

## MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 32 - NOVEMBER 2016

Late autumn witnessed the final actions of the Somme offensive as the weather closed in all along the Western Front. During November several attacks were undertaken in an attempt to consolidate advances/gains made since July and to placate criticism from politicians. The major British attack was to the north east of Albert and became known as the Battle of the Ancre. The capture of Beaumont Hamel signalled the final acts of the British offensive on the Somme for 1916. Whilst some of the first day (1st July) territorial objectives had still not been realised, nevertheless the cumulative detrimental effect on enemy resources, of both men and material, should not be underestimated. The casualty figures make for horrific numbers: the British suffering some 400,000; the French 200,000; and the Germans 500,000. The Germans would eventually withdraw to fresh lines of defence as will be revealed in 1917. Meanwhile the allied appetite for confronting the German army showed little signs of diminishing as high level talks/plans for action in 1917 continued. The French C-I-C also gave his permission for a final offensive at Verdun, where the German plan to force France out of the war had failed.

In the Balkans French and Serbian forces recaptured Monastir from its Bulgarian/German occupiers whilst in Rumania German forces closed in on Bucharest. The Allies were only too aware that the defeat of Rumania would allow the Central Powers direct access/control of the Rumanian oilfields.

On the home front London was attacked in broad daylight by German aircraft . One aircraft dropped a small number of bombs on Central London, wounding 10 people. The Royal Navy looked to new leadership when Admiral Sir David Beatty replaced Admiral Sir John Jellicoe as Commander of the Home Fleet.

The Government issued an order with regard to conscientious objectors which dealt with a matter which the soldiers at the front had felt to be a great injustice. The civil employment of a conscientious objector must in future be at a wage not higher than the pay and allowance of the private soldier.

The Uckfield Tribunal was again in session as reported by the K&SC and included local individuals claiming exemption from military service. Amongst the local men was W Blackman, a farmer from Frog Hole Farm, Five Ashes who was granted exemption until 31st December 1916. P Skinner, a single man aged 24, who ran a fishmongers business in Mayfield and was living with his mother was also given exemption until 31 December 1916. Messrs Sprot & Son of Crowborough asked to retain the services of their Clerk C W Cornford of West St Mayfield. A representative of the firm said they had tried to get a substitute without success. Exemption granted until 31 December 1916 - not renewable.

The K&SC also reported that *"At the Mayfield Parish Church on Thursday [9th November ?] a memorial service was held for all in the parish who had fallen during the war. At the conclusion of the service the "Dead March" in "Saul" was rendered on the organ, at which Mr Joy presided. At the main entrance to the church the Roll of Honour was displayed, draped with the Union jack, against which were placed wreaths of laurels and white lilies. the names of those who have lost their lives were:*

*Alfred Berry, Frank Heasman, John H. Langley, C. John Coker, C.G. Gordon Bayly, Leslie Jarvis, Russell Simmons, Frank Gutsell, F. H. Lowder, Herbert Jones, Frank Skinner, Frank Wheatley, Basil Paine, Alfred Ashdown, Elam Cornford, Joseph Watson, Ralph Grant, Frederick C. Akehurst, Owen F. Axell, Charles H. Pettitt, Charles Cosham, H. Maskell and W. Smith."*

Whilst the 1916 Roll of Honour commemorated the names of 23 men, it is interesting to note in passing that we have commemorated 39 men who died up until the end of November 1916 and who we have established had some link to Mayfield and Five Ashes.



The K&SC carried a photograph of Private Henry Hall of the Royal Fusiliers, son of Mrs S Hall of West St Mayfield. Private Hall was wounded in the arm and leg and was now in hospital in Exeter and progressing favourably.

*Photo 1, Kent & Sussex Courier, November 3rd 1916, p.3*



The K&SC also carried a photo of Private Alfred Osman, Royal Sussex Regiment; son of Mr Osman, Colkins Mills.

In a letter Private Osman writes 'I was just getting well up to the German lines when I had a bullet through the left hand but I don't think it will bring me to Blighty. The Germans say the war will be over by Christmas, and I hope they are right. I have had just eight months in the firing line now and think it time I had a bit of a rest. I think we had a fine catch of Germans on the day I got wounded; they don't appear very anxious to fight. The worst of it is the artillery is so heavy and it is a treat to get away from the sound of the guns for a while and to see a house with a light in a window and also civilians. I think I saw the first one on Friday for about 3 months.'

*Photo 2, Kent & Sussex Courier, November 10th 1916, p.3*

There are two names recorded for November on the War Memorials of Mayfield and Five Ashes. Both men died in November, but as a consequence of battles at opposite ends of the Somme offensive.



**Private William Alfred Rebbeck.** 2nd Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment. Service No G/8245. Known to his family/friends as Alfred, he died aged 19 on the 14 November 1916 at Chatham Military Hospital from wounds sustained on the 2nd July 1916.

He was the eldest of seven children of William and Ellen, (nee Allchin) the whole family all born and raised in Mayfield. William was a journeyman butcher in his early married life although by 1911 circumstances had changed and he was working as a general labourer. For much of this time they lived at Back Lane, Mayfield. Alfred was baptised at St Dunstons on the 2nd May 1897 and is next recorded in the 1911 census at the age of 14 working as a domestic gardener.

*Photo 3 Kent & Sussex Courier, November 24th 1916, p.3*

Alfred's military service records have survived in part, although badly burned and scorched. He enlisted in the RSR on 13 November 1915 and became one of the many trained to form Kitcheners new army. He embarked for France on the 4th May 1916 and took part in the early fighting along the Somme in July 1916. On the 2nd July he was badly wounded by gunshot fire in both his left and right thighs and sent back to England where he was cared for at the Military Hospital Chatham. Within days the family were alerted by telegram that Alfred was 'dangerously' wounded and his mother was reported to have visited him shortly after his arrival back in England.

The charred/scorched remnants of some hospital medical notes reveal a sad, upsetting and bleak 4 months spent in hospital, where, despite the best efforts of the medical staff, Alfred died on the 14 November 1916. One year and one day after he had enlisted. He is one of the few fallen Mayfield men buried in St Dunstons

churchyard and particularly poignant when viewed alongside his baptism at the same church some 19 years earlier.

The K&SC 24/11/16 p3 reported '*On Saturday the funeral of the late Private Alfred Rebbeck RSR and eldest son of Mr & Mrs W Rebbeck of South St took place at Mayfield Churchyard. The deceased died of wounds in Chatham Military Hospital on the Monday previous at the age of 19 years. The coffin which was covered by a Union Jack and lovely flowers was borne by four members of the local Voluntary Training Corp. The wounded soldiers of the local VAD Hospital were present and saluted as the coffin passed. The way from the High St to the Church door was lined with the members of the VTC and men of the Royal Defence Corps at Mayfield.....there were many floral tributes*'

**Private John Thurlow.** 8th Battalion East Surrey Regiment. Service No G/28173. John was killed in action at the age of 30 on the 19 November 1916 fighting in the 'Battle of The Ancre' in what must have been one of the final actions of the Somme offensive.

John and his sister Maude were the surviving children from five, both born at Kingswood, Reigate, Surrey to parents John H and Ellen E (nee West). John H & Ellen were born in Suffolk and via Surrey had arrived in the Mayfield area sometime in the 1890s. In 1901 they were living at Merryweathers, Mayfield and by 1911 were residing at May Cottage, Fletching St, Mayfield. John H was a farm carter/stockman and whilst his son John had worked on a farm, by 1911 is recorded as a market gardener. John Thurlow's military service records have not survived and the WWI medal index records his name as George R Thurlow for reasons unknown.

No direct reference to his death has been found in local newspapers, although his name is mentioned in 1918/19 in relation to the Mayfield Roll of Honour. Curiously on each occasion he is mentioned as 'missing'. However, The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records his burial at Regina Trench Cemetery, Grandcourt, France and show his grave as II.C.29.

The War Diaries of the 8th East Surrey Regiment throw some light on the 18/19th November and provide an insight into the possible circumstances of how and where John Thurlow lost his life. This brief extract indicates the conditions under which an attack on DESIRE TRENCH in the vicinity of Grandcourt commenced: '

*Battle positions were taken up with the 38th Canadians on the right and the 7th Royal West Kent on the left. There was a thick mist hanging over the ground and a heavy sleet falling, and the greatest difficulty was experienced in keeping in touch and in avoiding running into our own barrage. This difficulty was greatly increased by the Canadian attack losing direction and taking up about 100 yards of our front. These difficulties were however, surmounted and the objective was reached at about 6.40 a.m. and at 6.50 a.m. they were consolidating 150 yards beyond their objective."*

The diaries record the varied action throughout the day with great difficulty in keeping telephonic communications open and concludes after several days fighting with the casualty figures of Officers: Killed 1; Wounded 3; Missing 2. OR Killed 12; Wounded 94; Missing 9. Amongst the latter it is thought that John Thurlow was numbered. His body at some future time must have been found as revealed above.

As far as is known John's parents and married sister continued to live in the Mayfield area after the end of the war. Unusually, local newspapers have revealed that John's father died on the 24 Nov 1925 aged 71 and his mother died 10 June 1936 aged 79.

*Photo 1, Kent & Sussex Courier, November 3rd 1916, p.3*

<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000483/19161103/009/0003>

*Photo 2, Kent & Sussex Courier, November 10th 1916, p.3*

<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000483/19161110/006/0003>

*Photo 3 Kent & Sussex Courier, November 24th 1916, p.3*

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