

Private William Burberry

Killed in Action 3rd September 1916

by James Crouch © 2016

William James Burberry was born on 1st September 1888 at Bankside, Ewell, and was baptised at St Mary's, Ewell, a month later. He was the fourth of Jesse and Mary Ann Burberry's eight children.

Jesse was a gardener, born in Ewell, and Mary Ann (nee Fairclough) came from March, Cambridgeshire. They were married at St John's, Croydon, in September 1882. Following the birth of their first daughter, Mary Jessie (c1884), they moved to Kent, where Thomas (c1886) and Lillie (c1887) were born.

The Burberrys moved to Ewell shortly before William arrived. They lived in a railway cottage at Bankside on the Kingston Road (now the Ewell Bypass). Four cottages stood on a railway embankment above the road, where the Rembrandt (later Cannon) Cinema used to stand until its closure in 1998.

Jesse's father, Stephen, lived at Winkworth Cottage, which used to stand in the High Street, with Jesse's younger brother, Joshua, and sisters Susan and Elizabeth. Stephen and Joshua were both agricultural labourers and they presumably worked on Winkworth Farm (now under Marks & Spencer's and the neighbouring parade of shops), which farmed most of the land between the High Street and Winkworth Road. Jesse had moved his young family to Banstead by the time William was two-and-a-half years old. They lived in Salisbury Court, a cul-de-sac that eventually became Salisbury Road during the housing boom of the 1920s and 30s. The road connected directly to the High Street, by the smithy and the future site of the War Memorial, and ended about halfway along its current length down the hill. The Burberrys probably lived in the last house in the road on the western side. It's very likely that William attended school in the village but, unfortunately, records have not survived from that period. Another daughter, Beatrice, was born c1891, with Edith (c1892), Edward (c1896) and Winifred (c1899) completing the family.

Jesse was a member of the Manchester Unity Order of Independent Oddfellows and would have walked up the road to meetings of the Star of Banstead Lodge at the Woolpack Inn. He became Noble Grand (leader) of the lodge. William also joined, probably at a young age, providing him with a measure of financial security.

They had moved to a cottage in the new Diceland Road (at the time still known as Dicelands after the field it was built in) by 1901. William's grandfather was lodging in a house in Diceland Road too. Grandfather Stephen died in 1906 (buried at All Saints') and the Burberrys left Banstead in 1910-11.

They moved to St Wilfrid's (later number 38), Belmont Road, in the rapidly growing village of Belmont. William and his elder brother Thomas worked as labourers for the London & Brighton Railway, the Epsom Downs branch of which ran through the village. The line saw plenty of traffic and it wasn't just commuters and racegoers: Banstead Asylum, the South Metropolitan District School (later Belmont Hospital, now demolished) and The Downs Sanatorium (Sutton Hospital) all needed regular deliveries of goods and people so the track would have been in need of constant maintenance and there would have been plenty of work to do along the line.

The Oddfellows and Banstead

The Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows was formed in 1810. Banstead's lodge, the Star of Banstead, was the 5,339th in Britain and was formed in 1865. They used to meet at the Woolpack on the fourth Tuesday of every month and had 80 members in 1914.

Friendly societies, such as the Oddfellows, were set up to provide financial security for their members. Each member would make a regular contribution, based on actuarial tables, to their lodge. In return, the lodge (or central funds) would pay compensation if they were sick or injured and unable to work. They also paid funeral expenses and stipends to widows and orphans in the event of the death of a member. In addition to the financial benefits, they also provided a rich – and possibly sometimes rowdy – social life for their members.

The Oddfellows were the largest friendly society in Banstead (and the world) but we also had “slate clubs”, where patrons would contribute money for hardship funds or for Christmas gifts, at the schools and pubs of Banstead and Burgh Heath, and a Medical Club and Provident Club at All Saints.

In November 1906, 200 (or more) men of the friendly societies assembled at Burgh Heath in torrential rain and a howling gale for the first annual Friendly Societies Parade. They marched to The Mint, led by the Banstead Band and the Boys Brigade Band, and then on to All Saints' for a service “*of bright and hearty character*”, singing the hymns with a “*fine and sonorous roll of virile voices.*”

Despite leaving the village, the Burberrys maintained a connection with Banstead: Jesse represented the Star of Banstead Lodge at Mitcham Branch meetings in 1912 and 1915 and when William's sister Beatrice died in 1917, she was buried at All Saints'.

William was soon back in Banstead, working as a gardener like his dad. He worked at Castleton, a large house that used to stand approximately where the roundabout in Castleton Close is now, with parts of the house under the back gardens of 1-4 Castleton Close and the front of numbers 18-22. The grounds corresponded to the area delineated by Bolters Lane, Castleton Drive, Greenhayes Avenue and Kingsley Avenue. The house was owned by James Byres Watt, a steamship broker from Fraserburgh, Scotland, and his family. They had at least four live-in servants, including Mr A. Butler, who was... the coachman!

Younger brother Edward joined the Army before war broke out. He had been working as a caddy at Banstead Downs Golf Club, the course divided by the Brighton Road. Perhaps Thomas took over his caddying, as when war broke out he was among nine caddies listed as having joined the His Majesty's Forces and able to claim a £3 gratuity from the Club for having done so. One of his fellow caddies was Arthur Ireland, older brother of Henry Ireland (lost at sea 1st June 1916).

William, 5ft 5in tall and built with some heft, light brown hair, grey eyes with a scar on his face, joined the Army on his 26th birthday, 1st September 1914. This appears to have been a rare case of a man lying about their age to appear younger as William claimed to be only 24! It seems he may have considered joining the Dorsetshire Regiment on a permanent basis but he ended up volunteering for the duration of the war with the Devonshire Regiment. Although Sutton was in the East Surreys' recruiting district and on the doorstep of the Royal Fusiliers (the City of London Regiment), several Sutton men joined the Devons early on in the war. The provincial regiments had a hard time enlisting enough men and so recruiting officers tried to persuade men from the more populous districts to join them instead of their local regiment when their first choice was full.

After completing his basic training, William was probably posted to the newly-formed 9th (Service)

Battalion before joining the 1st (Regular) Battalion, in which another local gardener, Thomas Skelton, was serving as a professional soldier. The two may have met in civilian life but there was to be no reunion in uniform: Thomas was killed a month before William was sent out to France.

13191 Private William Burberry arrived in France on 17th February 1915, one of 40 other ranks in the 15th draft of reinforcements for the 1st Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment, part of 14th Brigade, and joined his battalion at Wulverghem, Belgium, a week later. They were holding trenches south of the Ypres salient, where the British lines curved northeastwards along the Menin Ridge east of the town and bulged into German territory before turning away to the west at Broodseinde and falling to the flat, wet plain of Flanders.

After the desperate rush of the "Race to the Sea", it had been a quiet couple of months. The trenches were still quite primitive, were necessarily shallow (digging deep here would just mean that you hit water - in some places the trenches were even above ground) and there was a shortage of building materials, sandbags and loopholes (which allowed some sheltered observation from snipers and a position to snipe from in return), so they did not offer as much protection as they would later in the war. The whole of the salient, including the troops' rest billets at Neuve Eglise (they were shelled out of the village three times in one day on 6th March), was under the eyes of the German guns. Even on days when little was happening, the everyday dangers of trench warfare took their toll.

"A fairly quiet day in the trenches. Killed other ranks: 3. Wounded other ranks: 5"
1st Devonshire's War Diary, 12th April 1915

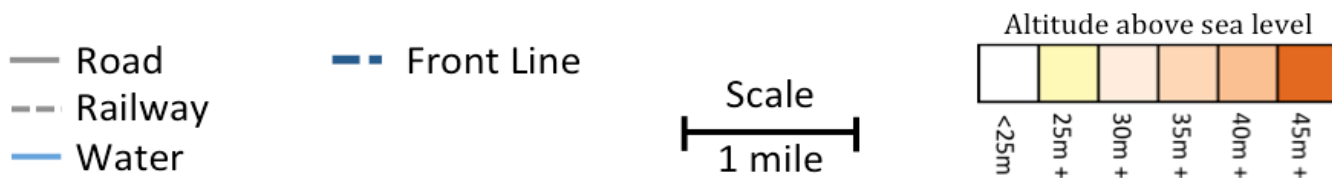
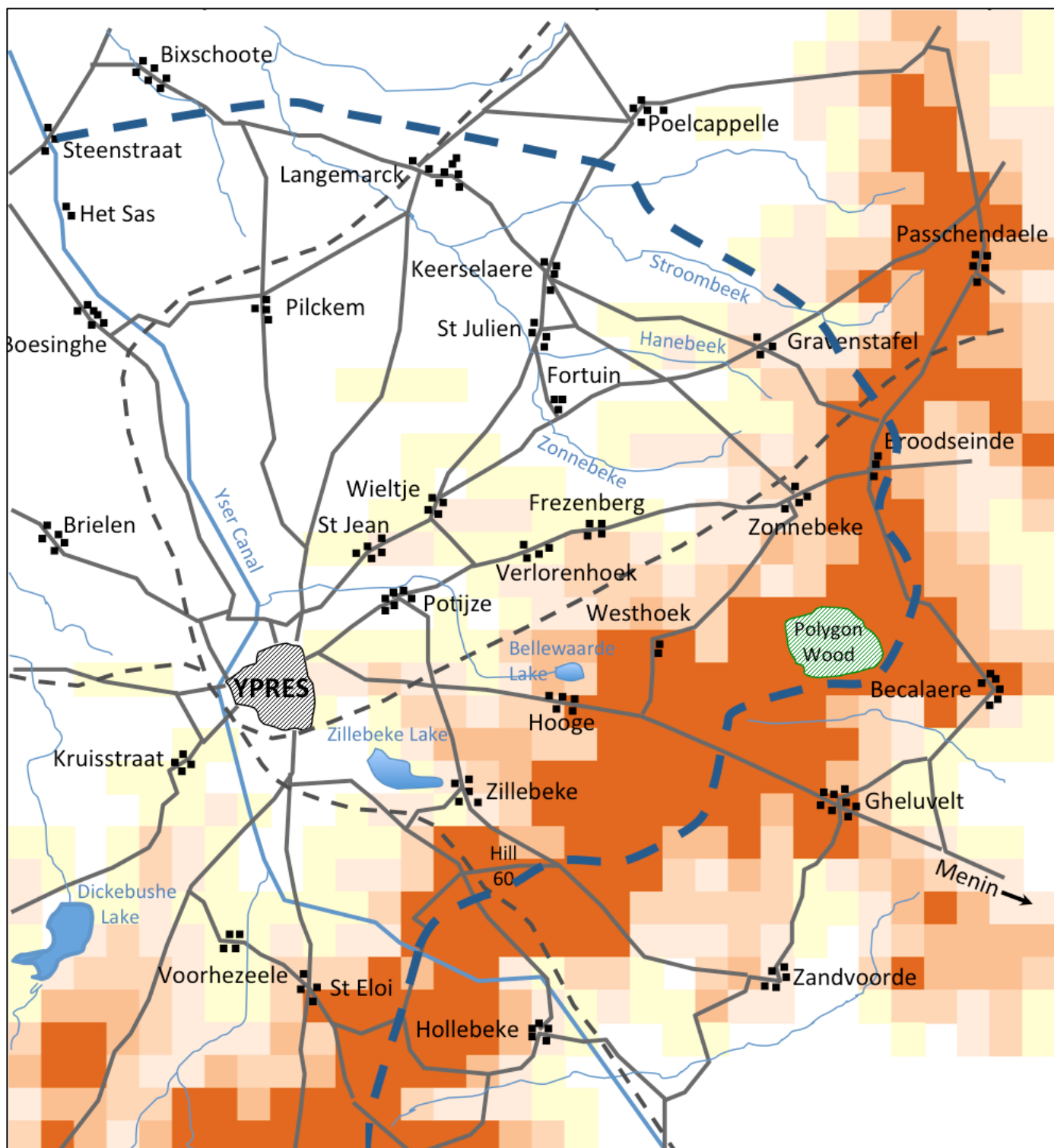
If the typical rate of daily attrition during this period was kept up then William could expect to be wounded or killed within six months to a year of arriving in the trenches.

While William's Devonshires held the line at Oosthoek, 2 miles south of Ypres, other troops blew a mine under the Germans at Hill 60 on 17th April and captured the hill with few losses. In the low-lying country of Flanders, the 60-metre high hill was a commanding height and key to the positions southeast of Ypres. It was much fought over and the Germans counterattacked. The Devons moved up into trenches littered with dead and wounded on the hill on 21st April.

Not only was the fight on the hill developing, but the next day the Germans attacked the French sector in the northwest of the Ypres salient. Their troops advanced behind a cloud of chlorine gas. It was the first cloud gas attack of the war and it caught the Algerian troops and elderly Territorials in the French sector unprepared. Even had they known the attack was coming they might still have been overwhelmed: gas protection at that stage of the war was wholly inadequate. Retreat became a rout in the French sector and the Ypres salient collapsed, only the Canadians clinging grimly on at Gravenstafel prevented a disaster.

The Devons fought in defence of Hill 60, a difficult task as their parapets kept getting blown away by German field guns which had been brought up to fire at close range, and suffered *"a fair number"* of casualties (51 on 22nd April). The next day, the Devonshire's war diary records *"a certain tension"* as the Germans advanced in the north. Secret orders were received detailing the actions they were to take if the salient had to be partially abandoned. The fighting on Hill 60 had become merely a sideshow to the main action in the salient, although it would not have felt like it to the men garrisoning the hill.

On the 27th, the Devonshires were relieved and manned dug-outs behind the hill for two days, waiting until nightfall before they emerged to work on improving communications trenches, *"entangling"* a nearby railway cutting with wire, digging a gun emplacement and carrying up small arms ammunition, stores and rations. As the Devons were about to enter the trenches, another mine was blown on the hill.



The Ypres Salient before the 2nd Battle of Ypres, showing areas of high ground, the position of Hill 60 (southeast of Ypres) and the front line on 22nd April 1915.

The hill was still partly in German hands, partly in British, on 1st May, when the Germans launched a new attempt to seize it.

At 7pm, during an artillery barrage, the Germans shot thick yellow clouds of gas out of nozzles opposite the British trenches. The hill's garrison, the men of the 1st Dorsetshire Regiment, were quickly overcome. Many could not get their respirators (simple chemically-impregnated cloth pads) over their mouths in time, others were already wearing their respirators as part of a drill but were awaiting a delivery of water and so had dry - ineffective - pads and the strength of the gas was enough to overwhelm even correctly fitted and moistened pads. 300 men were knocked out and most fell into the trenches, down into pools of heavier-than-air gas. Many of them died or were chronically injured. For a few crucial minutes, the situation on the hill was critical. A handful of men were still able to fight. Braving the shells that crashed all around them and the machine-gun fire that played along the parapets, they shot back. Up high, with heads out of the trenches, they were protected from the worst effects of the gas. Plans for the defence of the hill were in place and supports, including 6 platoons of the Devons, were quickly pushed forward. The Devons took over the trenches from the Dorsets that night.

The defenders in the north of the salient, who had gradually been driven back over the preceding days, were pulled back to newly-prepared positions that night. Hill 60 was the hinge on which the line had swung inwards and now the Germans were worrying close to the north of the hill too.

The Devons left the hill a few days later – it was then lost to the Germans on the 7th May - and were employed digging a new second line of defences. May passed uneventfully and time would have been spent on improving their trenches and instructing newly arrived units in trench life. June began with a fortnight's rest (a luxury denied to their brigademates, the 1st East Surreys, in which unit local men Arthur Boobier and John Henry Wade were serving) in bivouacs near Dickebusch. Although safer than the front line, the men still occasionally had to move out of the way of long-range artillery fire. A final stint in the trenches at Oosthoek was followed by more rest and then 14th Brigade was relieved.

They headed south to the quiet downland of Picardy, part of a general move of the British to the south to relieve the French. They were billeted in Suzanne and held trenches near Maricourt and sometimes garrisoned the defences of the town itself. This sector was a positive rest cure compared to Ypres and plenty of time could be spent recuperating in billets when not on the usual night-time digging duties. The Germans had dug in for a long stay and, apart from some light shelling, it was so quiet that they could hear singing and the playing of musical instruments in the German trenches. The Germans playfully crept within 20 yards of the British wire to stick a small flag in No Man's Land with a message that read "*Zutritt Verboten*" (no trespassing!). Men were able to attend concerts and even take home leave and perhaps William was one of those lucky enough to visit his family.

Just because it was quiet, it didn't mean that the men were allowed to be idle when in the line. Patrols were frequently sent out at night to cut the German wire or to bomb sap trenches. The patrol would arm themselves with half a dozen grenades each, sneak up close to a sap trench and wait for the sound of voices and then lob their bombs in and retire across No Man's Land. The result of these attacks, of course, would only make the Germans more hostile and give further thought to strengthening their defences.

A few days before Christmas, some Germans shouted to an advanced post in the British line: "*We speak English. If you don't shoot, we won't.*" Such friendly overtures were inevitably rebuffed and the next line in the war diary begins "*After our fire had ceased....*" In reply, the Germans gave as good as they got. There was to be no repeat of the 1914 Christmas truce but it was a quiet day and one of those rare ones when they did not have any casualties at all.

In the New Year, they marched west to billets in Montigny. Here they rested for more than a month. In early February, they left 14th Brigade and joined 95th Brigade. This was part of a general reorganisation of the Army in France and Flanders in which the veteran units of the older brigades were mixed up with the newly-arrived service (Kitchener volunteer) battalions. The men began training alongside their new brigademates, which seemed to consist mostly of route marching apart

from specialist instructions for the two dozen or so battalion signallers.

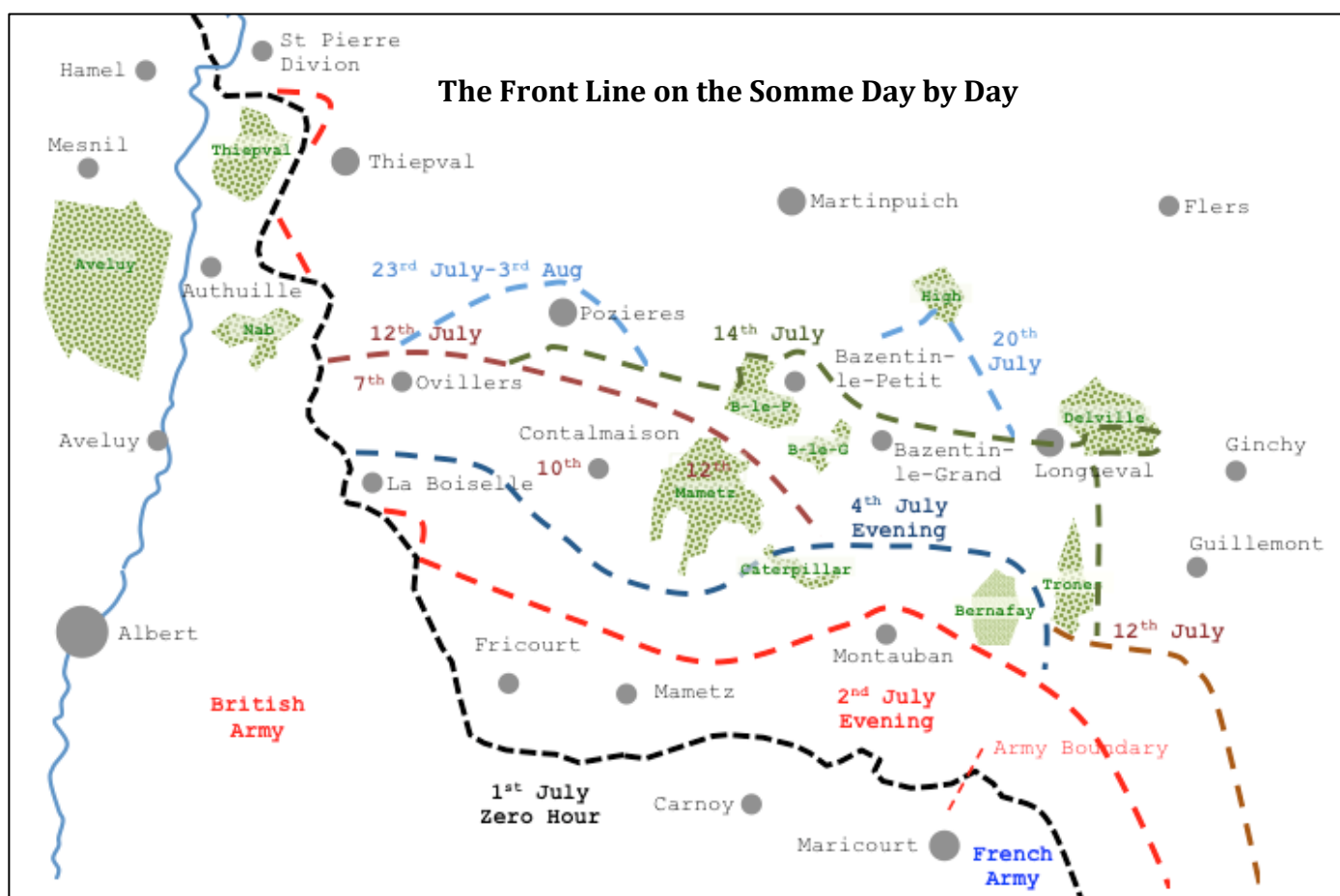
In late February, they moved north to billets in Occoches for a week and then to Sombrin, near Arras. On 3rd March, they took over the defences at Roclincourt from a French battalion, with No.4 Company later detached to man the defences in Arras. The joining up of the British lines in the north (which started just below Ypres) with those further south (on the Ancre and the Somme rivers), freed the French troops to be moved south where they were desperately needed to resist the German attack at Verdun, which had begun in late February and was drawing in large numbers of French soldiers. The attack had been designed to suck the French into an attritional battle that would wear down their army and the plan was working. The battle lasted for months and would be one of the factors that galvanised the British and French into a joint attack in Picardy in July.

Although almost every day's diary entry records that "*nothing of note occurred*" and Roclincourt was only casually shelled by the Germans every now and then, the Devons found this to be a more hostile part of the line. The snipers were active, particularly in the early morning, and the Germans were busier with trench mortars, aerial torpedoes and rifle grenades here than they had been down south. With adequate numbers of men available and a settled situation, there was opportunity to rest at billets in Harbarcq. On one such rest day, they were given a demonstration of a "*flame projector*" (referred to as "*Hun frightfulness*" by the 1st East Surrey's war diary).

Mid-May saw a change in billets and the men marched to Agnez. They were responsible for another set of trenches near Arras but otherwise their routine of taking turns with the East Surrey Regiment in manning the trenches continued mostly without incident. On 21st May, they were "*considerably affected*" during the night by gas from gas shells that had landed elsewhere and on 13th June a memorial service for Lord Kitchener (whose ship had just been sunk by a U-Boat) and "*all who had recently lost their lives on sea and land*" was held.

In late June, as the 7-day preliminary bombardment that heralded the beginning of the Battle of the Somme began to the south, the Devons began a prolonged rest spell in billets at Wanquetin. As many of the units to be involved on the first day of the battle were busy with final rehearsals for the attack, the 1st Devons did the only training that they ever seemed to do: route marching. As usual, they were kept busy improving local defences and working parties of hundreds of men were found daily.

As the "Big Push" began, the Devons were holding trenches at Wailly but left in buses for new billets on 2nd July before returning to Wanquetin and resting. They marched south in stages during the middle of the month, ending up in the old German lines in front of the village of Montauban on 19th July, nearly three weeks after they had been captured. Here they were in range of the German guns and were bombarded with both conventional and gas shell.

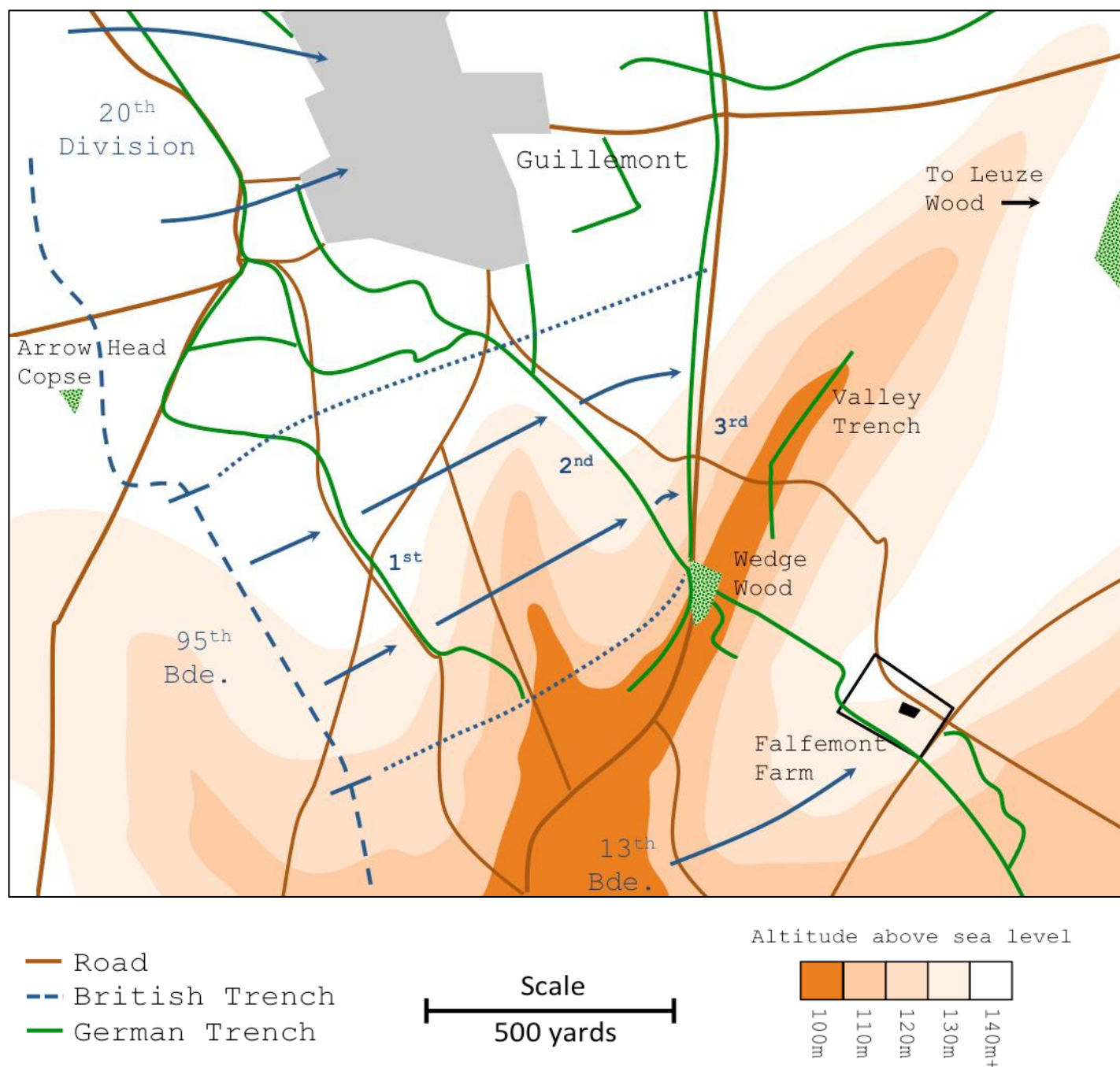


The initial gains on the Somme battlefield were in the south but progress quickly came to a halt. In preparation for a renewal of the advance, the villages of La Boisselle, Ovillers and Contalmaison were all captured at great cost and bloody fighting took place for Mametz and Trones Woods. A second phase of the battle began on 14th July and had impressive early success. Parts of the German second line system were captured but an opportunity to turn it into a breakthrough was missed and the advance was brought to a standstill once more.

On 23rd July, they moved up to the front line and into 1000 yards of trenches running northeast to southwest just outside the outskirts of the ruined village of Longueval, which adjoined Delville Wood. The village had been reduced to rubble – you couldn't tell where a house ended and the road began – and the southern half was in British hands. An attack on the northern half the previous night had failed. Fighting continued in and around the village and in the wood to its east. The following evening, the Germans attempted to retake the trenches held by the Devons. Beginning with a 2-hour evening bombardment and under cover of smoke, the Germans tried to leave their trenches but the Devonshires were able to drive them back. 11 men were killed and 89 were wounded over the two days. 10 of the casualties were officers, vulnerable as they rallied their men during the fighting.

Relieved from the firing line, they moved back to support trenches but were not much safer there, with 34 men killed or wounded over the next two days. Two companies were then pushed forward to occupy the old German trench southwest of the town and subjected to severe shelling which caused "rather heavy" casualties: 83 men killed or wounded in a day, perhaps a quarter of the men in the 2 companies.

The pressure was eased a little when they were pulled back to the old German second line to garrison the Pommiers Redoubt (captured on the first day of the Somme), holding it against a threatened counterattack, and then they left the battlefield altogether on 1st August, having lost nearly 250 men in a fortnight.



Planned attack of 3rd September 1916, showing 95th Brigade's first three objectives and a simplified trench system with shading to highlight the valley between two spurs in which Wedge Wood sat.

Reinforcements began to arrive and men started to trickle back from hospital. They were billeted in the village of St Maulvis. Concerts were given in the village square by the 5th Division band and a concert party, "The Whizz-Bangs." They route marched, of course, but otherwise "nothing of nothing of note occurred." They must have been nearly up to full strength when they returned to the trenches on 26th August.

They were stationed southeast of Guillemont, holding the line from Trones Wood to a point opposite Falfemont Farm in heavy showers of rain as well as German artillery shells. The chalky soil soon turned to slippery mud and although it probably wasn't anywhere near as bad as the clay of Ypres, it was still difficult to move around in. They dug through the rain, digging an assembly trench, named Devon Trench in their honour, and moving supplies and stores up for the forthcoming advance.

Attacks, later known as the Battle of Guillemont, were to be launched on 3rd September along a 6,000-yard front from Longueval to a point 1,500 yards south of Guillemont. Their objectives were to take the villages of Guillemont, Ginchy and Combles and advance to the Switch Line and Leuze Wood, part

of the next major trench system. This would mean that the capture of the German's second line which had begun on 14th July would finally be completed and the intermediate line between the second and third lines would be in British hands too. The way would be clear for an attack on the German third line in mid-September.

95th Brigade would lead the advance in the Devonshires' sector, the 12th Gloucesters on the right and the 1st Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry on the left. Following up behind them would be the Devons (on the right) and East Surreys (left) in support. To their right, south of Wedge Wood, the 13th Brigade would attack Falfemont Farm, a strongly-held key defensive position between Wedge Wood and the village of Maurepas. The preliminary bombardment began at 8am on 2nd September.

13th Brigade began their assault on the farm at 9am on the 3rd. It did not go well. They came under fire from in front and on their flanks and suffered heavy casualties. The farm did not fall and the decimated 13th Brigade had to be relieved by 15th Brigade, who would attempt another attack in the evening.

The Gloucesters and D.C.L.I. went forward at noon, 25 yards behind a creeping barrage moving at 100 yards per minute. The thorough preliminary bombardment had destroyed the German defences and they took their first objective, the trenches leading south from Guillemont, and moved on to tackle their second objective, the line of trenches leading southwest from Guillemont to the northern tip of Wedge Wood, at 12:50pm. As they advanced, two companies of the Devons moved up to the first captured trench, the other two companies taking their place in the old front line. At 2pm, the Gloucesters and D.C.L.I. moved on once more, attacking the sunken road that ran north from Wedge Wood to Ginchy and the Devons followed them. They reached the trench along the road despite the machine-gun fire from the farm across the valley and it was in their hands within a quarter of an hour of leaving their trenches.

To the north, Guillemont had fallen to the 20th Division and the leading troops of 95th Brigade linked up with 20th Division on the Ginchy-Wedge Wood road at 2:50pm. At 6:30pm, another unsuccessful attack on the farm was carried out by 15th Brigade but they did manage to reach Wedge Wood on the left and link with the Devons.

The next three days saw the capture of Valley Trench and an advance into Leuze Wood before the 95th Brigade were relieved on 6th September.

On the first day of the battle, 3rd September 1916, William was killed in action, aged 28. His body was either not found or never identified. He was one of 194 casualties suffered by the 1st Devonshire Regiment during the Battle of Guillemont (3rd-6th September 1916).

William is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing on the Somme, on the Sutton, Belmont and Banstead War Memorials, the Garton Memorial in All Saints' churchyard and on the memorial panels in the Lady Chapel at All Saints'. His name is recorded in the Manchester Unity Roll of Honour for the Star of Banstead Lodge and in the All Saints' Book of Men Who served Overseas.

William was awarded the British War Medal, the Victory Medal and the 1914-15 Star.

Notes

£12 was paid out from the Oddfellows' funeral fund to cover the costs of William's burial. As William's body was either not recovered or never identified, the money was probably spent on commemorating him in some other way, perhaps used to pay for his inscription on one of the war memorials.

William was recorded in the *Sutton & Epsom Advertiser's* Roll of Honour in 1914. The rolls were initially a list of men who had volunteered to serve; later in the war they became lists of the men who did not return. Sutton's Roll lists the men, their address and the unit they joined.

William's family probably lived at the modern number 29 in Salisbury Road but number 37 is another strong contender.

The Burberrys moved to 13 Clifton Avenue, Belmont, in 1914-15.

The Rembrandt Cinema was demolished and replaced by houses.

Castleton later became an old people's home in the 1930s before being demolished in the 1950s.

Sources

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Medal Index Card (William J Burberry, 13191)

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British Army Service Record (5104 Edward Harry Burberry)

WO95 1565-1 1st Battalion Devonshire Regiment War Diary

WO95 1579-3 1st Battalion Devonshire Regiment War Diary

WO95 1579 1st East Surrey Regiment War Diary

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Links

www.bansteadhistory.com

www.surreyinthegreatwar.org.uk