

# HERBERT BOYLETT

**Pte. 703129, C Coy. 1/23rd Battalion, London Regiment**

**Died at 5.30 p.m. on Thursday, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1917, Taunton & Somerset  
Hospital**

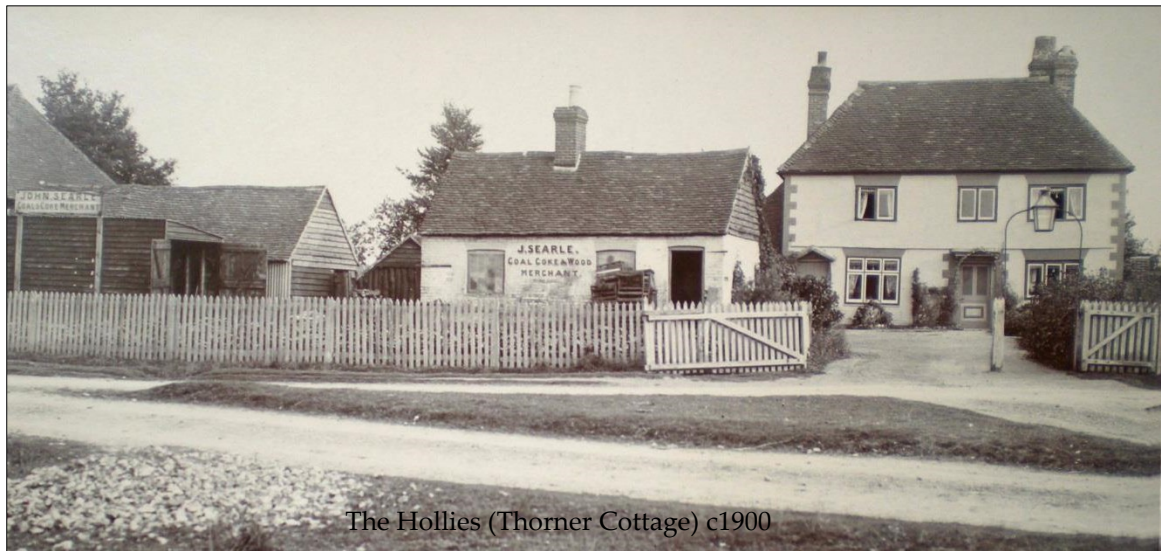
Raising nine children on a labourer's wage in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was difficult enough. Baby Herbert, the youngest of Henry Boylett's children, was just six months old when his father died, aged just forty-six, in February 1892, leaving mother Mary with a mighty struggle to bring up her family. The eldest boy, William, then thirteen, like Herbert destined to die in the Great War, had left school the previous year to become a labourer and Henry, the next in line, also had to leave school two months after his father's death, so at least there would then have been two meagre wages to support the family, but nevertheless times would have been hard.

The family had been living in Church Lane, but by the time Herbert went to school in 1896 (less than four years old) they had moved to no. 4 Henry Cottages, opposite the pond, now the left hand half of the Parish Shop. School was probably a trial, as he had not reached even Standard 1 by the time he moved to the Mixed Department under headmaster W.W. Frost in 1899, so it must



have been something of a relief for him to leave in 1905 and start earning a wage. Just two years later, in October 1907, his mother Mary died at the Royal Surrey County Hospital and was buried in Pirbright churchyard on the 30<sup>th</sup>, the family, like many others, too poor to afford a headstone.

Three of the Boylett family and a lodger were still living at 4 Henry Cottages in 1911. Henry, the second oldest son, aged 31, had become a railway platelayer with the London & South Western Railway; Mabel, ten years younger, was acting as housekeeper and the 19-year-old Herbert was now a coalman. He was working for William Harwood, of Lavender Cottage who, with his brother Joseph (another WW1 casualty, who lived next door at Myrtle Cottage), had taken over the coalyard and carriers next to what is now Thorner Cottage (*photo next page*) after the untimely death of John Searle in 1907. By this time, the cutting and burning of peat had almost entirely died out, so it would be a steady job for Herbert to collect coal from Brookwood station yard and deliver it round the village.



The Hollies (Thorner Cottage) c1900

On July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1915, Herbert Boylett took the King's Shilling by enlisting at Guildford in the Queens (Royal West Surrey Regiment), known irreverently from the lamb and flag cap badge as the Mutton Lancers. Luckily, his Service Record has survived a Second World War incendiary, so there is a wealth of detail about his military service. He was described as a 23-year-old coal merchant, 5ft 5ins tall, 38 inch chest, with good vision and in good physical health. His address was given as Cemetery Cottage, Brookwood and next of kin his brother William, of The Gardens, Pirbright, who enlisted later that year and was to die as a prisoner of war in December 1916 (see Volume I).

Given Herbert's good health, it was a mystery that he was not sent straight to the Western Front. Instead, he joined the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Queens, one of the home defence units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Home Counties Division. Initial orders were to form the Division in the Windsor area, but by the time he joined the Battalion on August 8<sup>th</sup> it had moved to Tunbridge Wells. Along with other second line Divisions, it suffered from lack of equipment of all sorts, being issued with Japanese rifles, unlike the Lee-Enfields of front-line troops. Not until late November, by which time the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Queens had moved to Reigate, where they remained for the rest of the winter and spring 1916, did modern rifles and ammunition arrive.

After what must have been something of a whirlwind three-month courtship, on November 15<sup>th</sup> 1915 Herbert Boylett married Elsie Kate Rice, a postman's daughter, at St. Swithun's Church, East Grinstead. Elsie remained there at 114 Queens Road with her parents, but two weeks later, Herbert had a fortnight in Redhill Hospital with influenza.

At the end of June that year, the Brigade, with the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Queens, marched the 15 miles to Wildernes Camp, near Sevenoaks and six weeks later, in stages, to a camp at Westbere, between Canterbury and Margate. Early the following month, the Brigade was formed into an emergency force in case of invasion, but by now urgent messages were coming from the Somme for reinforcements to replace the enormous losses in the 'Big Push' on July 1<sup>st</sup> and subsequent battles. The war was now to start in earnest for Herbert Boylett. On August 31<sup>st</sup>, he was sent with a draft to join the 1/23<sup>rd</sup> Londons, a Territorial Battalion which had been on the Western Front since the spring of 1915 as part of the 47<sup>th</sup> (2<sup>nd</sup> London) Division and which had already taken a mauling in May 1916 during a German offensive at Vimy Ridge, near Ypres.

At the time of his joining, the Battalion was camped at Lahoussoye, near Amiens, some 15 miles behind the front line, close enough to hear the sound of gunfire. It would not be long before Herbert saw action. After some intensive training, the Battalion marched east to Albert on September 11<sup>th</sup>,



past the 'Leaning Virgin', superstitiously believed to herald war's end when she fell, then through the skeleton of Mametz Wood to the trenches near the virtually obliterated village of Bazentin-le-Grand in reserve for an imminent attack. The objective would be High Wood, called 'the rottenest place on the Western Front', in one of the so-called 'September Offensives', designed to tidy up the line.



Albert Basilica, with Leaning Virgin



Mametz Wood

The 47<sup>th</sup> Division went over the top on September 15<sup>th</sup>. It was a costly failure. At 9.25 a.m. the next day, called forward from reserve, the 1/23<sup>rd</sup> Londons attacked east of High Wood. In any attack, it was normal for only three of the four Companies in a Battalion to take part, the fourth being kept back as a nucleus in case of heavy casualties. Herbert, in B Company, was in this reserve. Most of A, C and D Companies never returned.



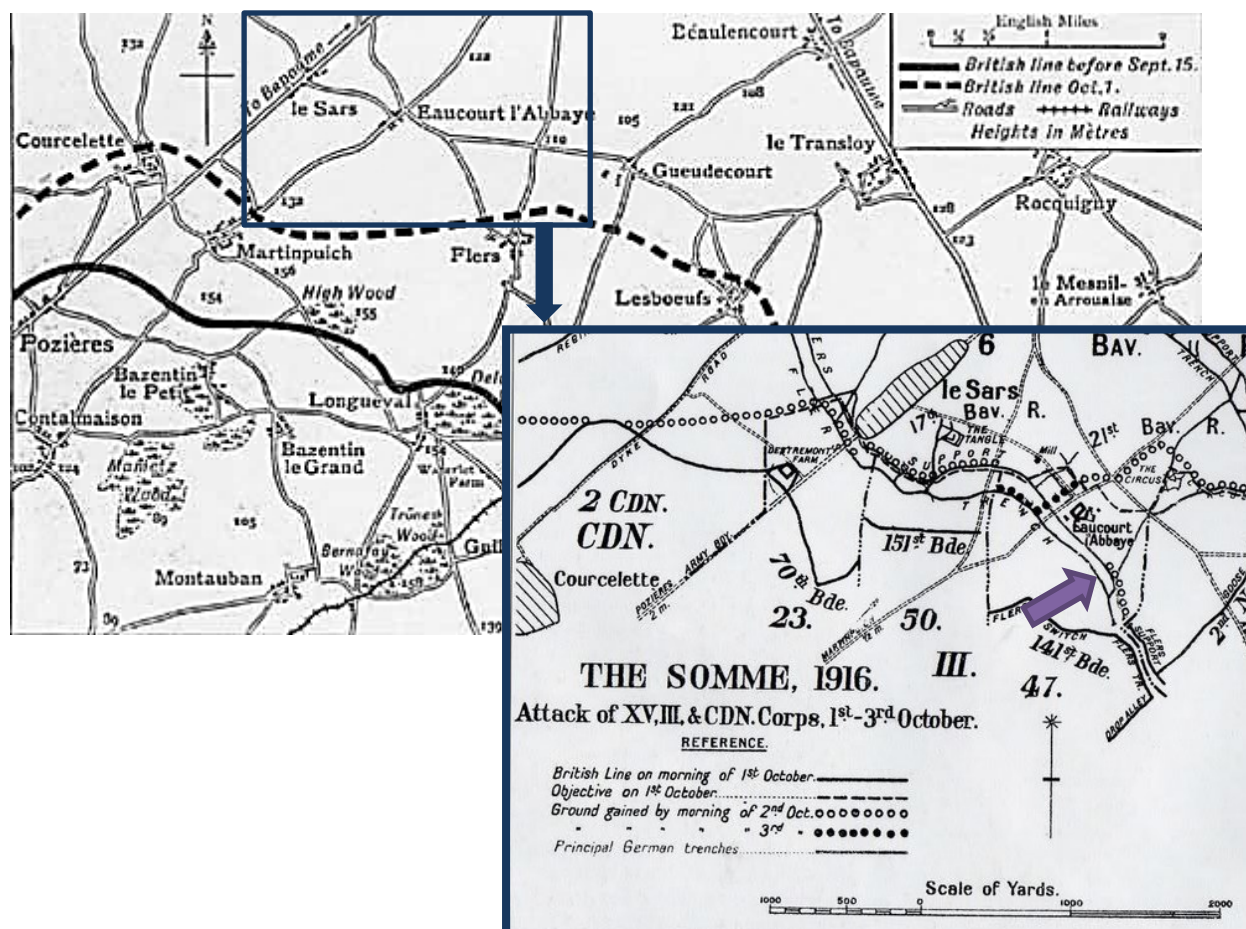
Two days later, the remnants of the Battalion, with the 1/24<sup>th</sup> Londons, attacked the Starfish Line and met heavy fire from the north-east corner of High Wood, but managed to take the objective. Predictably, Fritz counter-attacked and forced a withdrawal of 100 yards with hand-to-hand fighting until dusk. With 580 casualties, over half its strength, the decimated Battalion made its way back to



Black Wood, just outside Albert. This photos below show the remains of High Wood not long afterwards and the memorial to the 47<sup>th</sup> Division in 1919.



After two days to reorganise came a march to Millencourt, three miles west of Albert, to await reinforcements. There would be no time to rebuild properly. Capt. Clark, historian of the Post Office Rifles, noted: 'Only a week was allowed for the partial restoration of the battalion.....the men forming the new drafts were keen, but untrained in the very special methods the Somme fighting entailed'. On October 1st it was a tortuous trudge in the dark back through the maze of trenches to near Eaucourt l'Abbaye, about half a mile northeast of High Wood.





The attack in which they were to take part, along with other units of the 47<sup>th</sup> Division, would be one of a long series of actions known as the Battle of the Transloy Ridges, a series on the bloody Somme designed to straighten the front line, but at predictably high cost. These are extracts from the 1/23<sup>rd</sup> London's War Diary for October 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>:

*"....at 11 p.m. warning order received to reinforce 141<sup>st</sup> Inf Bde through Eaucourt l'Abbaye at dawn. Final orders received and dictated at 4 a.m. and after delay owing to congestion in trenches, advance was made from OBI in 4 attacking waves at 6.45 a.m.... The attack was held up by heavy machine gun fire..... Battalion withdrew at dusk.....and later was ordered to move back to High Wood.....Casualties 5 killed, 83 wounded and 75 missing"*



left: Battlefield at Eaucourt l'Abbaye  
with shrapnel burst  
below: Trenches nearby at Flers



From his service record, we know that Herbert Boylett was wounded in the abdomen on October 2<sup>nd</sup> and was probably lying in no-mans-land for two or three days, as he is not recorded being at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Field Ambulance until October 5<sup>th</sup>. His wound must have been a severe one, as he was not evacuated to England until more than a month later, on November 8<sup>th</sup>. He had been with his battalion for just 36 days before being wounded and in France just over two months.



His destination was the Taunton and Somerset Hospital, where he lingered, no doubt in considerable pain, until April 12<sup>th</sup> the next year. Primary cause of death on one Army form was given as enlargement of the heart and on another as his deep gunshot wound, but he also had tubercular lungs and emphysema, so he had clearly been in very poor health for many months. Wife Elsie Kate would have come from East Grinstead to visit him and would have seen him buried at the Old Cemetery there, near where they were married two and a half years before. Six months after Herbert's death, she would be awarded the widow's pension of 13/9d per week (£188 today). The couple had no children. She never remarried and died in East Sussex in 1960, aged 68.