



WILLIAM BOYLETT

Pte. G/23504, 2nd Battalion, Duke of Cambridge's Own, Middlesex Regiment

Died on Sunday, 24th December 1916, a prisoner of war

Lawfords Farm used to lie a few hundred yards east of Heath Mill, just into Woking parish. It was in a cottage there that William Boylett was born on September 17th 1877. His parents, Henry, a farm labourer and Mary, also born a Boylett, were cousins who had married at St John's Church almost two years before. William's older sister, Clara Kate, was the first of their six daughters. He was the oldest of three brothers and went first to Perry Hill School from 1883 to 1888, then to Pirbright School when the family moved to Pirbright Green, their address at the time of the 1891 census.



Five months later, Herbert, the last child (who was also to die in WW1) was born, but tragedy would strike less than six months afterwards with the death of his father, Henry. Life would suddenly become very difficult for Mary. William, now a general labourer, just fourteen, was the only breadwinner and although his sister Clara went to live with her uncle and aunt, Edward and Maria Mason at Fords Farm, their mother still had eight hungry mouths to feed, so no doubt she would have had to fall back on the widow's

expedients, laundry or sewing. Cope she must have, though; in the 1901 census she was living at 4 Henry Cottages (now the left half of the Parish Shop) with William and his younger brother Henry, both bricklayers' labourers and their four younger siblings, who were still at school. By this time, daughter Clara had married James Roberts, the broom-squire's son and Fanny was in service with Ferdinand Ball, one of Lord Pirbright's builders at Holly Grange, The Gardens. Mother Mary Boylett died in 1907 at the Royal Surrey County Hospital, aged 55, and was buried at Pirbright alongside her husband on October 30th. By this time, all the children were either married or wage-earners and Henry, Mabel and Herbert, the youngest, were all living at 4 Henry Cottages in the 1911 census. William may have been

courting at the time of his mother's death, as he married in April 1908. His bride was Emily Jane Alexander White, probably born illegitimately in 1880 (there is no father shown on Pirbright marriage register) to her mother, Emily Alexander, before she married Alfred Inkerman White, a cabman, who came from Stoughton to live at Pembroke Villa, at the Cemetery end of Pirbright Gardens in



who would probably be housekeeping for the others. Two years later, their first and only child, William Frederick was born. (*above left c1915 with his mother*)

1892. Misfortune would strike the White family in similar fashion to the Boyletts. Alfred Inkerman died in 1894 and Emily in 1900, leaving the older children, including Emily Jane, to raise the younger ones. At the time of the 1911 census, there were four people paying the 5/- per week rent at no. 15, as it had then become; they were two Whites, Alfred junior, a 34 year-old carter and his schoolboy step-brother Arthur (who was to die in March 1918), as well as William Boylett, now a bricklayer working for John Faggetter, and wife Emily,

There is precious little information on William Boylett's war service. The newspaper article reporting his death nine months afterwards in 1917 states that he left for the front just weeks after his wife's death. This bitter blow was on July 19th 1916, which would make it likely that he enlisted voluntarily into the 2nd Battalion, Middlesex Regiment in late 1915 or early the next year rather than be mobilised under the Derby Scheme. The month of July 1916, of course, was significant for the Battle of the Somme, which had decimated the battalion. On the first day at La Boisselle, their casualties were 540, over half, with one more later, when their Commanding Officer, who had predicted disaster, committed suicide in a London hotel.

After this mauling, the 2nd Middlesex, part of 8th Division, were withdrawn north to the Loos sector. No rest cure this, with episodes of gas, casualties from raiding parties and the ever-present *Minenwerfer*, the German trench mortar, known as 'Moaning Minnie'. It was here, in August or September, that William Boylett would have joined the ranks to make up for numbers lost, but by the middle of October the Battalion was back on the Somme again. Captain Alfred Bundy of the 2nd Middlesex described the state of the trenches -

"I have never seen such desolation. Mud thin, deep and black, shell holes full of water, corpses all round in every stage of decomposition.... Our trenches are little more than joined-up shell holes, mostly with 12 inches of water above 12 inches of mud. A sunken road provides the only access under cover and this is almost always under shell fire. Passed several derelict tanks on the way back to Trones Wood Camp, where we have nothing but bivouacs. Weather cold and wet. Sat in deep shell holes for shelter completely and utterly miserable"

The next few days were a countdown for an intended attack with the French on October 23rd, the purpose of which was to take German defences and establish a line on the crest of a spur

in front of what little remained of the village of Le Transloy. The attack was due to start at 11.30 a.m., but heavy mist caused a three hour postponement. The objectives, Spectrum and Zenith trenches, were successfully reached and held, but the 2nd Scottish Rifles alongside were shelled out of nearby Orion trench at nightfall. Capt. Bundy again -

"Interminable night – wet, windy and cold. Lot of shelling, but no casualties. Astonished that flesh and blood can stand this sort of thing, yet we are all quite cheery in an apathetic sort of way."

Relief took place at 11 p.m. on the 26th

"All dog tired..... Men have to help one another and yet some of the poor fellows drown. The biggest man in my company walked into a shell hole and wasn't seen again.....At Trones Wood got my Company into formation and had a roll-call, 62 missing out of 146".

'Rest' camp was a comparative improvement – only a few bell tents and tarpaulin sheets, but there was the luxury of sleep, hot food and drink, letters from home and the chance to scrape off mud, take off boots and have a bath of sorts. It could not last, of course. A week later the 2nd Middlesex were back in the Les Boeufs trenches and spent the next fortnight in and out of the line, happily now much quieter, repairing and consolidating the trenches, with the occasional patrol. The newspaper report mentioned earlier states that William Boylett was reported missing in November and afterwards a prisoner of war, so it is quite probable that he was captured on one of these patrols, as after November 19th the 8th Division was withdrawn well to the rear.

The Commonwealth War Graves entry notes that he was buried in Croisilles Cemetery, which was a puzzle, as it lies on what was at that time the British side and William, being a prisoner of war, was obviously on the German side of the lines. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission explained that he was originally interred at Hendecourt-les-Cagnicourt, about five miles to the east and exhumed and reburied after 1918, after the Allied advance.



Left – Croisilles Cemetery 1919. Right - William Boylett's grave



The William Boylett story had a happier sequel. Orphaned son William Frederick went to Brookwood School in 1918 under the guardianship of Mrs Hill, of the Brookwood Bakery, married Iris Annie Miriam Farley in 1934, lived at Brookwood and Bullswater Bungalow in Pirbright for a time before the Second World War and had four children. William Boylett now has no less than four great-grandchildren, six great-great-grandchildren and three great-great-great grandchildren.

With thanks to Ian Boylett for family and grave photos