

## BASIL FREDERICK ELLIS

**L/Cpl. 9847, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment)**

**Died of wounds on Saturday, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1914, Poperinghe, Belgium**

*"It was left to a little force of 30,000 to keep the German Army at bay... Here they clung on like grim death, with almost every man in the trenches holding... a thin, exhausted line, against which the prime of the German first-line troops were hurling themselves with fury. The odds against them were about 8 to 1.... Yet the men stood firm and defended Ypres in such a manner that a German officer... said that they were under the impression that there had been four Army Corps against them. When the Division was afterwards withdrawn from the firing line to refit, it was found that out of 400 officers who set out from England there were only 44 left, and out of 12,000 men only 2,336."*

General Rawlinson, Commander, IV Corps, B.E.F.

Less than a quarter of a mile from the enemy, hidden behind a slight rise in a Flanders field one misty November morning in 1914, Basil Ellis, one of the 900 or so men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Queens, waited in the half light of dawn for the order to advance.

Barely more than two months before, he had been standing on the quayside at Capetown waiting to embark on HMT Kenilworth Castle for the three week voyage to Southampton, one of the thousands of Regulars hurriedly recalled to England. Then came hasty re-organisation and re-equipment with the 7<sup>th</sup> Division at Lyndhurst before setting off again on October 4th for Zeebrugge.

The German Army, halted in its plan to outflank the Allies to the north by the Battles of Marne and Aisne, made a final effort in what became known as the Dash for the Coast. For a few chaotic days in early October the 2<sup>nd</sup> Queens were involved in stemming the tide. Zeebrugge to Bruges, back to Ostend on the coast, train south east to Ghent, before being forced back westwards day by day with the 7<sup>th</sup> Division some 40 miles to Ypres on October 14th.

The Ypres Salient has been likened to a half saucer, with the town in the centre. The Germans had the advantage, not only of numbers, but of holding the higher ground on the eastern edge of this saucer, thereby having a good view of the land held by the Allies to the west; able to observe all movement and to bring down fire from artillery shielded behind the ridge.



Before the stalemate of static trench warfare for the next three years, however, they flung themselves on a stubborn Allied resistance. The War Diary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Queens, written in a small notebook, records those desperate days in and out of makeshift trenches, in reserve escorting prisoners and filling gaps in the line. The three days from October 29<sup>th</sup> saw a serious German assault near Ghulevelt, about 5 miles

ESE of Ypres, culminating in a crucial action on the 31<sup>st</sup>, when the British line was broken, with 170 battalion casualties, needing some days for reorganization and rest in 'Wipers'. Even there, German shelling forced evacuation out of the town to tents nearby at Dickebusch on November 5<sup>th</sup>. The next day, 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade had a call for assistance from Lord Cavan, commanding the Guards Division at Zillebeke, 2 miles to the south east. As a result, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Queens were drawn up for attack at that misty dawn the following day.....

Basil Frederick Ellis' mother, Alice Lavinia Farrow Clarke, was born at Levington, a small Suffolk village between Ipswich and Felixstowe, the daughter of Solomon Clarke, a gardener. In a familiar pattern in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, she became a domestic servant, first at Ipswich, then moved to London and married Benjamin Ellis, a labourer, at St John's Church, Greenwich in 1887. By the time of the 1891 census, they were living in two rooms at Bedford Road, Blackheath with two daughters, Elsie, age 3 and Amy, 11 months.

Now comes a mystery. Basil Frederick Ellis was born on August 18<sup>th</sup> 1893 in the Union Workhouse at Ipswich, with no father shown on his birth certificate, which would imply he was illegitimate. Yet it appears that Benjamin Ellis was still very much alive at the time. Although uncertain, as his is a common name, he probably died early the next year in the Greenwich district. The next glimpse of the family is in the 1901 census, when Basil is an 8-year-old 'inmate' of the South Metropolitan District School in Sutton, Surrey, opened in 1852 to educate poor children from Greenwich and

Southwark. His widowed mother is housemaid to a tea merchant in South Kensington and her daughter Elsie is living with her grandparents at Levington. At some time between 1901 and 1906, Alice must have moved to Pirbright, as it was in December that year at St Michael's Church that she married a 57 year old widower, George Smith, who was then living at 3, Long Houses. Two years later, the couple moved to Manor Cottage, Mill Lane, (photo left) where George became the



Manor House Cottage with Mrs Armstrong

gardener at the Manor House for Major and Mrs Armstrong, with Alice probably helping in the house.

By 1911, Basil Ellis had become a soldier, as he appears in the census as a private in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, the Queens, at their depot in Warley, near Brentwood in Essex.



Three years later, at 6.15 a.m. on that damp and misty November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1915, near Zillebeke, came the order for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Queens to attack. In this, their first concerted charge, doubtless they felt they had a point to prove, called on for help as they were by the Guards. The only artillery support was a solitary 18-pounder, but, as the War Diary drily records: '...the assistance given was slight'. Once over the rising ground (S on the War Diary map), German machine guns opened up, mowing men down, but two lines of Queens charged the Germans, taking both C and D trenches. However, they were then exposed to the two machine guns ("A" & "B") on their left and right, firing directly into the trenches, and were also exposed by the Munster Fusiliers' slower advance on one side which was hindered by wood and

undergrowth; likewise the French on the other, who were also late in starting. The Germans now counter-attacked in strength and the Queens, with the rest of 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, were forced back with heavy casualties to their starting point by the end of the day. In D Company, Basil Ellis was probably one of the early casualties, as he died of wounds after being evacuated to Poperinghe, about nine miles to the rear, probably at one of the Casualty Clearing Stations, and was laid to rest on the edge of town at the Old Military cemetery, one of 429 identified British and Commonwealth casualties there. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Queens had been decimated. Out of a total of more than 900, just 311 men and 3 officers were left who were not killed, wounded or missing.



A Casualty Clearing Station

Alice and George Smith continued to live at Manor Cottage. Elsie Harriet Ellis, the daughter from Alice's first marriage, was probably also living there, as at Pirbright in 1919 she married Onslow Smith, an insurance broker. George Smith, her stepfather, died two years later, aged 71, and mother Alice carried on living in Mill Lane for another 25 years until 1946, when she joined her daughter at Palmers Green, dying there three years later at the age of 89.