

Private 10981, 2nd Battalion, East Surrey Regiment

Killed in action on Monday, 27th September 1915, Loos, Belgium

Thomas Larby's father, also a Thomas, was born at Worplesdon in 1861 and married Elizabeth Maria Heather in 1883. The couple, who had six children, appear to have moved around, as Albert William, the oldest, was born at West Horsley; Annie Elizabeth, James Edmund and Jenny probably at Worplesdon before the family moved to Dartford from about



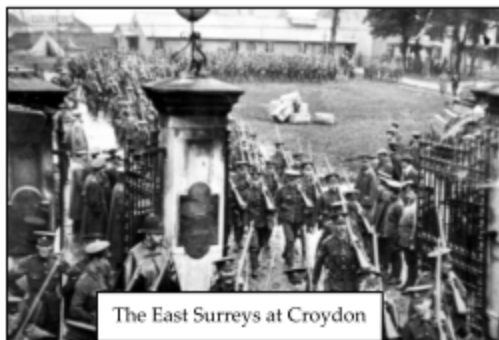
1889 to 1891, Thomas senior being described as a carman on the 1891 census. Thomas junior was the second youngest, born on April 27th 1892 in Pirbright after they had moved to Sandpit Cottages in School Lane.

Tragedy would strike two years later, while Elizabeth was heavily pregnant with their sixth child, Alice Mabel, when her husband died and was buried in Pirbright churchyard on November 7th 1894. Faced with the daunting prospect of raising her children unsupported, she remarried John Williams in July 1896 and the couple went to live at Gibbs Acre, then newly built by John Faggetter.

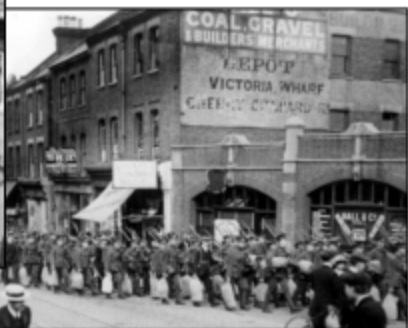
In the 1901 census Thomas was a schoolboy living with his mother and stepfather, an agricultural labourer, at 4 Gibbs Acre, along with three of his siblings and a stepbrother, John Alfred Williams, aged two. His sister, Annie Elizabeth Larby, was in Guildford Workhouse and described as an imbecile. Unlike his oldest brother Albert, who was a thorn in the side of Pirbright School, Thomas never appears on the pages of the Punishment Book before leaving in April 1906. Sadly, stepfather John Williams was to live only two years more, dying at the Royal Surrey County Hospital and being buried at Pirbright on March 13th 1908.

For the third and last time, in 1910, Elizabeth Williams remarried, this time to Edward Hill, twenty four years her junior, who is described as a nurseryman at Brookwood Asylum on the 1911 census, when they were living at 13 Sunnyside Terrace, Knaphill. Also there are three of her sons, James and Thomas Larby, both dairymen and John Williams, the only child of her second marriage.

Come World War One, James Edmund was the first brother to enlist, in the 6th Queens on August 17th 1914. Thomas would follow suit on October 3rd at Kingston, the register showing his height as 5ft 9ins, weight 136lbs, with fresh complexion, hazel eyes and



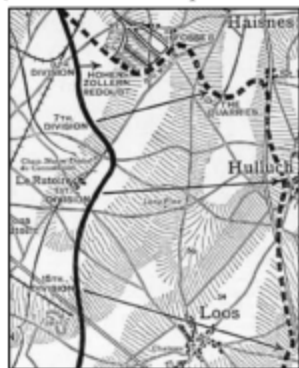
The East Surreys at Croydon



auburn hair; his trade was shown as a porter. Unlike most men, who enlisted for the duration of the war, he signed up to join the East Surrey Regiment for seven years plus five in the reserve, maybe because the pay was slightly better. For kitting out and initial training he joined the 3rd Battalion at Croydon Barracks.

The 2nd Battalion of the East Surreys had been in India in August 1914, returning to England in December. Less than a month later they were in the Ypres salient, where Thomas' service record shows him joining them in rest and training at Loere, about 6 miles SW of the town. There were no major battles at this time, but German shelling from the Messines ridge caused a number of casualties during the familiar pattern in and out of the trenches, some even from "friendly fire" on March 12th. On the 26th and 27th, 700 men were involved in the loathed but necessary carrying and working parties when Lt. Sheppard and five other ranks were wounded, including Thomas, who was wounded in the head and evacuated to No. 1 General Hospital in England on April 4th. He stayed here for just over a month before being posted back on May 6th to the 3rd Battalion, now at Dover, for sick leave.

After his experience of the trenches earlier in the year, maybe it was hardly surprising that Thomas overstayed his hospital leave by 3 days, from May 16th to 19th, a misdemeanour which cost him 7 days confined to barracks & 3 days forfeited pay. On June 1st he was back with his old battalion, which had suffered heavy casualties in the final battle of Ypres in 1915 (there were 421 replacements between May 27th and June 11th) and were to enjoy three



months of comparative quiet with short tours in the front line alternating with training and route marches. This was to last until the end of September, when the battalion marched 35 miles SE to Bethune on September 26th in preparation for an offensive which became known as the Battle of Loos, a small mining village in the middle of the French coalfield

"Dead flat, featureless country: dozens of big gaunt mines and huge black slag heaps: little sordid dirty villages and roads made of black mud a foot deep"

The main attack, which was initially successful, came the next day, with the East Surreys in reserve. Their involvement came early the next morning, which was to attack part of a formidable

strongpoint, the Hohenzollern Redoubt, built on a 20ft high spoil-heap, which had been taken on the 25th by the 9th (Scottish) Division, in the process all but wiped out, with most of the gains lost in a counter-attack on the 27th, when Thomas Larby was killed, probably by shellfire on his way to the trenches.

Inside the Hohenzollern Redoubt



This battlefield photo, with bursting shells & trenches in the foreground was taken during another failed attack in October on the Redoubt by the 46th Division.

Edward Hill and Elizabeth Maria, Thomas' mother, had probably moved from Knaphill to Boormans Cottages, West Molesey before the war. However by June 1919, when she completed a family form for the plaque (the "Dead Man's Penny") and scroll, they had moved back to Sunnyside Terrace, Knaphill. Elizabeth died in 1922. It is not known when Edward died.

Albert William Larby, Thomas' oldest brother, was shown on the form as 'emigrating to Canada', but never went. He had had a chequered career, after joining the army as a short-term regular in 1902 serving in the South African War, but blotted his copybook by stealing and being invalided out after contracting syphilis in Burma. Marrying Nellie Hill in 1909, in 1911 he was a builder's labourer at Westfield, Woking with two children; two more followed. There is no record of WWI service, but he did join the 5th Queens in 1921, his occupation a cook, just 3 months before they disbanded and he was discharged. In 1926 one of his sons

attended Pirbright School for a short time, coming from Petworth, so he must have moved about, like his father. He probably died in 1975, age 92.

Sister Annie Larby was in the Ottershaw Union Workhouse in 1919. She died in 1946.

Brother James Edmund Larby joined the 6th Queens in August 1914, fighting in France from June to November 1915, but being invalided out with epilepsy in January 1916. Shortly afterwards he married Gertrude Hill, Albert's wife, Nellie's sister and had two sons, one of whom came to Pirbright School in 1926 from Send. James Edmund died in 1959.

Younger sister Alice Mabel Larby never married. In 1919 she was living with her mother and stepfather in Knaphill. By 1921 she had moved to Cemetery Road, Stoughton and died in 1969.

Stepbrother John Alfred Williams died in the First World War, but strangely does not appear on the War Memorial, although another John Williams with apparently no Pirbright connection does. They have separate biographies.

Thomas Larby's body would have been obliterated in the shell-burst.

His name is remembered on the Loos memorial

