

## ARTHUR EDWARD SAYERS

**Pte. 6431, 18<sup>th</sup> (Queen Mary's Own Royal) Hussars**

**Died on Thursday, 13<sup>th</sup> May 1915, near Wieltje, Flanders, age 29**

With no service record surviving, it is only possible to say that Arthur Sayers probably joined the 18<sup>th</sup> Hussars in about 1902, when he was 17 years old and his parents were living at 9, Pirbright Terrace. Henry, his father, had been a gardener all his working life and that year had moved to Pirbright from Middle Street in Fleet, Hampshire, where he had been living with his wife Elizabeth and three of their five children. Arthur Edward was the youngest, born in 1886 at Eltham in South-East London, like his elder brother, William Thomas. The three older children were all born at St John's, Woking, where their father had been working when, in 1874, he married Elizabeth Hall, who was a domestic servant at St John's Chapel at the time.

The 18<sup>th</sup> Hussars had returned from South Africa in 1902. That year they changed their more ornamental uniform for drab khaki. The next five years were mainly spent in barracks at York, where young Arthur would have trained, before being posted to the Curragh, near Dublin in 1907 for two years. Early in 1911 the Princess of Wales' Own, as they were known until the Coronation that year, when the name changed to the Queens Own Royal, were in barracks at Tidworth, Hampshire. An outbreak of strikes in 1910 and 1911 saw them keeping the peace in South Wales and Liverpool before another move to the Curragh the next year. Back at Tidworth at the outbreak of war, they became part of the B.E.F., involved in the fighting rearguard actions at Mons, Le Cateau, The Marne and the Aisne. Arthur Sayers joined them in France shortly after his arrival on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1914, probably on the 12<sup>th</sup>, their first day in the Ypres sector, in pouring rain.

Traditions die hard, but it had soon become obvious that, in a static war of barbed wire, machine guns, shelling and trenches, mounted troops, though full of fighting spirit, were of very limited value, so cavalry had to learn to become infantry. From November 14<sup>th</sup>, the 18<sup>th</sup> Hussars left their horses behind the lines for the discomfort of half-waterlogged trenches, before being relieved on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and being taken back, by the indignity, for cavalymen, of motor-bus, to the relative luxury of farm billets at Berthen, about ten miles to the rear. Here they stayed in training and some recreation until the end of February 1915, during a comparative lull before the series of brutal battles that made up the Second Battle of Ypres.

The Second Cavalry Brigade, including the 18<sup>th</sup>, was sent to relieve the French at Zillebeke, three miles south east of Ypres, on February 28<sup>th</sup>. After a few days of skirmishing, they made a vigorous attempt to recapture some lost trenches after the detonation of two mines. The British one exploded on time and the resulting crater was occupied, but the French were not able to detonate their charge until five hours later and it was not followed up by their infantry, so the Queens Own Royals had no option but to retire under a hail of bombs, being relieved the next day and returning to the comfort of their billets.

The next two months were spent either in reserve or support, with working parties repairing or improving trenches until, on the night of May 12<sup>th</sup>, the 18<sup>th</sup> Hussars took over front line trenches at Canadian Farm, near Wielteje, the north-east point of the Salient and a very exposed spot, swept by machine gun fire and in very poor condition.



Panorama with Canadian Farm 1915

Thursday, May 13<sup>th</sup>, was described by one of the Hussars' officers as 'a day few of us will ever forget'. This is a contemporary description of the 18<sup>th</sup> Hussars that day by Brig. Gen. Burnett:-

*"At 3.30 in the morning, just as it was getting light, the enemy opened up an intensely heavy shell-fire..... The cross-fire from heavy howitzers was annihilating..... A black pall hung over the trenches occupied by the Regiment till 10.30 a.m., when intermittent shelling continued till dark..... In many places it was impossible to distinguish where the original line ran and only here and there were found little lengths of trench remaining. Behind, these were grouped, however, the heroic remnants of the squadrons, about a hundred men out of the three hundred who had occupied them the night before."*

Small wonder, then, that Arthur Sayers was one of the many to be killed in this inferno. His body, possibly buried, was never identified, and his name joined Lieut. Charles Hunter as one of the thousands on the Ypres Memorial. These linked photos, taken in action nearby a few days later by a wounded Liverpool Scottish soldier, give some idea of being under shellfire with little cover and, at this stage of the war, no helmets.



On October 26<sup>th</sup> 1914, at St Michael's Church, almost certainly on his last leave before sailing for France, Arthur Edward Sayers married Alice Chapman. She was five years older than him, one of the daughters of Frederick, a carter, who probably worked for William Thompson at Wickhams Farm, the family living at what was then Terrys Cottage (*left*) and now rebuilt as Sunset Cottage in Church Lane. Likely, Alice Sayers was pregnant at the time, as she gave birth to a daughter, Phyllis May, on April 1<sup>st</sup> the next year and the baby was baptised on May 9<sup>th</sup>, just four



Terrys Cottage in 1902

days before her father's death. The widow and child then lived with her parents until 1920, when she remarried Samuel Baker, a 35-year-old G.P.O. wireman, and a brother of John Baker, who had died on the Somme in August 1916 (*see his biography p.44*). Although Sam had joined the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers at the beginning of the war, his life was probably saved in 1916 by being transferred to the Machine Gun Corps and sent to Mesopotamia. After the war, he, Alice and the young Phyllis set up home first at 2 Model Cottages, in Vapery Lane, then at 2 New Cottages, just round the corner, from where Phyllis was married in 1940 to Henry Hodgson Jackson, a Grenadier Corporal, who survived WW2 and became a stalwart of the Pirbright British Legion.



Sam & Alice Baker (nee Chapman, Sayers)



Phyllis Hodgson (nee Sayers) with son Peter