

## MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 48 - MARCH 2018

As Spring approached in March 1918, the Allies were aware that the German Army was preparing for its first major offensive along the Western Front since 1914. A peace treaty had been completed between Russia and Germany, fueling the worst fears of the Allied military planners. The transfer of German troops and material from East to West would give the German Army a short term numerical advantage before the weight of American manpower and industry could significantly reinforce the allied forces. The Allies were unaware of where this fresh German offensive would fall, nor had a clear insight into the timing.

Meanwhile, whilst the Americans built up and trained their forces, the French and British, absorbing lessons from their own and German offensives of 1917, reorganised their defensive lines and tactics. A three tier line system was introduced: a lightly held forward line; a battle line further back, as a main defensive line, and a third support line to allow swift deployment of reserves as and when required. The British implementation of such a plan was incomplete when the German Army advanced with overwhelming force north of the Somme. The German aim was to drive a wedge between the British and French Armies where their sectors met; expose the British right flank and then roll north forcing the British back onto the Channel Ports and ultimate defeat. If the British were defeated the German belief was that the French would seek an armistice, on peace terms imposed by Germany along the humiliating terms offered and accepted by the Russians.

From the 21st March until the end of the month the Allies were forced to retreat both north and south of the Somme, and concede ground won in 1916/17 at great cost in men and treasure. In places the German Army advanced 40 miles at a pace unseen at any time since earlier in the war. Although it may have seemed desperate at the time it was not all doom and gloom for the Allies. The ground given up was largely the old battlefields ie dead ground of yesteryear and the important railheads and Channel ports were not overrun. Furthermore, the German large scale deployment of crack troops as their initial assault force was to result in heavy casualties to these same troops, who simply could not be replaced from weakened and inexperienced reserve forces. By the end of March the Allies had grasped the nettle of a unified command structure and appointed General Foch as supreme coordinator of the allied forces. The development, response to and outcome of this offensive will be briefly reviewed in future articles.

The Mayfield men in the 5th (Cinque Ports) Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment spent the first part of the month screening roads in the Montello area outside Milan, before then spending the latter part of the month marching through Italy towards Venice. Battle casualties were low, but 97 men from "A" Company were evacuated sick during the month due to an epidemic presumed to be caused by bad water.

Nationally, amongst measures of ever increasing government control, was the New Military Service Bill which raised the maximum conscription age to 50 and introduced conscription in Ireland. Also introduced was the rationing of coal, gas and electricity; and theatres were instructed to close at 10.30pm and restaurants at 10.00 pm.

Two government initiatives very much in the public eye would have generated local interest. First, to support the cost of the war, a week, early in March, was designated for an intensive campaign to issue/sell National War Bonds to the general public. As a novel 'marketing' ploy each borough, city, town or district was allocated a target investment total which was linked to the cost of one or more aeroplanes, tanks, ships. In Tunbridge Wells and District (which is presumed to include Mayfield) a target of £100,000 was set and linked to the equivalent cost of one submarine. Local national savings committees and dignitaries, well supported by local newspapers, devoted much time and energy in urging the local populace to support 'Submarine Week'. The Kent & Sussex Courier (K&SC) published a league table of towns of similar size to TW together with the value of bonds purchased per head of population. It was full of praise for local effort when TW and District raised £180,000, the equivalent of 1.8 submarines. There was also some sense of civic satisfaction in doing rather better than certain other towns.

Secondly, under constant exhortations at national and local level, the general public were encouraged to grow more vegetables at home or on local allotments. Farmers were bringing much extra land into use but it was deemed essential to increase the production of home grown produce, particularly potatoes. Given the ever stricter controls over food hoarding and rationing, the incentive was dangled that home grown produce was largely exempt from food control rules. In Mayfield a special meeting of the Parish

Council considered applications for allotments and the provision of suitable land. A field close to South St, owned by Messrs Page & Overton and hired by Mr J Cornford, was identified where fifteen 10 Rod plots could be brought into use. Despite protests from Mr Cornford the PC decided to progress with the acquisition of the land for use as war allotments. The actual size of a 10 Rod plot is unknown. (A Rod is 5 1/2 yard long: there are 160 Sq Rods to an acre). To bolster local enthusiasm for home produce Mr Gabbitas of Venells offered a prize of 10/- to cottagers and allotment holders for the six largest onions grown. Miss Bell-Irving offered a prize of 10/- for the largest head of sunflower seed.

A proposal from the War Office to quarter 100 Officers in Mayfield for recuperation and the opportunity to learn something of farming, raised concerns over rationing with the local Food Committee. The PC decided to ask the WO to limit the number of Officers to 20 and allot the remainder to neighbouring villages.

The PC was also advised that the local Fire Brigade was in poor shape. Manning was increasingly difficult as military conscription seized many able bodied men, no drills were undertaken and hose was perishing from lack of use. In short, the PC were advised, the Brigade was practically non-existent.

The inaugural meeting of the Mayfield W.I. was held on Wednesday March 6th at the schoolroom adjoining the congregational church. 66 new members joined the movement, who saw demonstrations about "soft cheese making" and "how to increase butter" together with an exhibition of home preserved foods. The Hon. Mrs Marshall was elected president and Miss Bell-Irving Vice-President.

The Roll of Honour at the Parish Church was updated and contains the names of 39 men. 37 Killed and 2 missing.

**The Uckfield Tribunal:** The K&SC 15/3/18 reported: *'Adjourned for medical examination G Leonard, 36, Drapery and Outfitting Manager, employed by the Executors of the late Mr Holder of Mayfield. J Hartfield, 32, Stone Dresser and Engine Driver of Mayfield was granted exemption until 13 Sept on the application of his employer Mr E T B Coppard. Temporary exemption to 13 May, not renewable without leave, to W Penney, 35, a Chauffeur and Gardener to Mr W G Orchard of Blackboys. The case of H G Holmes 31, a Carter and Ploughman, employed by Mr J Bailey of Mayfield was adjourned so that application may be made to the ES Executive Committee for a protection certificate.'*

**On Leave:** The K&SC 1/3/18 P6 reported: *'Private T Pierson has 14 days leave from the Front.'*

**In Hospital:** The K&SC 29/3/18 P6 reported: *'Sapper W Hick RE who has been with the forces in France over 12 months is now in a London Hospital suffering from Trench Fever.'*

**Wounded:** *Mr J Lade, Harness Maker, High St has received news officially that his son Private F J Lade, AOC, is dangerously wounded in France. Private Lade joined the army on the outbreak of war and has been in France over 2 years. Home on leave about a month ago (he was Best Man at a friend's wedding) his previous job had been in the employ of the late Mr Holder.'* (See Below)

There are 4 names recorded on the Mayfield and Five Ashes War Memorials for March 1918.

**Private Arthur Groombridge:** B Company: 8th Battalion Queens Own (Royal West Kent Regiment). Service No G/18660. Arthur was killed in action 21 March 1918 aged 35. His name is commemorated at Pozieres Memorial which is located on the Somme some 5/6 miles from the town of Albert.

Arthur was born in 1883 at Rotherfield to parents Edward Kent (variously Domestic Coach Driver & Gardener) originally from Hawkhurst, and Eliza (nee Norris) from Langley, Kent. Arthur was one of six surviving children, his parents long time Mayfield residents lived successively at School House Cottage; Fletching St; and Pound Hill although these locations may be one and the same. Little is known of Arthur's early years, although at later dates it would seem that he was involved in music concerts and was certainly a bellringer (Tenor Bell) at the Parish Church. His occupation in 1901 was as a domestic gardener, an occupation he retained for the remainder of his civic life. He married Harriett Kate Weeks, another resident of Mayfield, at St Dunstons in December 1909, and the following year became a father of twin daughters, Kate and Daisy.

His Attestation papers 4/12/15 reveal that he had previous military experience of between 8/9 years with the 5th Battalion RSR as a Territorial. His physical health was described as excellent, his height given as 6' 1" although teeth described as poor. He was eventually called up in 1916 into the Royal Fusiliers: Service No G/41796 and served a home posting between 7/6/16 -3/10/16 before transferring to the RWK and serving in France between 4/10/16 - 13/6/17. At this date his health suffered a set back and he was sent to a Birmingham Hospital where he was treated for severe Sciatica. He spent a total of 78 days at this hospital before being transferred to Woldingham Hospital for a further 63 days. His medical records state *'has had special remedial exercises and army physical drill in various grades. Able to march up to six miles at the regulation pace.'*

Restored to health he was discharged from Woldingham 23rd Sept 1917 and spent a week at home in Mayfield before reporting for duty at Shoreham By Sea on the 1 November 1917. No details are available of his military life after that date until he was posted back to France on the 12 March 1918. In France he rejoined the 8th Battalion RWK who were to be at the front line of defence against the German attack of the 21st March. Arthur was eventually officially listed as missing.

Details of his death are unknown but the following provides a general scenario of the RWK position. *'In the early morning of the 21st March, German artillery launched the largest bombardment of the war, swiftly followed by rapidly advancing shock troops, against the British Army around St Quentin. Here 8th Battalion RWK, part of 72nd Infantry Brigade was holding a sector that was one of the hardest hit of the attack. The front line trenches were almost obliterated under the bombardment and many of the surviving troops were quickly overwhelmed by the mass German infantry attacks. The 8th RWK made a fighting retreat along the River Omignon to Bilecourt.'*

Harriett Groombridge never remarried and lived at Toll Cottages for many years. She died in 1961. Daughter Daisy married Frederick Blackman in 1936 and lived in Sevenoaks. Daughter Katie never married and died at Hastings 1977.



**Francis James Lade:** Private 15th Division Army Ordnance Corps. Service No 02440. Frank died of wounds 22 March 1918 aged 28. His grave is at Duisans British Cemetery, Etrun. Located in the Pas-de-Calais approx 5 miles west of Arras.

Frank was born in Mayfield 1890 to parents James Luke Lade (Harness Maker) and Jane (nee Eade). It appears that his mother Jane died in 1890 (possibly in childbirth) and the first occasion that Frank is recorded in a census is 1891 where he is living with an Uncle Richard (a Blacksmith) and Aunt Jane Cottingham at High St Mayfield. Frank continued to reside with his Uncle/Aunt until at least 1911. By this date he was employed as a Drapers Assistant with Mr Holder also of High St Mayfield.

*Image 1, Kent & Sussex Courier, April 5th 1918, p.3*

In 1911 Frank is reported in the K&SC 15/9/11 as follows. *'On Thursday afternoon when cycling on his return journey from London to Mayfield Frank J Lade met with an accident near Sevenoaks. It appears that he had just overtaken a traction engine and then immediately came into collision with a motor car which was approaching to pass the engine. He had a marvellous escape from a serious mishap, but he was bruised and shaken considerably. His cycle was also badly damaged.'*

No Army service records are available but newspaper reports of his death contain a comprehensive account of his enlistment (at Woolwich) and events leading to his death. As noted earlier in this article his father had been informed that Frank had been dangerously wounded in France. A week later in the K&SC 5/4/18 P3 the following articles appeared. *'Since our report in last weeks issue , Mr J Lade (Saddler) High St Mayfield has received official news that his only son Private F J Lade has died from wounds. Private Lade was 28 years of age. In civilian life he was in the drapery line of business. Apprenticed to the late Mr Henry Holder, he stayed with him a year or two after his apprenticeship and then went to London to a large wholesale firm (Messrs Copeslake, Crampton & Co). He was there in the shipping dept when war broke out. In November 1914 he with a friend employee of the same house volunteered. They desired to get into the London Rifles but failing, then went into the ROAC. They went to France together in July 1915 and managed to keep together to the last, as will be seen from the following letter (to Mr J Lade). Dear Mr Lade, I really don't know what to say except sympathise deeply with you over my old chum Frank. I could not write to let you know, before you received any official news, for I was damaged by the same shell. It was yesterday week evening. The town was being shelled and had been for 2 or 3 days. About 7 PM Frank and I went out for a short stroll and on the way back to the depot we went to a cafe for a glass of wine. There was a shell come over into an old brewery 100 yards from us about 7.40 and a couple of minutes after, the house we were in was struck. When I came to the next day about 12 o'clock I enquired for Frank and was told he wasn't too good, and upon enquiry again that evening I was told that he had died. I don't think that he could have had much pain, for I don't suppose he was conscious. He was the best pal I've ever had and as straight as a die, one of the nicest chaps one could possibly meet, and liked by everybody who knew him. I shall have to close now . Any questions you want to ask-please ask. Yours with much sympathy E G Baynham.'\*\**

Mr Lade also received the following letter from the Captain: *'Dear Mr Lade. It is my painful duty to have to inform you that your son Private Frank Lade has succumbed to injuries received during bombardment of this town on the 21st March. He went into a restaurant with a great friend of his (L Corp Baynham) and while there a shell came and struck the house, killing nearly everybody in the room. Your son was got out as soon as it was possible to do so. He was unconscious and I am glad to say, never recovered consciousness. I can assure you that he was in no pain when he died. Dear Mr Lade I am so sorry about this. Your son had served under me for well over two years and we were all very fond of him. He always had worked most splendidly and was one of the best men I had. We shall all miss him very much indeed. He was buried this morning in one of the military cemeteries near here and his comrades were all present. I will tell you where this is as soon as I am permitted to do so.'*

Twelve months later in the K&SC 21/3/19 in the In Memoriam column there were two entries for Frank. One from his father James Luke Lade annotated 'From Home': one from step sister Beatrice.

\*\* Ernest George Baynham born in Monmouth would have been aged 25/6 in March 1918.

**William Wickens:** Lance Corporal 4th Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment. Service No. 204052. William was killed in action 24 March 1918 aged 27 and is commemorated on the Arras Memorial.

William was born in Frant 1890 to parents Alfred S Wickens ( Domestic Gardener/Servant) and Emma (nee). Both were born in Rotherfield. William was one of 6 children and over the 20 years between 1891-1911 the family variously lived at Frant Green, Frant; Shernfold Gardens, Frant; Stonehurst Cottage, Rotherfield. In 1911 still living with his parents at Rotherfield, William, following in his father's footsteps had taken up employment as a Domestic Gardener. At about this time there are also indications in the local newspapers that William was probably a cricketer (Unverified cricket results/teams).

By 1914 it is probable that his line of work had taken him further afield as he enlisted in the 2/6 East Surrey Regiment Service No 240927 on November 1914 at Kingston Upon Thames. This appears to have been a reserve battalion and William clearly impressed, for in the latter half of 1915 he was promoted to Lance Corporal and subsequently Corporal. Also, on the 25 December 1915 he married Eleanor Bowpitt at Kingston Hill and a daughter Eileen L E Wickens was born on 26 December 1916. Perhaps a long home posting grew frustrating, or maybe anxious to join a front line regiment, William requested a transfer

out of the 2/6 East Surrey Regiment and was posted to France, where he joined the 4th Bedfordshire Regiment on the 19 September 1917.

His brief service records have no further detail of his time in France apart from reporting him as missing 24 March 1918. The 4th Bedfordshire were part of 190th Brigade, 63rd (Royal Navy) Division, and were heavily engaged in the opening phases of the German offensive (also known confusingly as the First battle of the Somme) in March 1918, specifically in the fighting around St Quentin and Bapaume. The war diaries briefly recount the punishing defiant retreat undertaken by 190th Brigade and reveal the casualty list from the 20-31 March 1918 as 21 Killed; 88 Wounded; 124 Missing. Amongst the latter was William Wickens. His wife and daughter were living at Horley, Surrey at this time and the last mention in the service records is a claim in June 1918 by Eleanor for a pension to support herself and her daughter. Mrs Eleanor Wickens never remarried and lived for some time at Stonehurst Cottage with the Wickens family. Daughter Eileen married Michael M Vinson at Bromley in 1944. Unverified research suggests that Eleanor (Ellen) Wickens died at Tonbridge in 1948.

William is also recorded on the Hadlow Down War Memorial.

**Henry Thomas Carter:** Private 9th Battalion East Surrey Regiment. Service No. 35218. Henry was killed in action 27 March 1918 aged 19 and is commemorated on the Pozieres Memorial, Somme. NE of Albert.

Henry T Carter was born 1899 at Hankham Nr Westham, Sussex to parents William (Scissor Grinder & Cutter) and Harriett. The Carters were an itinerant family and probably moved around the Sussex, Surrey, Kent area more often than other families. Little is known other than the family lived variously at Russet Common, Hambledon, Surrey; Main St, Broombat Hill, Northiam; and Brick Yard Cottage, Boreham St. Hailsham.

Henry enlisted in April 1917 at Eastbourne at which time he recorded his occupation as bakers vanman. The home address he provided was Hope Cottages (also referred to on subsequent documentation as Forge Cottages) in Five Ashes. His preferred army unit was recorded on enlistment as being for the ASC; a Corps he appears to have joined at Park Royal, Middlesex- Manning and Reserve Horse Transport Depot. His enlistment medical notes reveal that Henry was 5' 8 1/2' tall; weighed 116 lbs had scar tissue to his cheek and also a varicose vein on his left leg .....His service records curiously state that he was '*deemed to have been enlisted-Called up for Service.*' The records go on to state that 27/7/17 he was '*compulsorily transferred to the East Surrey Regiment, Tonbridge on present rate of pay.*' The Tonbridge posting seems to have been another training/reserve depot at which location he remained until posted to the BEF as a Private in January 1918 joining the 7th Battalion ESR on 15/1/18 and later being posted to the 9th Battalion ESR 12/2/18.

His death is recorded as killed in action/missing between 21/26 March 1918. This somewhat vague record of his fate is partly explained by the 9th Battalion war diaries which provide a glimpse of the ferocious and desperate fighting that occurred between the 21 and 26 March 1918. The original war diary for March 1918 was lost during the fighting that month and had to be rewritten 'in bulk', as the diary states. A précis of the rewritten diary 21/26 March is as follows:

*21/3/18 VERMAND: The preliminary bombardment by the enemy opened at 4.30 AM; transport lines were hit. Men & horses killed. 07.30 signallers hut hit 2 killed 6 wounded. CO killed by snipers bullet in the head. Enemy aeroplanes very active, low flying.*

*22/3/18 VILLECHOLLES: Considerable artillery activity on both sides. Heavy barrage on front line which then crept onto support/reserve lines. Battalion ordered to withdraw as both flanks giving way. Battalion reassembled and moved into support at MONCHY LA GACHE in newly dug battle positions.*

*23/3/18 Battalion retired to cross River Somme. Retirement carried out in conjunction with other units in leap frog formation. Battalion last to cross river, before crossing point blown up, with the*

*exception of D Coy who could not get across in time. Only 25 managed to cross, the remainder stay, put up good fight delaying enemy advance. Night spent in open trenches at LICOURT.*

*24/25/3/18 LICOURT/HATTENCOURT Battalion withdrew to FONCHES; contact with enemy caused many enemy casualties. 8th RWK on left. Battalion reinforced by 150 Other Ranks. Overnight enemy shell fire terrific, many casualties sustained.*

*26/3/18 FONCHES Battalion withdrew to old enemy front line evacuated by Germans in 1916. Right flank withdrawn and reports of trench 30 yards immediately to front full of the enemy. Good deal of MG fire, many casualties in the enemy ranks. At 8.30 AM enemy launched violent attack along front. Battalion garrisoning (sic) front of 1400 yards, enemy beaten off again and again causing very heavy casualties in enemy ranks. Battalion determined to hold on at all costs, no withdrawal. Right and Left flank crumble. Defensive flanks formed and enemy held back against terrific odds. Battalion continued great stand against overwhelming numbers, every officer and man fighting to the last until completely surrounded. Only three officers and approx 30 men succeeded in getting away. The Battalion held up enemies advance for over an hour whilst inflicting very heavy casualties.*

*26 March-8 April remnants of Battalion attached to 8 RWK. Battalion Casualties in March: Officers: Killed x 3: Wounded x 9: Missing x 13. Other Ranks: Killed 23: Wounded 152: Missing x 215*

Somewhere/time amongst this confused violent fighting Henry Carter was killed, details unknown, his body never recovered.

Henry is also commemorated on the Hadlow Down War memorial.

*Image 1, Kent & Sussex Courier, April 5th 1918, p.3*

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