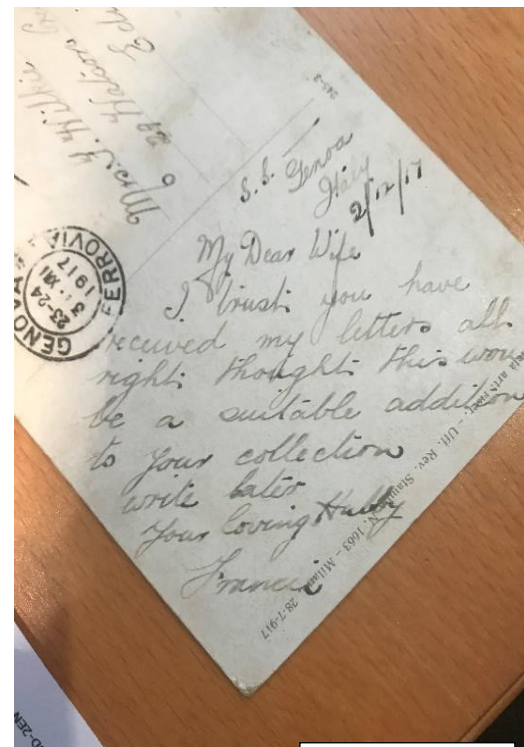
The postcard to his baby son says “*may you never leave the road of health, it is really the greatest wealth*” When a young girl I learnt from my father that he had had a brother who didn’t survive infancy. To lose a husband and son so close together must have been hard to bear.



To his baby son



To my father



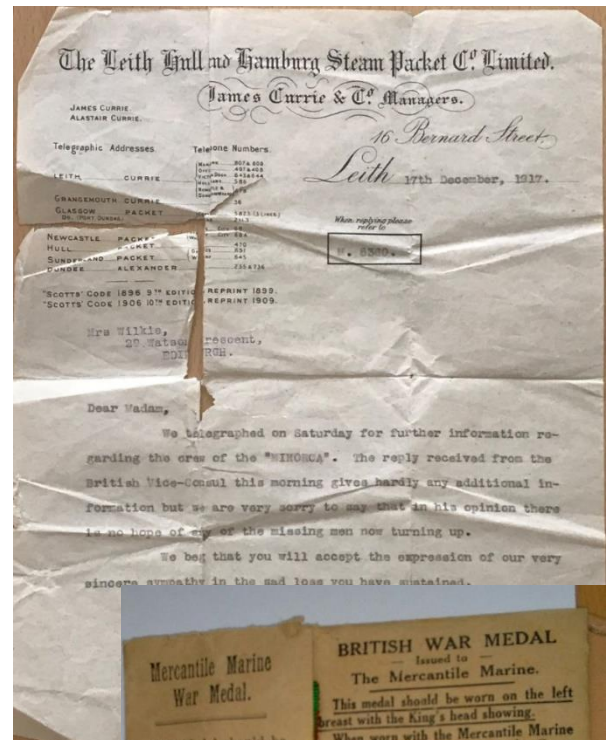
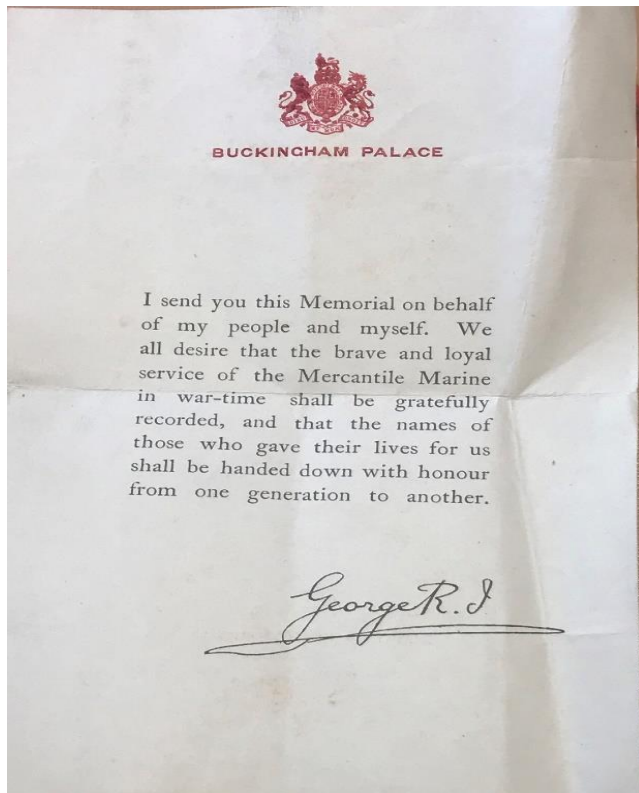
To his wife

On December 11th 1917 on a journey from Genoa to Carthage his ship, the SS Minorca was torpedoed and sunk by the German submarine U-64 (under the command of Robert Moraht) about three miles off Cape de las Huertas, Spain. All on board were lost and the Scots among them are commemorated in the WW1 Mercantile Marine book of Remembrance in the Scottish National War Memorial in Edinburgh Castle and all on the relatively recent Tower Hill Memorial in London.

What else is in the box?

- A letter from Buckingham Palace;

- Bronze Memorial Plaque;
- A letter from the steamship company;
- A citation for a Torpedo Badge, and
- His Mercantile Marine war medals.



As Stuart Allan, the principal curator co-ordinating the *Next of Kin* exhibition at the National War Museum in Edinburgh Castle said "This is what people have at home, what they kept to keep alive the memories of those who went away".

They are examples of some of the things that families have at home kept in drawers (or in this case, a box) all over the country.

Elsbeth Vicars, October 2018