

## HUMPHREY PENNEFATHER EVANS

**Lieut., 2nd Battalion, South Wales Borderers**

**Died on Saturday, 1st July 1916, Beaumont Hamel, Somme, age 20**

It was through his aunt, Hilda Gausson (*see p. 30*), that Humphrey Evans came to be on the Pirbright War Memorial. Living at Holly Villa, the first house in the Gardens from 1913 to 1924, she was born Hilda Bertha Hennessy and married James Robert Gausson at Lucknow, India in 1894.

Grace Woodburn Hennessy, Hilda's sister, married Granville Pennefather Evans at Dacca, Bengal in 1893 and they had three sons: John Pennefather, born in 1894 in Nepal; Humphrey Pennefather, 1896 in Benares, India and Brian Pennefather, 1897 in London. With their father an Indian Army officer, commissioned in 1890 when he was 21, it was hardly surprising their birthplaces should be so far apart. With their parents in India, in the 1901 census the three boys were living in Wimbledon under the care of a governess. By 1911, Humphrey and John were at boarding school in Fleetwood, Lancashire and younger brother Brian was living with his aunt Hilda Gausson, then at an address in Ripley.

Their grandfather, Matthew Evans, was born in Ireland in 1836 and made his fortune as a tea merchant, first in China, where Granville was born, then Ceylon. A fortune it certainly was, as he left the equivalent of £6 million when he died in 1902. As M.P.E., the firm is still listed on the London Stock Market, but has diversified over the years, mainly into palm oil.

Humphrey would have joined his father's first Regiment, the South Wales Borderers, early in the war, as his commission was gazetted in April 1915 when he was still only nineteen years old. His Medal Roll Index card shows that he went to France on July 16<sup>th</sup>, but at this date the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, the unit he was serving in when he died, was on its way to Gallipoli. However, the 5<sup>th</sup> (Pioneer) Battalion, which were reported to have been in urgent need of officers, entered France on July 16<sup>th</sup>, so it must be assumed that Humphrey had joined the 5<sup>th</sup> and transferred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> early in 1916, when it was transferred to France after the debacle of the Dardanelles.

The Pioneers, although also trained as infantry, were only involved in fighting to a limited extent, as their main mission was in construction of all sorts; encampments, depots, railways etc., which were their tasks in the Loos Sector during the latter half of 1915. In any case, the 19<sup>th</sup> (Western) Division, of which they were part, was only involved in a supporting role.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, South Wales Borderers returned from Gallipoli to the Western Front in March 1916. After their casualties from fighting and disease they would have been short of officers and it was probably then that Humphrey was posted from the 5<sup>th</sup>. The next three months would be spent in concentrated training for the "Big Push" on the Somme. The 29<sup>th</sup> Division, with 2 S.W.B. in the centre, was given the task of taking and holding 'Y Ravine'. Later in the war, John Masefield, the poet, visited and described the area -



strongpoints along the front and the plan was to detonate them all at 7.28 a.m., but Lt-Gen. Hunter-Weston persuaded Lt-Gen. Rawlinson that the largest one, under the Hawthorn Redoubt (*photo previous page*), be exploded at 7.20. This disastrous decision sealed the fate, not only of hundreds of Germans, but thousands of Tommies, as it alerted the enemy and gave them time to emerge from their deep dugouts and man their machine guns.



Shelling at  
Beaumont-Hamel



Y Ravine after the battle  
Note the crosses

So, when the whistles went, and the mighty Allied armies went over the top, confident in the belief that their artillery had pulverised the opposition and destroyed their barbed wire, in the first few moments they were cut down “like corn to the scythe”. The battalion history records that “within twenty minutes of Zero the 2<sup>nd</sup> S.W.B. had been virtually wiped out”. By the end of that fateful day on the Somme, 19,240 British soldiers, including Humphrey Pennefather Evans, had laid down their lives.

His body was never recovered, but his name will live on, carved on the Thiepval Memorial.

