Arthur Henry Fitt (1890 -1954) and his war

By Peter Cox

[image from author's collection]
This is a case study of my grandfather, Arthur Henry Fitt (1890-1954) and his service with the 13th Battalion the Royal Sussex Regiment. His experiences were not extraordinary by the standard of the Great War involving just one major battle (Passchendaele) and becoming a Prisoner of War (POW) during the German advance in Spring 1918.

I chose to research my grandfather Arthur Henry Fitt, as I thought he was the only member of my family who had actively taken part in the Great War. I had a number of artefacts collected by my mother and notes she had made of her father and her family life in Brighton and Lewes.

Like many soldiers of the Great War my grandfather spoke little of his experiences. He had been wounded and captured during the German Spring offensive of 1918, worked on a farm and making his way home after the Armistice travelling through Holland 'when the bulbs were out'. My mother had accumulated a few bits and pieces including, A match box holder marked ‘Ypres’ and ‘Arthur H FITT, 16024, 13 Royal Sussex Regiment.
A photograph of two soldiers of the Royal Sussex Regiment; one seated with a wound stripe was my grandfather.
Unsent postcards from Quedlinburg POW camp.
A ‘pigeon service’ map with the place name ‘Wieltje’.
A silver ‘wounded’ badge
Enamelled lapel badge, 'Royal Sussex Regiment'
A copy of 'Alf's Button' by W A Darlington

My grandfather, Arthur Henry Fitt, was born on the 21st September 1890 at 9 Clarence Road, St Leonards, East Sussex, the fourth of seven children born to Gilbert and Caroline 'Carrie' Fitt. Carrie died when Arthur Henry was seven leaving Gilbert to bring up the seven children.

Gilbert Fitt had been born in 1858 at Priory Farm, Selborne, Hampshire the eighth of nine children born to the tenant farmer Benjamin Fitt and his wife Dinah.

For 150 years the Fitts had been prosperous farmers in Hampshire and often afforded the title 'Mr' but by the 1860s their fortune and that of British agriculture in general were in decline. Benjamin Fitt gave up the tenancy of Priory Farm in 1866 dying shortly afterwards in 1869.

Gilbert left Selborne and found work in St Leonards as a journeyman butcher. By 1908 he had moved to Brighton with his two youngest sons, including my grand father.

On the 26th December 1912 Arthur Henry Fitt married Mary Ann Cooper (1887-1975) at Littlehampton when he is described as a butcher. The couple rented two rooms at 40a Ashton Street, Brighton and a year later two rooms at 9 Howard Road, Brighton. Arthur Henry Fitt worked as a butcher for 'Seals' of Preston Circus’, at 3 Preston Road. By 1925 the family had moved to 5 Arnold Street, Brighton (five rooms now!)

I took advantage of a Sussex Family History Group (SFHG) 'day out’ to the then Public Record Office (now The National Archives) at Kew where service records are held. I wasn’t that hopeful having read that up to 60% of service records had been destroyed by enemy action in 1940 with the Royal Sussex Regiment’s being particularly affected.
First call though was the medal roll. Nearly everybody got a medal and the records are held on card but available on microfiche in alphabetical order. Arthur Henry Fitt got the Victory and the British War Medal. The medal roll also gave his date of enlistment (8th December 1915 and discharge (17th April 1919), regimental number, G/16024 which corresponded with the number on the match box holder, and the corps, R.Sussex R. 3rd – but not the 13th.

![Medal Roll](image)

Medal Roll for Arthur Henry Fitt from the National Archives WO372

Cause of Discharge '392(xviA)' means he had been discharged on account of being permanently physically unfit.

Next was to find his service record if it had survived. It had having been removed from the main series as he claimed a disability pension. The service record proved to be a mine of information and gave the information that he was wounded (GSW – gun shot wound) on the 22nd March 1918 and discharged from the 3rd battalion Royal Sussex Regiment on 26th March 1919. His disability pension was one shilling a week.

Arthur Henry Fitt had enlisted in the Army on the 8th December 1915 and been assigned to the 4th Territorial Force Reserve Royal Sussex. In 1908 the Volunteer Force had come an end and the 2nd Volunteer Battalion was transferred as a complete unit to the new Territorial Force and became the 4th Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment. A postcard to his wife and postmarked the 28th July 1916 was sent from Belhus Park Camp at Aveley (Essex) a WWI Volunteer/TF Annual Camp and mentions being in E Company. Confusingly the picture on the postcard is of "Forest Church, Horsham". It wasn’t until 7th September 1916 that he embarked from Folkestone to disembark at Boulogne with his service officially starting on his arrival at Étaples Training Camp, France on 8th September 1916.

British soldiers destined for the Western Front usually landed at the French ports of Le Havre or Boulogne. The men were then transported to the main base camp just outside the French town of Étaples with as many as 100,000 soldiers at a time being were housed at the camp. In the sand
dunes at Étaples was the notorious Bull Ring training camp. Here attempts were made to prepare men for life in the trenches. The new soldiers also received lectures on how to deal with problems such as lice, trench foot and poison gas.

On 19th September 1916 he was posted to the 13th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment (3rd South Down) with the service number G16024. The 13th Battalion together with the 11th and 12th had been raised in the Autumn of 1914 and were known as the Southdown Battalions – or ‘Lowther’s Lambs’ after Claude Lowther, owner of Herstmonceux castle and MP for Eskdale in Cumberland.

In September 1916 there was plenty of room for new recruits in the 13th for on the 30th June 1916 together with the 12th Battalion they were sent ‘over the top’ at the battle of Richebourg (‘The Boars Head’) as a diversion to the first battle of the Somme (1st July 1916). 365 men were killed or missing with over 1000 casualties. The battalion diary for the 13th Battalion ends at this point the next entry being 1st January 1917.

The 11th, 12th and 13th battalions of the Royal Sussex Regiment and the 14th battalion of the Royal Hampshire Regiment made up the 116th brigade and together with 117th and 118th brigade, the 39th division of the British Army in France and as such were used in the Battle of Passchendaele (Passendale) – ‘Third Ypres’ between June and November 1917.

The battalion diary gives the ins and outs of the battle and 'Third Ypres, Passchendaele by Chris McCarthy an overall view.

My grandfather may have been present when the 13th battalion captured the important village of St Julien on 1st August 1917 but a postcard from his wife on the 14th September is addressed to him at 'Hdqrs Staff' 13th Royal Sussex Regt. He was certainly able to walk off with a 'clean' copy of a map of the front.

Sept 14th (1917)

Dear Arthur,
I have just received your field card of the 9th I hope you will be out of the line on your birthday (21st September) myself and the kiddies wish you as happy a birthday as possible with love your loving wife
Annie

Pte A H Fitt
G.16024
Hdqrs Staff
13th Royal Sussex Regt.
B.E.F France
Postmark Brighton 10.45pm 14th Sep

'Out of the line on your birthday' - despite censorship the folks back home certainly had some idea of what was going on.
Owned and worn by my grandmother a ‘Sweetheart’ Badge
to show her ‘man’ was in the forces.

[images from items in authors collection]
Unused pigeon service map of the front line at Passchendaele
The British front line is on Admirals Rd at the bottom.

Enamelled lapel badge, ‘Royal Sussex Regiment’

Matchbox holder probably made from a shell case.
Arthur H Fitt
16024
13 Royal Sussex

Spine view of matchbox holder
YPRES
He must have been relieved when the battle officially ended on the 10th November 1917 and from the 17th November to the 1st December he was on leave in the UK.

He returned to France by way of Dover. 'Auntie' was Jane West (1862-1924), his wife's aunt living at 1 Woodlands road, Littlehampton.

On the 15th March 1918 the 11th and 13th battalions of the Royal Sussex Regiment were in the Hem sector, south of the Somme. The great German offensive started on 21st March and Arthur Henry was reported 'missing' on the 22nd. He had been wounded in the right arm with a machine gun bullet and captured, one of over 21,000 British soldiers taken as Prisoner of War (POW) on the 21st March 1918. Somewhere is a recollection of him living for two weeks in no man's land 'with only grass to eat', as told later to his daughter.

This 'first capture' card was introduced in November 1917 and although it states that no reply should be sent to Limburg enormous confusion was caused as people assumed that was where the POW was physically located.

Kriegsgefangenensendung - 'Prisoners of War Broadcast'

The card filled in by Arthur Henry Fitt after his capture and sent to his wife by way of the Red Cross.

[authors collection]
The battalion diary for the 22nd March records
‘... A Co. with ½ B Co. who had been sent up with them was cut off and
annihilated 4 officers & about 150 O.R.s (Other Ranks) were thus lost to
the battalion. The night was fairly quiet’. 7.

The remainder of the 13th battalion was amalgamated with the 13th
Gloucestershire Regiment as No. 2 composite battalion and by the 26th
April consisted of only four officers and seven rifles later increasing to
eight officers and 150 O.R.s on the 27th April. The 13th battalion ceased
to exist but with remains from the 11th battalion formed a cadre employed
for the instruction of American units.

Arthur Henry was a prisoner at Quedlingburg in Saxony, Germany. Being
wounded in the right arm the German Authorities wanted to amputate the
limb, but he refused. Apparently prisoners massaged each other’s
wounds and limbs to restore and promote circulation with only paper
bandages available 6. Food, or the lack of it, was a problem especially as
he was expected to work on a farm. Somewhere is a recollection of him
living for two weeks in no man’s land ‘with only grass to eat’ 6.

Much of the following description of Quedlinburg POW camp has been
taken from the website 8. The camp was surrounded by a double barbed
wire fence and consisted of huts approximately 50m long and 15 to 20m
in width. When the camp opened there was about 10m³ per prisoner but
by 1918 this had dropped to 2m³. Of the 18,000 prisoners at
Quedlinburg, about 60% were Russian, 27% French, 7% ‘English’ and 4%
Italian and a few civilians 9. Prisoners walked to the camp from the station,
about 3km, looked on by a curious local population.

Prisoners were regarded as an important and inexpensive source of
labour. The visit of a Spanish delegation to the Quedlingburg camp in
January 1917 also included the work camps. These were some 20 to 30
miles away and were a brown coal mine (Atzendorf), a salt mine
(Bergkohlen) and war plants (Eisenbahmeistgerei of Aschersleben). Only
Russian and French prisoners are mentioned suggesting the camp had not
yet been occupied by British prisoners. The lucky ones were sent to the
fields and so, later in the War, included my grandfather with his shattered
arm. Work was paid for in 'Camp Money', money which could only be
used in the camp. Typically this was 50 to 70 pfennig a day but up to 10 Marks a week for the miners.

Peculiarly Quedlinburg had its own bakery. The website displays a menu, shown below, from August 1915. This could be supplemented by food parcels and items bought from the camp shop.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Morning</th>
<th>Evening</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Green beans</td>
<td>Potatoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sheep</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Barley</td>
<td>Salty soup</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beef</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>Rice with dried fruits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potatoes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Carrots</td>
<td>Potatoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pork</td>
<td>Baltic herring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Mashed potatoes</td>
<td>Barley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beef</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>Fababeans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potato</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>Cornmeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sheep</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

http://www.camp-de-QUedlinburg.fr/Nouriture.htm

By March 1918 Germany was suffering severe food shortages and the menu probably looked very different.

'Remembrance' is perhaps too strong a word to use as both Arthur Henry Fitt and Katie's husband, Percy, were both alive. But the content implies that there was some communication from Arthur Henry Fitt as POW to his home.

Post card from Katie Jones to Arthur Henry Fitt's wife in Brighton.
Post mark 8th April (1918).
Reverse is photograph of St Peter's church, Bedford.
Prisoners got a (hot!) shower twice a week but lice were a persistent problem. By 1920 the archives suggest there had been a total of 703 deaths at the camp: 412 Russians, 144 French, 101 British, 32 Italians and 14 civilians. They were buried at the central cemetery in Quedlinburg but probably only the Russians now remain. My grandfather brought back 4 postcards of the memorial erected to dead prisoners as well as one of the Russian chapel in the camp. On the reverse all are titled Kriegsgefangenenensendung - 'Prisoners of War addressee'.

The camp Kommandant, Generalleutnant Georg Dietrich Nikolaus Geldern-Crispendorf (1855-1939), can be seen in a light coloured great coat in the top right picture just left of centre, facing and in the bottom right picture just right of centre.

My grandfather remained a prisoner of war in Germany until the 29th December 1918 and on 9th January 1919 was repatriated to Hull having had time to be photographed at the Rigtersleek Mill, Enschede, Holland. This is the nearest city to Germany; Holland had been neutral in the Great War. The owner of Rigtersleek Mill was Jan van Hake (1873-1957) and
with numerous townspeople of Enschede he provided help and support to
the thousands of many nationalities who passed through the town.

Arthur Henry Fitt may be the individual to the right of the left hand post.
[image from authors collection]

January does seem a little early for bulbs though.

On the 9th January 1919 he was posted to the Royal Sussex Regiment
depot at Chichester and on the 26th March 1919 posted to the 3rd
Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment. On the 3rd April 1919 he was at
Rugeley camp filling in a ‘Statement by a soldier concerning his own case
and sending a postcard with a ‘Rugeley Camp’ ditty on the reverse.
Dear Annie,

How would you like this place a true description.

With love to you and Rene Arthur

Mrs A H Fitt
9 Howard Rd
Elm Grove
Brighton Sussex

Postmarked 6.45 pm 3rd April 1919
Rugeley Camp Staffordshire

[images from authors collection]

His statement revealed that he received no hospital treatment for his wound.
On the 17th April 1919 he was discharged from 3rd battalion Royal Sussex Regiment and at home, 9 Howard Road, Brighton.

His regimental conduct sheet records that there was no record of him ‘having incurred any regimental entry during his service’.

Arthur Henry Fitt was awarded the Victory Medal and the British War Medal given to those entering service overseas between the 5th August 1914 and the 11th November 1918 inclusive, and the Silver War Badge. The Silver War Badge was awarded to a soldier who had been honourably discharged from the army due to wounds. About 450,000 of the ‘B’ series were issued between September 1918 and December 1919, together with a citation.

[The Silver War Badge awarded to Arthur Henry Fitt
Number B229243
[Item in authors collection]
Violet Leconfield (1892-1956) was the wife of Charles Henry Wyndham 3rd Baron Leconfield (1872-1952) who was the Lord Lieutenant of Sussex from 1917 to 1949. 27 Upperton Road, Eastbourne was the address of the Sailors and Soldiers Help Society and Miss Flora MacCartie the Honorary Secretary, Sussex County Prisoners of War Fund for the Royal Sussex Regiment.
A family gathering about 1924 outside 15 Charlwood Houses, Midhope street, London. [image from authors collection]

Left to right at back: Arthur Henry Fitt wearing the silver War Badge; his wife Mary Ann (née Cooper); George Cooper (father to Mary Ann); 'Auntie' Jane West. Left to right at front: Irene Mary Fitt and Arthur George Fitt (children of Arthur Henry and Mary Ann Fitt).

Before…

Arthur Henry Fitt with his wife, Mary Ann, son Arthur George and daughter Irene Mary. December 1915. [image from authors collection]

… and after

Note the brass 'wound stripe' on the left forearm [image from authors collection]
On his discharge from the Army Arthur Henry was unable to find work as a butcher and went to work at the diamond (Oppenheimer) factory in the Lewes Road, Brighton. This had been set up in 1918 as a workplace for disabled soldiers returning from the War. The site was later taken over by Allen West Ltd and is now occupied by Mithras House, part of the University of Brighton.

He later found work at a butchers in Grantham Road, Brighton but in 1935 lost his job as the owner’s son was coming into the business.

By 1936 he had his own Butcher's shop at 152 Springfield Road, Brighton, East Sussex. There were four shops in a row; Oakleys a general grocer on the corner, Miss Gander, a sweetshop, AH Fitt and Son butchers, and Burrells, greengrocers.

152 Springfield Road, Brighton, East Sussex. Arthur Henry Fitt (left) with his son, Arthur George Fitt (right) at the entrance to the butcher's shop.

Photograph from Mrs V Goodliffe.

Arthur Henry and Mary Ann Fitt were to have two children. Arthur George and my mother, Irene Mary. Irene was chosen for ‘peace’, which must have been a common theme during the years of the Great War.

He died on the 14th September 1954 one week short of his 64th birthday.
[BATTALION NATIONAL ANTHEM]

ONLY just one more Reveille,
Only one more night parade,
Only one more Kit Inspection,
Then we're marching home again.
When we get our civil clothes on,
Oh, how happy we shall be,
When this gory war is over
No more soldiering for me.
Compliments will then be fewer,
Guards, Fatigues, will be no more,
We'll be spooning with the wenches
As we did in days of yore.
N.C.O.'s will then be navvies,
Privates own their motor cars,
No more “sir-ing” and “saluting,”
No more tea in two pound jars.
No more marching, no more doubling,
In the morn at six-fifteen,
No more pushing blooming barrows
On the range at Wormald Green.
No more “smarter men now smarter,”
No more bread like granite rock,
No more rising at five-thirty,
And “Lights out” at ten o'clock.
No more asking when we’re marching,
"Please, Sir, may we have a drink,"
Or because we drop a shovel,
No more putting in the clink.
No more “shun-ing,” "as you were-ing."
No working for a bob a day,
When next the Country has a War on,
We'll find a job that brings more pay.
People told us when we listed
Fame and medals we should win,
But the fame is in the guard room,
And the medals made of tin.
When we've finished with the Kaiser,
At the Empire we shall sing
THE BATTALION NATIONAL ANTHEM,
Twice a night, God Save the King.

[Image from authors collection]
I started off thinking only my grandfather was involved in the Great War but have found out that his brother Gilbert Edward Benjamin Fitt (1888-1925) was in the 1st Battalion Kings Royal Rifle Corps having joined up before the war. Gassed on the Western Front he was to die of tuberculosis in 1925.

And my grandmother's half brother, Herbert George Cooper (1892-1918) was in the 1st Battalion East Surrey Regiment and killed on the 20 May 1918 during an attack near the river Bourre.

My grandfather though must have been in a desperate state to volunteer in December 1915 before the introduction of conscription for married men in May 1916. At home he had a wife of four years and two children, my uncle age two and my mother just four months. The conditions must have been financial arising from job uncertainty; both my mother and uncle said they couldn't remember their parents ever having 'words'.

The whole experience must have been so alien to the average conscript, although there was a regular pay packet and 'all found'.

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3. Spartacus Educational *Arrival in France* [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWarrival.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWarrival.htm)
4. RSR MS7/25 Royal Sussex Regiment War diary 13th Battalion (typescript copy) at West Sussex Record Office.
6. Irene Mary Fitt, later Cox, his daughter.
7. RSR MS7/25 Royal Sussex Regiment 13th Battalion War Diary (typescript copy) 22nd March 1918 at West Sussex Record Office.
8. Le camp de prisonniers de guerre de Quedlinburg [http://www.camp-de- quedlinburg.fr](http://www.camp-de- quedlinburg.fr)

Other sources

W A Darlington, *Alf's Button* (Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1920)
All artefacts, postcards, photographs are in the Author's collection.