



## JOHN ALBERT IRELAN

Private 8600, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Highland Light Infantry

Killed in action on Wednesday, 20th September 1914, Aisne, France

John Irelan's connection with Pirbright would have been through his parents, George Albert and Harriet, who came to live at Fairmead, the left half of a semi-detached house at the Bullswater end of Rowe Lane, in about 1909 from Holland Park, West London. George Albert Irelan was a carpenter and joiner up till then, and may have come to Pirbright to better himself, as he describes himself as a 'builders hacman' in 1911 and later as a builder's foreman. No doubt John Albert came visiting his parents, but there are no records of him actually living here. Born at Notting Hill in 1886, like his four brothers and one sister, he is described as a 14 year old stonemason in 1901, but must have changed his occupation to horsekeeper in June 1903, which was his description when he signed on for three years in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Highland Light Infantry.



Maryhill Barracks

Luckily, his service record has survived and we have an interesting picture of his travels. He was a small lad for sixteen – 5' 6" tall and just 8 stone, with fair hair, blue eyes and two tattoos. Posted initially to Maryhill Barracks, Hamilton, by the end of August 1903 he was in Jersey, 'wilfully damaging government property', the first of a number of minor misdemeanours – 'dirty on parade', 'slovenly in town', 'exchanging guard duties without permission'. Four months later came ten days in hospital with a dose of clap caught in Cairo and in April 1905 he was thrown from his horse at Bulford Camp, Wiltshire. Despite 'having a dirty greatcoat' in January 1906, he still had a Good Conduct badge on his

discharge in June 1906 and the list of duties on which he was employed included spells as Sergeants' Mess Cook, Officer's Groom and three months in the armoury.



Genevieve Bertieri



Royal Crescent, Notting Hill

At the time of his discharge his home address was given as 7, St Anne's Villas, Royal Crescent, Notting Hill, where his parents were still living, and his papers state he was intending to become a 'timekeeper'. If so, this occupation did not last, as the 1911 census finds him in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, as cook to an Italian painter, Pilade Bertieri; both a fashionable address and a fashionable portrait painter, reputedly second only to Sir John Lavery. This elegant portrait of his from 1912 is of Genevieve, his Paris-born American wife, thirteen years his junior. Her brother was there at the time of the census, with a maid and a Swiss butler.

John Albert Irelan's Service Record notes that he was mobilised at Hamilton on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914, the day after the outbreak of war, when he joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Highland Light Infantry. On the 13<sup>th</sup>, the battalion embarked on S.S. Lake Michigan, arriving at Boulogne the next day and marching to a rest camp. The next month was spent in much the same frantic activity as Robert Wood with the Grenadiers (*see his previous biography*), and ending on the same battlefield. After a long train journey to Wasigny, near Reims, the relentless marching and fighting started, some 200 miles in all, a rearguard action against an overwhelming German Army during those hot summer days, before the decisive Battle of the River Marne forced the



Aisne trench

by now exhausted enemy back northwards to the River Aisne, where they dug in above the steep north bank of the river. The Regimental War Diary records on September 12<sup>th</sup> that it was now 'very wet'. Next day the battalion, though shelled when crossing the Aisne river at Pont d'Arcy, took up positions outside the village of Vernueil (*see map below*),

where they drove back an attack and advanced half a mile before, exposed on both flanks, they had to retire to the village under heavy shelling.

Then began the bloody trench warfare which was to last on different battlefields on the Western Front throughout the war; attack, counter-attack, sniping, raiding parties and constant shelling (on the Aisne the Germans had superiority, particularly in trench mortars).



On September 20<sup>th</sup>, the War Diary records –

*'Heavy rifle fire at 6.00 a.m. Attack repulsed. Germans noticed to be entrenching themselves about 300 yards from our advanced trenches. 2 platoons under Lt. Lilburn ('B' company) with two companies of Worcester Regiment made a gallant, but unsuccessful attack on German trenches. Missing:- 15 NCOs and men'*

This was the day that John Albert Irelan was posted missing, so it was probably in this attack that he was killed, but his body was never found. As a quirk of fate, this battle was the point at which three of the Pirbright War Memorial names come together, even though none was born in Pirbright and only two of them were likely to have known each other. John Irelan was in A Company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Highland Light Infantry. B Company was commanded by Capt. David Gausson, who was wounded on the same day that John died; he was subsequently killed near Armentieres in May the next year and had a sister-in-law living in Pirbright Gardens. Robert Wood, fighting with the Grenadiers, had died less than a week before at Soupir, the village just a mile or so to the south west of the H.L.I. (see map above). He had married a Pirbright girl.

Six weeks after John was reported wounded, his father wrote a poignant letter to Scotland (next page), asking for news of his son. There is no note of the reply, but not until January 1916 did the War Office advise the depot that he had died 'on or after September 20<sup>th</sup> 1914'.



Two of John's brothers died young. The remaining one, Alfred Charles, eight years his junior, served for 21 years in the cavalry, mercifully surviving the war. He married in 1920 and had three girls, only to die after falling from a ladder in 1933, aged 41, and is buried in Pirbright churchyard. John's older sister, Maud, had married John Henry Hill, a Grenadier Guardsman, in 1910. He also survived and the family and their three children (baptised with the surname Irelan-Hill) lived at Kiln Cottage, near Railes Farm for some years. Parents George Albert and Harriet Irelan continued to live at Fairmead, Rowe Lane until the late '20s, moving to East End Cottages, Chapel Lane, then to Holly Bank

at Swallow Corner in the mid-'30s, before Harriet died there in 1941. She is also buried in the churchyard, but with no headstone, unlike her son Alfred. George Albert himself moved to Sussex, probably to be near his daughter and died there, aged 85, in 1948.

*John Albert Irelan's name is recorded, along with Robert Wood's, many miles away from his death, on the memorial at La Ferte sous Jouarre, together with 3,888 officers and other ranks who came to France in August 1914 and died at Mons, Le Cateau, on the Marne or the Aisne and have no known grave.*

