

# ROBERT WOOD

Guardsman 11866, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Grenadier Guards

Killed in action, 14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> September 1914, Aisne, France

Robert Wood is something of an enigma, as the only documents we have about him are, firstly, a 1911 census entry with his young family in Spalding, Lincolnshire and secondly, his marriage early in 1907 in the Guildford district (but not in Pirbright). His link with the village was through his bride, Lottie, the daughter of Charles Thompson (*below left in 1895*), local wheelwright, carpenter and builder, who lived at Brook Cottage, by Cove Bridge. In the 1911 census Robert Wood is an insurance agent, shown as born in 1872 at St Pauls, Lincoln, but no trace can be found of him in birth indexes or any other census. However, he was a soldier in 1907 when his first child was baptised, so it would be a reasonable assumption that he had been a Grenadier Guardsman before the outbreak of war, or he could not have been with his regiment in France so early in the war.



Charles Thompson was the son of Richard, who had come to Rails Farm, Mill Lane from Worplesdon in the mid-1850s. Charles' first marriage, in 1869, to Lucy Luff, produced one child, Lily. Lucy died young, aged 27, in 1876 and shortly afterwards Charles remarried Annie, surname unknown, who was born at "Westram" (Westerham), Kent in 1845, according to the 1881 census. She bore him three more children, Lottie Elizabeth being the youngest, in 1884, before his second wife tragically died five years later. Lottie would have looked after her father for some years before her marriage, as she was the only child at home in the 1901 census, but by 1911 she had two children of her own, Winifred Frances, age 3, born in September 1907 at Brook Cottage, her father a soldier at her baptism, and Robert Charles ('Bobbie'), born in September the next year and entered in that census as in Pirbright, but not baptised here, so it seems likely that the Wood family had moved to Spalding in Lincolnshire in 1909-10.

On August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1914, just fifteen days after the Declaration of War, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Grenadier Guards left for France. Robert Wood's Medal Roll shows he entered the country on the 13<sup>th</sup>, so he was almost certainly a Regular at the outbreak of war. The history of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Grenadiers during the following weeks is one of skirmishing, battles, retreat, but above all of marching - 20, sometimes 25



1914. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Grenadiers march from Le Havre (Daily Mail)

miles a day, mostly under a scorching August sun with a 40 lb pack and often short of food and water. Early in September the equally exhausted Germans suffered a critical defeat at the Battle of the Marne, so by mid-September their bruised Army had withdrawn some miles northwards to a hastily prepared defensive position on the north bank of the River Aisne, followed by the French Army and B.E.F.



Above: Pontoon bridge over the Aisne (IWM)

Briefly, the situation on the morning of September 14<sup>th</sup> was this. Autumn rain had now arrived and narrow pontoon



Soupir Village

bridges (above) had to be built over the by now swollen river where the Germans had blown the permanent ones. The north bank sloped steeply and muddily upwards to a plateau, at the top of which stood a farm, the Cour de Soupir, with the village of Soupir (right) a few hundred yards beyond. The river crossing was painfully slow, with the result that the attack was made piecemeal by whatever forces were available. A later history records.... "the desperate character of the encounters on the Chemin des Dames ridge and on the spurs and in the valleys leading up to it." "...In consequence of thick weather, of the fighting being at close quarters, sometimes even hand-to-hand, and of the heavy casualties, actually very great confusion reigned." After fierce attack and counter-attack, the farm and village were captured and by the end of the day the Guards Division had secured a line some half a mile to the north, but at the cost of over 350 casualties to each Guards battalion, including the 2<sup>nd</sup> Grenadiers, a third of their strength.

The Commonwealth War Grave Commission entry for Robert Wood states, unusually, that he died, not at a single date, but between September 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> and his name is recorded on the memorial at La Ferte-sous-Jouarre, many miles away, indicating that his body was never found and in the confusion of the fighting his loss was not discovered until a later roll-call. On September 15<sup>th</sup> there were determined German counter attacks, some to within yards of the British lines, and heavy shelling, the B.E.F. being outgunned by ten to one. The following day, No. 2 Company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Grenadiers had been asked to line the edge of a quarry. An eight-inch high explosive shell landed right at the spot and out of 103 men who had been brought up, only 44 were left. The devastation of an explosion of this size in their midst would leave no recognizable remains to bury, so this could well be the time and place of Robert's death.

Five months later the widowed Lottie returned to Pirbright to live with her father. The two children came to Pirbright School from Wheatley, a suburb of Doncaster, Winifred leaving and Robert going on to secondary school in 1919. In January that year their 74 year old grandfather Charles was buried. Tragically, aged 11, 'Bobbie' himself would be dead before the end of the same year, possibly from the current epidemic of Spanish 'flu. Lottie and her daughter carried on living at Brook House until 1935, when 'Winnie' married Derrig Gibbs, the well-known military photographer, who had followed his father Gwyer's footsteps in taking mainly group photographs. The couple moved to the Gibbs' house, Roughways, at the end of Whites Lane and Lottie, now finding Brook House too large, then moved to Brown Hatch, nearly opposite her daughter and son-in-law, where she lived until the mid '60s, when she moved in with them, dying in June 1984 at the ripe old age of 100.