

MAYFIELD, FIVE ASHES AND THE GREAT WAR - No. 8 - November 1914

The most significant fighting on the Western Front for the BEF during November occurred in Flanders, particularly around Ypres. In late October, with heavy casualties continuing on both sides, the German advance through Belgium had been checked by the opening of the sluices on the River Yser and the flooding of the coastal area. In November the allied line at Ypres, under immense pressure from the German Army who had significantly greater numbers, survived unbroken largely due to dogged British resistance and the timely arrival of French reinforcements. At the end of this first battle of Ypres, officially recognised as 22nd November, with the Germans holding the high ground, the Allies held an awkward bulge eastwards of Ypres. This was the infamous Salient, a murderous and exposed deathtrap which was to be the focus of further major engagements over the next four years.

Trenches were now established along the entire Western Front from the Swiss frontier to the North Sea. The power and efficiency of modern weapons in defence had triumphed over attack, and stalemate ensued. By mid-November the first snow had fallen on the front, and both sides dug in and prepared for winter.

For the British, having taken casualties (deaths, wounded and missing) of approx 90,000 since the outbreak of war, this marked the end of the old, relatively small, Regular Army. In the words of renowned military historian Sir Basil Liddell Hart *"this defence of Ypres is in a dual sense the supreme memorial to the British Regular Army, for here its officers and men showed the inestimable value of the disciplined morale and unique standard of musketry which were the fruit of long training, and here was their tombstone. From failing hands they threw the torch to the New Armies rising in Britain to the call of country"*.

Elsewhere during November, fighting ebbed and flowed on the Eastern Front with success/failure on both sides. Turkey declared war on the Allies and Britain annexed Cyprus. British and German forces confronted each other in Africa. The British force in Mesopotamia entered Basra to secure oil supplies for most of the Royal Navy. At Sheerness, 700 people died when a Battleship, HMS Bulwark, blew up in what was later concluded to be an accidental internal explosion.

Nationally, recruitment for Kitchener's New Army continued to dominate thoughts and policy. It was now generally acknowledged that the war was not going to be over by Christmas and if Britain was to help overcome the enemy in Europe a field army of 2,000,000 men would be required. Newspapers, national and local, were full of articles discussing the latest recruitment figures and influential men/women toured the country giving patriotic speeches to encourage enlistment. Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, raised income tax for 1915 to 1s and 6d in the pound on earned income, and 2s and 6d on unearned income. He also announced a £350 million War Loan (in 2014 value approx £28 billion) to cover war costs of £1 million a day. Further Government borrowing was forecast. Locally recruiting was going well for the second South Downs battalion, with expectations that men would soon be able to be stationed at the new quarters being built at Cooden. The Royal Pavillion, Brighton, was given over as a hospital for use by the Indian troops.

The 5th (Cinque Ports) Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment were still stationed at The Tower of London. For the last few weeks they had sent 120 men a day to take charge of the German and Austrian civilian prisoners confined in Olympia. Football matches frequently took place between the different companies in the moat of the Tower, often with much interest from public onlookers. The battalion had been chosen to line part of the route from Buckingham Palace to the Houses of Parliament for the state re-opening and otherwise the band of the 5th RSR played daily at Horse Guards parade or in the Green Park.

In Mayfield, permission had been gained from the Local Government Board to borrow £1,800 for the purchase of lands for Mayfield Sewage works. However, the purchase was put on hold temporarily. Much local emphasis was still placed on helping the Belgian Refugees, and through the kindness of the owner, Mr Alfred Taylor, "The Middle House" was lent to local Belgian refugees as lodgings. At the end of the month a dramatic evening was given by the pupils of Xaverian College in the parish hall to raise money for the Belgian Refugee Fund. The annual winter cattle fair was held at Court Meadow, where despite the inclement weather there was a good show of cattle for sale and a "capital attendance of buyers".

However, the loss of three Mayfield/Five Ashes men during the course of November would have been the important news. Two of the men are recorded on the Mayfield War Memorial; the reason for the omission of Alfred Berry remains unclear, despite being included in the 1915 Mayfield Roll of Honour. Perhaps it was as simple as a name confusion with Alfred John Berry, also commemorated on the war memorial, who died in 1917.

Alfred Berry, service no. 10405, was a Private in the 2nd Battalion Queens Royal West Surrey Regiment and died as a result of wounds **1 November 1914**. He was aged 22 and buried in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery, France.

Alfred was born in 1892 in Waldron, East Sussex; a member of a large family of 14 children. In 1911, his parents Emphraim and Fanny Berry, and many of the family, were living at Berrys Farm, Blackboys although by 1916 the family had moved first to Claytons Cottage, Mayfield and subsequently to Upper Honeys Green, Framfield. His involvement with the Army started early when he enlisted in 1909, at Holmlea, Cross In Hand, as a Territorial in the 5th Battalion (Cinque Ports) Royal Sussex Regiment, aged 17, stating his occupation as farm labourer working for a Mrs Berry at Tilsmore Farm. Six months later in March 1910 he volunteered to join the Army Reserve. His military career then takes a curious twist as his service record shows he deserted in August 1910 and does not rejoin until October 1912. At this point he is tried by Courts Martial for deserting His Majesty's Service and losing by neglect his equipment, clothing and regimental necessities; his sentence was 21 days detention and placed under 'Army Stoppages' until he made good the sum of £2 8s 3 1/4d. In this case the term 'Deserted' seems harsh and whilst militarily this is the language used, perhaps he simply did not turn up for training or attend the annual camps. After release from detention he continued with the RSR as an army reservist until June 2013 when he joined the regular army; the 2nd battalion Queens RWSR, and his conduct described as 'Good'. His enlistment records note his personal particulars as: Height: 5'3"; Weight 129lbs; Chest 35"; Fresh complexion, blue eyes, brown hair., 2 moles on his back, one mole on his upper L arm and a 2" operation scar on his groin. Ouch!!

Although the remains of his service record are incomplete it is probable that serving with the BEF he was posted to the front line early in October 1914. From that point well into November the QWSR was involved in regular and fierce fighting, consequently suffering heavy casualties. For the moment, how Alfred sustained his wounds, and when, remains unclear and is subject to ongoing research. Again, whilst the record is not definitive there is no reason to believe his family did not receive his war medals and there is evidence that in 1920 they received his commemorative plaque and scroll.

Alfred's death is the only one, of the three Mayfield/Five Ashes men, mentioned in local newspapers during November. A small paragraph together with a photograph appeared in the 27/11/14 edition of the K&SC, despite his death being much earlier on the 1st November. It is assumed that once his family had been informed many people in the district would also have been aware of his death.

John Hamilton Langley, service no. 8299, was a Lance Corporal in the 2nd Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment, who died of wounds in Mesopotamia on **19th November 1914**. The 2nd Battalion landed in Fao, Persian Gulf, for the campaign in Mesopotamia as part of the Indian Expeditionary Force. He was aged 24 and is buried at the Basra War Cemetery.

John Hamilton Langley was born in 1890 in Balcombe, Sussex, one of four children to Habby and Fanny Langley. In 1911 his family are listed as living in Birch Cottages, Five Ashes, but by 1920 the family are living in South Street, Mayfield. John's army career also began early in his life as he enlisted into the Dorsetshire Regiment, using the name John Douch Hamilton, on 1st March 1907, aged 18 years and 1 month. His previous trade was noted as having been an "indoor servant". He was posted to his regiment in October 1907, but is recorded as deserted from June 1909 until November 1911. He was also tried by Courts Martial and sentenced to 84 days detention and had to suffer pay stoppages until he had made good the value of his missing kit. The circumstances of his "desertion" are unknown and 100 years later it is inappropriate to draw uninformed conclusions. He was missing again in August 1912, whilst posted in India, and was sentenced for a further 96 hours detention. He sailed from Bombay with the Battalion on 16th October, 1914, and was wounded severely in action in Sahil on the 17th November and died of wounds two days later. In 1920 his father was working at the Grocery Bar, Guadaloupe Barracks, Borden, Hants where he received John's 1914-15 Star. In 1922 Habby was contacted again by the Infantry Record Office, this time to tell him that John's body was being exhumed and being re-buried at the Makina Masul New Extension Cemetery, in Basra, Iraq.

Edwin George Wicker, service no. 232543, was a Leading Seaman, who was lost overboard from Torpedo Boat no. 8 on **22nd November 1914** aged 25. His body was not recovered for burial, but he is remembered on the Chatham Naval Memorial.

Edwin was born in Mayfield in 1889, the fourth of 8 children, to his parents William and Caroline Wicker. His father was an agricultural labourer, who moved his family to Pinehurst Cottage, Rotherfield presumably for work, but then sadly died in 1900 when Edwin was just 11. Edwin was still living with his family in Spout Farm House, Rotherfield in 1901, his stated occupation being "scholar". In 1902 Edwin had a minor brush with the law when, missing from home, he was charged with the theft of £2 from his eldest brother and was eventually returned to the local constabulary from the Portsmouth police. Edwin owned up to taking the money, saying that he had wanted to get into the Navy. It is worth noting that his brother had not wished charges to be brought, but had involved the police because Edwin was missing. By October 1904 he had joined the Navy and was serving on HMS Impregnable, the first of many ships on which he served. When he first joined the navy he was 5'2" with blue eyes, brown hair, a fresh complexion and an anchor tattooed on his left forearm. By his 18th birthday in 1907 he had grown to 5'5" height and miraculously still had a fresh

complexion! His mother, Caroline, is still recorded a widow in 1911 when the family are living at Stone House Cottage, Bassets Farm, Mayfield. In this same census Edwin is listed as an Able Seaman on a Battleship, HMS Dominion. Edwin's service record states that he was drowned, being lost overboard from T.B. 8 in the vicinity of East Spike Buoy which is believed to be in the English Channel.

Wounded casualties were also being reported by this time and by the end of November at least three local men who were regulars in the BEF had returned to Mayfield/Five Ashes to recover.

As briefly mentioned in the October article **Private Charles Kenward***, service no. 15398, Kings Company, Grenadier Guards, son of ex Police Sergeant Kenward (Steward of the Mayfield Conservative Club) had been incapacitated when a horse he was leading near the front line suddenly bolted, crushing his foot and breaking an ankle. This was desperately unlucky as Pte Kenward had survived heavy fighting in the trenches. He praised his comrades for their cheerfulness and indomitable spirit but said they were exasperated by the lack of cigarettes. None of the cigarettes which had been sent to the Front had reached them and the Tommies were reduced to making their own out of dried tea leaves rolled in newspaper.

Lance Corporal Frank Hazlewood, service no. L/10183, Queens Royal West Surrey Regiment had been invalided home and was with his parents at 12 Victoria Road, Mayfield. Again he had been involved in heavy fighting, had survived unscathed, but was unable to continue owing to a problem with his ears. It was reported that an operation was probably required but that within a few days Pte Hazlewood was leaving Mayfield to rejoin his Regiment. It might be speculated that he had suffered damage to his ears from heavy shelling.

Private (William) Alfred Luck, service no. 867, 1st Battalion Scots Guards returned to Mayfield after being wounded in the right instep and was staying with his parents at Cranesden Lodge. A participant at the Battle of Mons and subsequent actions he was wounded on the 29th October by shrapnel and had the painful experience of having to crawl for over a mile to a place of safety. Within a few days of being at home he was to rejoin his Regiment. His service records actually show that he did not return to the Front until mid February in 1915. He went on to survive the war, become a sergeant, and amongst other medals received the Military Medal.

Whilst letters sent home from the front were subject to censure, all of the above injured/wounded men were interviewed by the press. When they talked of their experiences they referred to the resourcefulness of the Tommies and the desperate fighting with the numerically superior German Army. Opinion differed as to the fighting quality of the Germans, their lack of humanity and treatment of civilians. These stories must have enthralled, inspired, enraged and horrified readers in equal measure.

* Denotes one of the Mayfield/Five Ashes Fallen.

Crosses will be placed on the Mayfield War Memorial just for the day that marks the centenary of the death of each man who gave his life in WW1. You are welcome to come and pay your respects.

This series is written by Carole Stilwell and Brian Oldfield. If any reader has any information, however seemingly trivial, to add to the research being undertaken please contact Carole Stilwell on 01435 873407 (e-mail carolestilwell@hotmail.com) who is Vice-Chair and Events Coordinator for Mayfield, Five Ashes and Hadlow Down Branch of the Royal British Legion. If you are interested in reading previous articles in this series, you can find them all on the Mayfield British legion site at www.britishlegion.org.uk/branches/mayfield