

## Arthur Henry Fitt (1890 -1954) and his war



[image from author's collection]

### By Peter Cox

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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 26<sup>th</sup> 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 (8<sup>th</sup> December 1915 and discharge (17<sup>th</sup> April 1919), regimental number, G/16024 which corresponded with the number on the match box holder, and the corps, R.Sussex R. 3<sup>rd</sup> – but not the 13<sup>th</sup>.

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\* 2/4 R Sussex R. 4569 R

Name	Corps	Reg. No.	Rank	Date of Discharge	Cause of Discharge
FITT A.H. 2/19	R. Sussex R. 3rd.	4569 R	Pte	17.4.19	P392(LXVIA)
		9/16024		8.12.15	W.

Date of application (a) Badge (b) Medal

No. of File " "

Address of applicant:—

Action taken List 6/1729/2.

W9339—RP3794 100,000 2/19 HWV(P1005) KG36  
1233—RP4268 50,000 6/19

MEDAL "ROLL" PAGE  
VICTORY \*E/2/10/137 1282  
BRITISH \*do do  
STAR

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 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1918 and discharged from the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion Royal Sussex Regiment on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1919. His disability pension was one shilling a week.

Arthur Henry Fitt had enlisted in the Army on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 1915 and been assigned to the 4th Territorial Force Reserve Royal Sussex. In 1908 the Volunteer Force had come an end and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Volunteer Battalion was transferred as a complete unit to the new Territorial Force and became the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment<sup>1</sup>.

A postcard to his wife and postmarked the 28<sup>th</sup> July 1916 was sent from Belhus Park Camp at Aveley (Essex) a WWI Volunteer/TF Annual Camp<sup>2</sup> and mentions being in E Company. Confusingly the picture on the postcard is of "Forest Church, Horsham".

It wasn't until 7<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>3</sup>.

On 19<sup>th</sup> September 1916 he was posted to the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment (3<sup>rd</sup> South Down) with the service number G16024. The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion together with the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> for on the 30<sup>th</sup> June 1916 together with the 12<sup>th</sup> 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 (1<sup>st</sup> July 1916). 365 men were killed or missing with over 1000 casualties. The battalion diary for the 13<sup>th</sup>

Battalion ends at this point the next entry being 1<sup>st</sup> January 1917.<sup>4</sup>

The 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> battalions of the Royal Sussex Regiment and the 14<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Royal Hampshire Regiment made up the 116<sup>th</sup> brigade and together with 117<sup>th</sup> and 118<sup>th</sup> brigade, the 39<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> an overall view.

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



[image from author's collection]

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

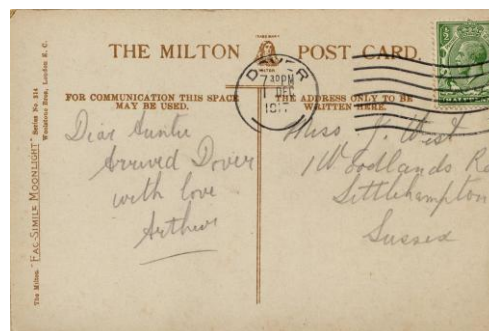


Spine view of matchbox holder  
 YPRES



He must have been relieved when the battle officially ended on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1917 and from the 17<sup>th</sup> November to the 1<sup>st</sup> 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.



Post card sent from Dover and postmarked 7.30pm 1 Dec 1917  
 [authors collection]

On the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1918 the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> battalions of the Royal Sussex Regiment were in the Hem sector, south of the Somme. The great German offensive started on 21<sup>st</sup> March and Arthur Henry was reported 'missing' on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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<sup>6</sup>.

**Kriegsgefangenensendung.**

Prüfungsstempel: **geprüft 97**  
 P. Pr. Limburg/L.

Postprüfungsstelle Limburg  
 der Kriegsgefangenen-Kommandatur Wahn  
 in Limburg a. d. Lahn  
 Postausgabestelle.

To be forwarded immediately to ENGLAND.

Write plainly! To (address) Mrs. A. H. Fitt  
9 Howard Road  
Elm. Grove, Brighton, Sussex  
 (Destination) England

Address carefully!

Fill up this card immediately!

I am prisoner of war in Germany.

Name: A. H. Fitt  
 Christian name: Arthur Henry  
 Rank: PT  
 Regiment: 13<sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex

Sound: ☒ Wounded. ☐ Improper to be erased.

Date: 24/3/1918

Do not reply to Limburg, await further information.

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.  
 [image from authors collection]

The battalion diary for the 22<sup>nd</sup> 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' <sup>7</sup>.

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

Arthur Henry was a prisoner at Quedlinburg 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 <sup>6</sup>. 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' <sup>6</sup>.

Much of the following description of Quedlinburg POW camp has been taken from the website <sup>8</sup>. 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 10m<sup>3</sup> per prisoner but by 1918 this had dropped to 2m<sup>3</sup>. Of the 18,000 prisoners at Quedlinburg, about 60% were Russian, 27% French, 7% 'English' and 4% Italian and a few civilians <sup>9</sup> Prisoners walked to the camp from the station, about 3km, looked on by a curious local population.



Prisoners huts at  
 Quedlinburg



Inside of prisoners' hut,  
 Quedlinburg

Prisoners were regarded as an important and inexpensive source of labour. The visit of a Spanish delegation to the Quedlinburg 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 (Eisenbahnmeistgerei 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

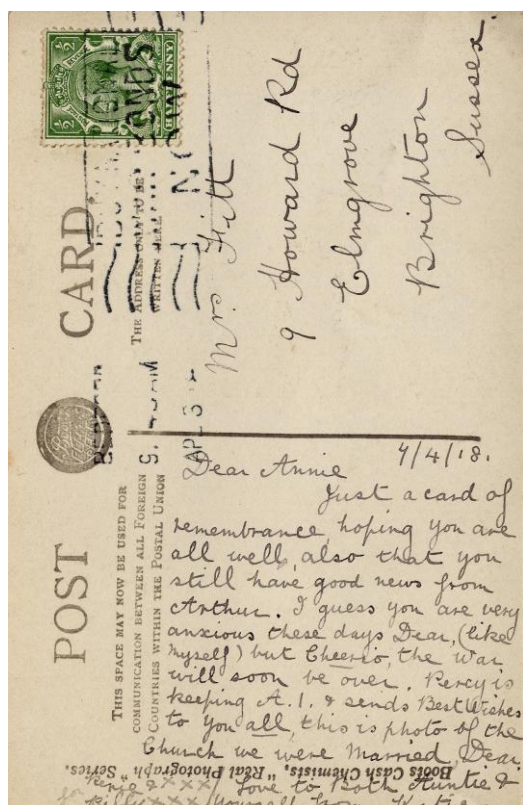
used in the camp. Typically this was 50 to 70 pfennig a day but up to 10 Marks a week for the miners.

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

	Morning	Evening
Sunday	Green beans Sheep	Potatoes
Monday	Barley Beef	Salty soup
Tuesday	Fish Potatoes	Rice with dried fruits
Wednesday	Carrots Pork	Potatoes Baltic herring
Thursday	Mashed potatoes Beef	Barley
Friday	Fish Potato	Fababeans
Saturday	Beans Sheep	Cornmeal

<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 8<sup>th</sup> 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 dead 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 Kriegsgefangenensendung - 'Prisoners of War addressee'.



Russian chapel in the camp  
 [image from authors collection]



Inauguration of the memorial to dead prisoners [image from authors collection]



Inauguration of the memorial to dead prisoners  
 [image from authors collection]



Inauguration of the memorial to dead prisoners  
 [image from authors collection]

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 29<sup>th</sup> December 1918 and on 9<sup>th</sup> 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.

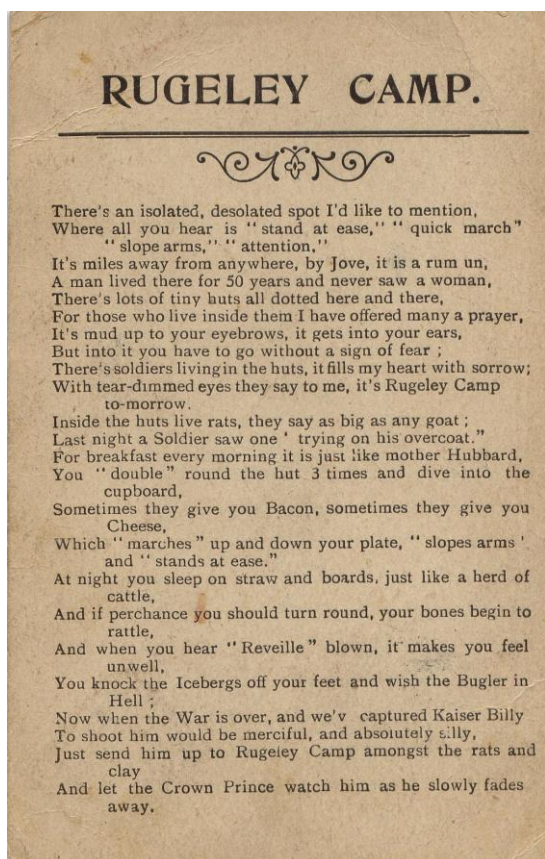


Arthur Henry Fitt may be the individual to the right of the left hand post.  
[image from authors collection]

January does seem a little early for bulbs though.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> January 1919 he was posted to the Royal Sussex Regiment depot at Chichester and on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1919 posted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> April 1919 he was discharged from 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> August 1914 and the 11<sup>th</sup> 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]





[image from authors collection]

Citation given to Arthur Henry Fitt.

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<sup>10</sup>]

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.

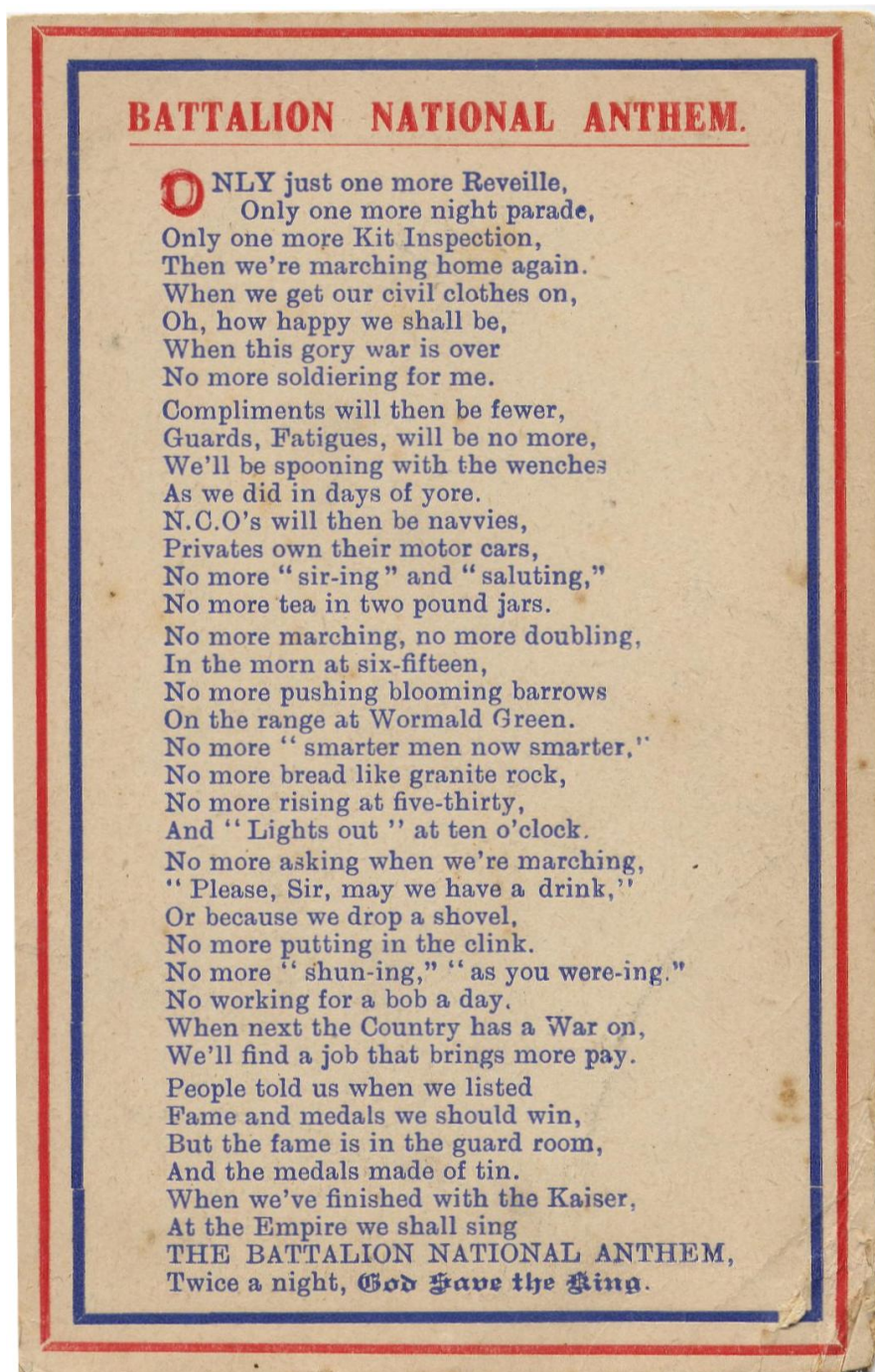
By 1936 he had his own Butcher's shop at 152 Springfield Road, Brighton, East Sussex. There were four shops in a row; Oakleys a general grocer on the corner, Miss Gander, a sweetshop, AH Fitt and Son butchers, and Burrells, greengrocers.



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 14<sup>th</sup> September 1954 one week short of his 64th birthday.





[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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> AE Readman *The Royal Sussex Regiment. A Catalogue of Records* (1985)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.airfieldinformationexchange.org/community/showthread.php?6822-Army-Camps-Barracks-Essex>

<sup>3</sup> Spartacus Educational Arrival in France

[www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWarrival.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWarrival.htm)

<sup>4</sup> RSR MS7/25 Royal Sussex Regiment War diary 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion (typescript copy) at West Sussex Record Office.

<sup>5</sup> Chris McCarthy, *The Third Ypres, Passchendaele* (Arms and Armour 1995). ISBN 1 85409 217 0.

<sup>6</sup> Irene Mary Fitt, later Cox, his daughter.

<sup>7</sup> RSR MS7/25 Royal Sussex Regiment 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary (typescript copy) 22nd March 1918 at West Sussex Record Office.

<sup>8</sup> Le camp de prisonniers de guerre de Quedlinburg <http://www.camp-de-quedlinburg.fr>

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Droege, *Kriegsgefangene Völker*, (Berlin, 1921)

<sup>10</sup> Previously been published in the *Sussex Family Historian*, Volume 16, number 4 (December 2004)

#### Other sources

Richard van Emden & Steve Humphries, *Veterans The Last Survivors of the Great War* (Leo Cooper, 1999). ISBN 0 85052 640 X

Sarah Peterson, *Tracing your Prisoner of War Ancestors, The First World War*, (Pen & Sword Family History and Imperial War Museum, 2012). ISBN 1 84884 501 4.

Richard van Emden, *Prisoners of the Kaiser*, (Leo Cooper, 2000). ISBN 0 85052 734 1

The Long, Long Trail at <http://www.1914-1918.net>

W A Darlington, *Alf's Button* (Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1920)



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All artefacts, postcards, photographs are in the Author's collection.