

LEONARD ARTHUR GRACE

L/Cpl. G/2070, A Coy., 7th, The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment)

Killed in action on Thursday, 28th September 1916, Schwaben Redoubt, Thiepval

In the pretty but unremarkable North Oxfordshire village of Finmere, two doors away from the Kings Arms, on the main Buckingham to Banbury road, in a tiny terraced cottage, Leonard Arthur Grace was born in 1884.



The Kings Arms and Finmere House

His father, Henry Arthur Hickey Grace, a young gardener, had come here with his wife Susan the previous year, probably to work at Finmere House, just round the corner. The couple already had a daughter, Lilian Henrietta, born in 1882 at Bishopstoke, between Southampton

and Winchester, from where they had moved. It must have been a happy time at Finmere, as the family lived here for fourteen years and in 1892 another daughter, Eva Mary, was born there.



Ross Lewis Mangles, V.C., of Pirbright Lodge, must have been looking for a new gardener in 1897. Probably he had advertised and Henry

Grace had applied for the job. No doubt a good part of the attraction for him would have been a much bigger and more modern house, No. 2 Longhouses, beyond the Lodge at the top of Mill Lane (above).

Henry got the job and made the move in September that year, staying here for the rest of his long life, tending the large garden at the Lodge for Mr Mangles until his death in 1904 and his widow Henriette's in 1918, finally working for General Sir Arthur Smith during the '30s.



Pirbright Lodge in 1920
& Ross Mangles V.C.

What of young Leonard? His name is recorded on Pirbright School Admission Book as entering on September 19th 1897, the same day as his younger sister Eva, but there is no leaving date, suggesting that at almost fourteen (the leaving age) he never attended. In the 1901 census he was a grocer's assistant, maybe on the Green at Briant's, Searle's or Boylett's and living at home, but by 1904, when he was confirmed, he was a gardener's boy at the Lodge and at the time of the 1911 census a 27-year-old gardener, still living at Longhouses.

On September 4th 1914, shortly after the outbreak of war, Leonard enlisted in the 7th Queens at Guildford. The previous month a Woking lad, Clarric Jarman, also joined the 7th. He was badly wounded on the Somme, survived the war and later recorded his memories, so there is a first-hand view of their lives in the battalion. They were under canvas at Purfleet, Essex until January 1915, when huts were built. While there, Leonard must have been granted compassionate leave, as he married Mabel Gertrude Beatrice Trower, a coal merchant's daughter, at Horsell on December 12th. In April the Battalion moved to Colchester for a week's manoeuvres, covering 150 miles, then had to march straight back to Colchester from Ipswich. At the end of that month the 18th Division moved to Codford St. Mary, near Salisbury Plain for more manoeuvres and rifle practice before the real war started for them at the end of June with a journey to Dernancourt, on the Somme. Here are Clarric's recollections of the next few months –

"We took over a section of the line from the 1/Norfolks, with Albert behind us and Fricourt, held by the Germans, in front of us. At first to hear the bullets whizzing by and shells whining over us made us duck, but we soon got used to it and treated this with contempt... During the rest of 1915 and all through the winter we remained on this front between La Boisselle and Suzanne on the right of the British line, linking up with the French. The conditions during the winter months were pretty grim, snow at Christmas with rain and freezing cold. The trenches became thick with mud and we were often up to our knees in water, which was miserable, to say the least."



Somme mud. Trench at Beaumont Hamel 1916



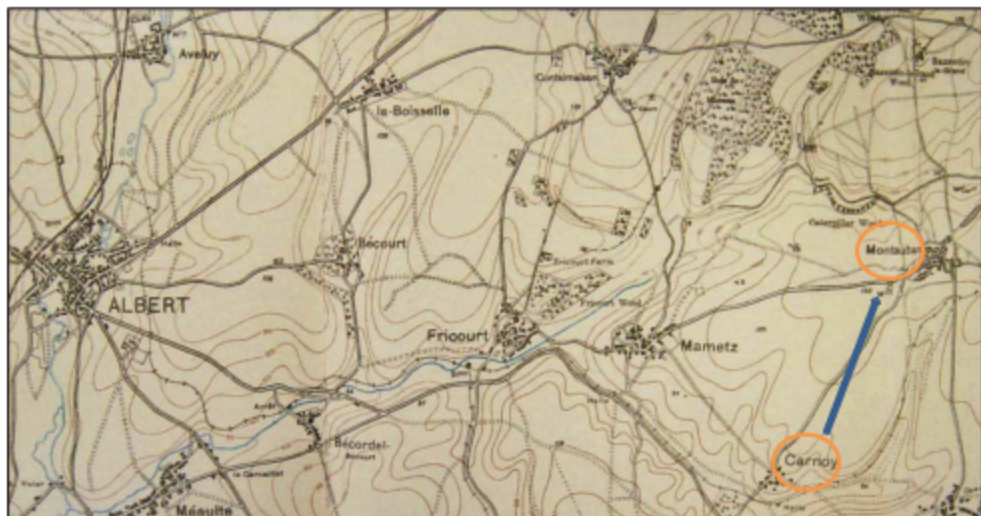
Bath time

Through the turn and turn about system, not all time was spent in the front line-

"When out of the line, our time was fully occupied. First we had to clean the mud off uniforms and boots and clean buttons, rifles and boots. We had to parade for a bath and change of underwear. The bath house was usually in some old barn and we had to bath in tubs. Our clothing after being in the line was pretty lousy. In fact, we were hardly ever free from lice... In old barns we had to sleep on lice-infested straw and the rats just ran over us...."

Other duties when out of the line consisted of parades, route marches, physical jerks and often we worked with the REs making up roads, laying railway tracks and water mains, hence the saying:

*The bees do the work and the bees make the honey,
But the Queens do the work and the REs draw the money"*
(Royal Engineers were paid more than the Poor Bloody Infantry)

The Somme area & the 7th Queens' attack

After two weeks rest, the 7th Queens went up the line again to Suzanne in preparation for that fateful day, July 1st, the first day of Battle of the Somme. For ten June days Allied artillery pounded the German lines day and night in what turned out to be a fruitless attempt to annihilate them. On Thursday, June 29th the battalion took up position in the assembly trenches, only to be told the attack had been postponed for 48 rainy hours before zero hour, 7.30 a.m. on Saturday. Clarrie again-

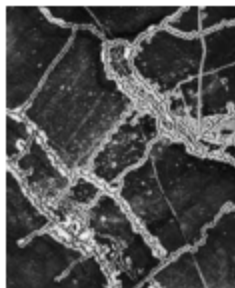
"The weather had turned fine and warm, the trench ladders were in place and, on the blast of whistles and after wishing our chums the best of luck, over the top we went, expecting, as we had been told, just a walkover.... We actually went over the top at Carnoy and our objective was Montauban (see map previous page) The Germans.... came at us with what must have been hundreds of machine guns, coupled with artillery fire and just mowed us down. On top of this our own field guns were for the first time using what was called a creeping barrage, firing over the top of us and a great many of our lads must have been killed or wounded by our own shells. Instead of a walkover it was a complete slaughter."

Clarrie himself was badly wounded in the leg and by good fortune rescued from no-mans land the next day. His leg was subsequently amputated, but he lived to tell his tale. Leonard Grace survived this battle, with over half the battalion, 532, as casualties.



The caption for this photo from the Queen's History reads - 'Men of the 7th Battalion after reaching their objective on the Montauban - Mametz Road on the first day of the Battle of the Somme 1916'

A fortnight later, they were involved in more fighting with the 55th Brigade in an unsuccessful attempt to retake Trones Wood, fiercely contested, the ground changing hands a number of times, before being sent for a week's rest to Grovetown Camp and Fletre, both well to the rear.



Early in August, the 18th Division, with the reinforced 7th Queens, moved to a quiet training area near Armentieres. This came to an end on September 28th with another move to Puchvillers in preparation for an assault on Thiepval and the Schwaben Reoubt. From early 1915 the Germans had been fortifying the higher ground on the Somme for protection and artillery observation of the lower ground to the west. This included a number of formidable strongpoints with deep dugouts and lines of trenches in front and rear.

Aerial view of the Schwaben Redoubt, top right (IWM)

Soon after noon on September 28th, the attack began. A Company, with Lance Corporal Grace, was in reserve, to be brought up later. Things went well to start with, but the nearer the Tommies came to the Redoubt, the stiffer the opposition, with machine guns versus bombs (hand grenades) and by nightfall the next day, when the 7th Queens were relieved, the Redoubt was still in German hands, not to be finally taken until October 5th. Although in reserve, Leonard Arthur was one of the missing on the 28th, possibly hit by shellfire. In all, 495 of the battalion, almost half, were killed, wounded or missing, token of the intensity of the fighting and almost as many as on that first bloody day of the Somme.



The Schwaben Redoubt (centre, just below the skyline) under shellfire in July 1916. (IWM)



Although they may have been half expecting the news, the death of their only son must have come as a terrible shock to father Henry, mother Susan and his sisters. Lilian, the elder, had married Horace Daniels, a railway porter, at Pirbright in 1909, and was living at Brookwood in 1911. Eva Mary never married and stayed with her parents until her father died in 1934 at the age of 77, then moved to Barnhurst, at Stanford. Their mother, Susan, also had to move from Longhouses after her husband's death, to 236 Connaught Road, Brookwood, where she died in November 1939, aged 86. Both she and Henry are buried together with a headstone in Pirbright churchyard, not far from Stanley's grave.

The dreaded buff telegram would have been just as heavy a blow for Leonard's wife, Mabel, who had given birth to a daughter Evelyn Joan not a month before. From the scanty records we have, it seems that she was living at Bramley at the time and moved later to St George's Avenue in Farnham. Daughter Evelyn Joan married Ronald Squire in Surrey in 1952. The couple do not appear to have had any children and moved at some later date to North Devon where they both died, Evelyn in 2000 at 83, Ronald two years later at 86. Mabel Gertrude Beatrice Grace, Leonard's widow, died at Bideford in 1956.

Leonard Arthur Grace is another Pirbrighter who is remembered on the majestic memorial of Thiepval, near the spot where he fell ninety-six years ago.