

A Sussex Family's Sacrifice Soldiers of the Royal Garrison Artillery



Author's Photograph

By Julie Wade

Summary

The roots of the Elliott family can be found in Wisborough Green and surrounding villages in West Sussex as far back as the early 1600s. One descendent moved to Brighton from Lodsworth in the late 1860s and this is the study of his sons who fought for the Royal Garrison Artillery in the First World War.

Introduction

I chose this subject because I was shocked to learn that three of my great grandfather's brothers, who had been sent to Belgium to fight, all perished within three and a half months of each other and are buried at different locations within an approximately ten-mile radius, west of Ypres.

Background

My great, great grandfather, Edwin Elliott, was born in April 1849 in Lodsworth, West Sussex. At the time of his marriage, in 1871, to Charlotte McDonough Bennett, born in Boothby Pagnell, Lincolnshire, he was living at 5 Cheltenham Place, Brighton, and earning his living as a soda water manufacturer – an occupation that could be carried out at home.

Over the next 14 years, Edwin and Charlotte had seven sons, all born in Brighton. The eldest, Edwin Ernest (my great grandfather), was born in 1872 and died in 1929, having produced eight children. Their second-born, Roland Albert, died at the age of three. Arthur Victor Thomas was born in 1875 and lived until 1948. Sydney Charles Robert and Alec Leonard were born in 1879 and 1882 respectively. Archie Edgar Frederick lived from 1885 to 1957. Oscar Douglas Harold was born in 1886. ¹

Edwin and his family lived at 75 North Road (now the Heart and Hand Pub) and 55 New England Street between 1871 and 1882. North Road was developed in 1810 and doubled in width in 1870. Edwin and Charlotte probably made use of the nearby "slipper bath" (for poor people who had no bath of their own) which opened in 1870. Thereafter, they resided at 29 Blackman Street until at least 1911.² Blackman Street consisted of dense terraced housing dating from the 1840s built as a result of the development of the railway.³ Considered "slums", these houses were cleared in 1962. The conditions in the backstreet terraces of Brighton could not have been more different from those in the properties on the seafront and in the central valleys. Brighton was the second most densely populated county borough in the country in 1921 and far removed from life in rural Lodsworth, West Sussex.⁴

Edwin continued to work mostly as a mineral water bottler and foreman of a mineral water factory although, in 1878, he is recorded as a beer retailer and, in 1911, as a house painter. He died in 1916 which meant that, although he lived during the first half of World War 1, he was, thankfully,

unaware of the fate of three of his sons a little over a year later. However, sadly, Charlotte was not spared this as she outlived him by 20 years.

Three of their sons did not enlist or perhaps were turned down. Edwin and Arthur would have been 42 and 39 respectively at the start of the War, both with large families; the eldest child being 19 and the youngest 1. This made them too old to be enlisted although, by 1916, the eligible age was 41 and enlistment actually meant conscription. Archie would have been 29 at the onset with only three children. However, he is recorded as a labourer in 1916 when his daughter, Florence Elsie, is born so perhaps he was part of the essential workforce which was required as a result of the War in towns and villages throughout the county and to keep Brighton functioning. Brighton received thousands of wounded soldiers from the very beginning of the War which must have had a major impact on local services and facilities.

In 1917, Londoners could have heard explosives and artillery barrages taking place at Ypres, 140 miles away.

On the Western Front, rather than massive military manoeuvres, advancing and retreating, mighty long-range artillery weapons, such as horse-drawn field artillery and tractor-pulled howitzers created a stalemate. These weapons forced a strategy of digging trenches as it was too dangerous for the men to fight in open ground. Unlike the Germans, the British captured as much ground as possible before digging trenches. The weather and natural water ingress made the trenches fill with water.⁵

During the day, soldiers wrote home or kept a diary or tried to sleep as most enemy attacks took place at dawn or dusk. They ate whenever it was possible to deliver food. They spent up to ten days in the front line before moving to the reserve lines and then to rest in a rear area. It was during the last period that they were able to get clean and have fresh clothes.

Although a small part of trench war took place between opposing soldiers on open ground, many were wounded or killed just by being visible to the enemy. A soldier was a target even if he was retrieving a wounded comrade or body. They had to be alert and ready for battle at all times. Signs with wording such as "Do not stand about here. Even if you are not hit, someone else will be." were necessary due to the constantly flying shells.

However heavily the enemy defences had been pounded by the artillery, there were still barbed wire and machine guns left intact which meant that advancing "over the top" was extremely dangerous. It is estimated that as many as 21 million soldiers were wounded during the War. Over $\frac{3}{4}$ of British soldiers who fought on the Western front were sent to fight again.⁶

In September 1916, a British invention, the “tank” was first used which gave soldiers in the infantry an advantage, especially in November 1917 at the Battle of Cambrai. However, their use was not able to prevent the deaths of many tens of thousands of soldiers like Sydney, Oscar and Alec Elliott.

Sydney Charles Robert Elliott

Until 1915, Sydney’s main occupation had been as a window cleaner. He married Elizabeth Avis in 1910 at St Peter’s, Rodmell, and they had two sons, John Robert, born 20 May 1911, and Sidney James, born 27 August 1915.⁷

Sydney had been living at 67 Osborne Road, Preston Park, Brighton, from at least 1911 when he enlisted in Brighton in 1917. As Acting Bombardier 102270 of the 291st Siege Battery of the Royal Garrison Artillery, he spent from 8 July 1916 to 27 March 1917 in England where he was trained in gun laying (aligning a gun barrel in vertical and horizontal planes). He was then posted from 28 March 1917 with the British Expeditionary Forces.⁸

The 291st Siege Battery was part of the 39th Division. This Division was involved in the Battle of Pilkem from 31 July to 2 August 1917 as part of the Fifth Army and the Battle of Langemark from 16 to 18 August 1917 as part of the Second Army. He was killed in action on 6 September 1917⁹ and is buried at Klein-Vierstraat British Cemetery (grave no III.B.18), Heuvelland, West Vlaanderen, Belgium, less than 10 km from Ypres. Klein-Vierstraat British Cemetery was begun in January 1917 and Plots I to III were made by field ambulances and fighting units before the middle of January 1918.



Author’s photograph

Sydney was awarded the Victory Medal and the British War Medal.

Sydney’s Division may have been involved in the Third Battle of Ypres, 31 July - 10 November 1917, which, according to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), represented the major British offensive on the Western Front in 1917. Two ambitious goals lay behind the enterprise: the capture of Roulers, a vital railway centre, key to German dispositions in Flanders, and the clearance of the Belgian coast. These objectives first necessitated the occupation of the enclosing German-held ridges which dominated Ypres.

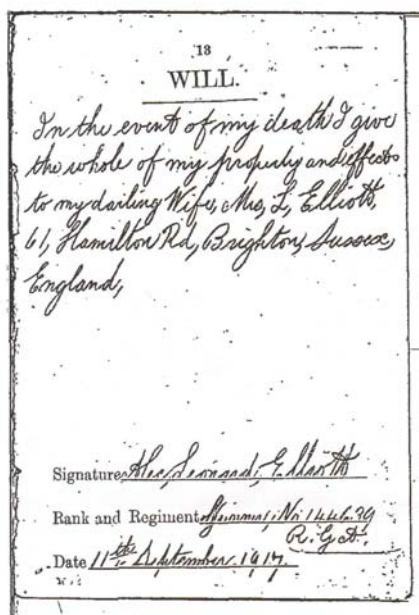
The success at Messines Ridge in June marked the opening of the campaign but a near seven week delay ensued before Gough’s Fifth Army was ready for the main attack. On 31 July, after a fortnight’s intense bombardment of German positions, nine British Divisions assaulted the northern and eastern ridges on a 13,700 yard front; good progress was

made (especially across Pilckem Ridge) but by late afternoon rain set in and German counter-attacks regained much ground. Ceaseless rain in the following days turned the shell-cratered ground into a quagmire, severely impeding subsequent British attacks; by the end of August, despite heavy casualties, little progress had been made.

Control of operations passed to Plumer and a pause in fighting (coinciding with better weather) was sanctioned to allow preparations to secure the Gheluvelt Plateau: three successful set-piece battles of late September and early October raised hopes of breakthrough but the return of torrential early autumn rains greatly hindered further efforts. Ordered to continue, the final actions were fought in indescribable conditions on a near impassable battlefield. Canadian infantry struggled through to occupy Passchendaele on 6 November and offensive operations were called off four days later. In over 100 days of fighting no strategic breakthrough was achieved; a five miles advance left the British in occupation of an enlarged and highly vulnerable salient, at a cost of an estimated 250,000 casualties. The history of the campaign remains steeped in controversy.¹⁰

Alec Leonard Elliott

Alec (known as Leonard) also enlisted in Brighton, having previously worked as a clothes shop assistant. He married Lucy Comber in 1904 in Brighton and was living at 14 Guildford Street in 1911.¹¹ They had five children. His daughter, Dorothy A, was born shortly before he joined the Royal Garrison Artillery as Gunner 144639 of the 409th Siege Battery in the 1st Division. He died of his wounds on 17 September 1917¹² (11 days after Sydney), poignantly on the day he wrote his Will (see below), and is buried in Vlamertinghe New Military Cemetery which is located 5 km west of Ypres town centre.



Will purchased from
www.probaterearch.service.gov.uk



Author's photograph

Alec may have sustained his wounds as a result of fighting in the Battle of Langemarck, 16 - 18 August 1917. The CWGC states that the costly and unproductive British attacks between 20-25 August convinced Haig that Gough's tactics were not working.



Command for the offensive passed to Plumer who requested a temporary suspension of the fighting to prepare the next forward move. Second Army's ensuing assault, designed to secure the Gheluvelt Plateau, was based on careful planning and overwhelming artillery superiority.

Image from the Imperial War Museum ref: Q2864
[Imperial War Museum](http://www.imperialwarmuseum.org)

Preparations during the first three weeks of September coincided with good weather; sunshine and wind dried the ground and raised the spirits of the Army. As guns and ammunition were accumulated the infantry rehearsed the new style of fighting required by Plumer's battle plan. The role of artillery was paramount; the preliminary bombardment began on 31 August, intensifying daily to culminate in a colossal two day counter-battery shoot prior to zero-hour.¹³

For much of the First World War, Vlamertinghe (now Vlamertinge) was just outside the normal range of German shell fire and the village was used both by artillery units and field ambulances. The New Military Cemetery was begun in anticipation of the Allied offensive launched on this part of the front in July. Although the cemetery continued in use until October 1918, most of the burials are from July to December 1917.

Oscar Douglas Harold Elliott



Author's Photograph

Oscar (known as Douglas) worked variously as a clothes shop assistant, a carriage lifter and a labourer before he enlisted. On 1 February 1913, he married Ethel Jane Holman and they had two children, Edward Stanley, born soon after the marriage, and Ethel Doris, born two years later.

The family was living with Oscar's parents at 29 Blackman Street which must have been more than a little snug. He was also a Gunner in the Royal Garrison Artillery in the 156th Siege Battery. Oscar left for France on 9 September 1916¹⁴ and was also killed in action on 23 December 1917¹⁵, a little over 3 months after his two brothers. He was buried at Minty Farm Cemetery, Langemark-Poelkapelle, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium, again, no more than

10 km from Ypres. His headstone is engraved with "Waiting for the great reveille".

Oscar was awarded the Victory and British War Medals.

Langemark is located north of the town of Ypres. Minty Farm (the name was probably adopted during its occupation by a Wiltshire unit) was used in 1917 as a company headquarters for Commonwealth Forces. The cemetery was begun in October 1917 and used until April 1918 by units fighting on that front. More than a third of the graves are of officers and men of the Royal Artillery.¹⁶



Author's Photograph

Nothing Achieved

The enormous sacrifice made by the Elliott family might have been considered worthwhile, however, 'Third Ypres' ground to a halt without a defining victory; the lack of available reserves as much as the winter weather, atrocious battlefield conditions and continued resolute enemy resistance put paid to further British offensive actions after 10 November.

In over three-and-a-half months fighting (113 days up to and including 20 November) the British and Dominion forces advanced around five miles at a cost of approximately 250,000 casualties. Over 50 British Expeditionary Force Divisions fought in the eight distinct 'battles'.

By the campaign's end no strategic breakthrough had been achieved; despite the most desperate efforts to obtain a secure winter position in the last attacks even the northern end of the main Passchendaele-Westroosebeke ridge remained in German hands.

After the broad-fronted opening attack of 31 July (with its grand and distant strategic objectives) British assaults progressively slowed; fronts of advance narrowed and strictly limited gains became ever more modest. In the process the Salient became a killing ground – where the protagonists fought and lived in the foulest of conditions; incessant British attacks drew in equally determined German resistance. There is no doubt that the German Army was seriously damaged by the British Expeditionary Force's three month slog eastwards from Ypres. An estimated 200,000 German casualties stemmed from repeated British attacks that may not have been consciously initiated as 'attritional' actions, certainly, due to their prolongation, appear so in retrospect as nothing less. But in the process of seriously damaging the principal enemy (the German Field Army) in the decisive theatre of operations (the Western front) the BEF was itself considerably harmed.

Additionally, in the absence of a glorious consummation, the battles of 'Third Ypres' resulted in the creation of a perilously vulnerable salient around Passchedaele, as a forward extension of the larger Ypres Salient;

the considerable difficulties posed for the defence of the new forward positions were soon clearly acknowledged by the British High Command. This verdict was accurate; during the German Spring offensive in April 1918, the territory gained on the uplands east of Ypres, so hard earned by months of selfless sacrifice, was readily relinquished in a matter of days, leaving, in this one family, three widows and nine fatherless children.

Aftermath of the War

On 7 October 1922, Earl Beatty unveiled the Old Steine War Memorial to the dead of WW1. It was designed by J W Simpson, born in Brighton, and held almost 2,600 names.

“The most poignant part of the ceremony was near the end when all the final wreaths had been laid. Unannounced, large numbers of the crowd stepped forward with their own small wreaths and floral tributes, covering every space of the memorial. “They came on”, said the Herald, “till they seemed past counting ...”¹⁷



Author's Photograph

Sidney's widow, Elizabeth, lived at 38 Albion Street from 1917 and possibly until 1932¹⁸. She died in Brighton in 1937. His eldest son, John R does not appear to have stayed in Brighton. Sidney J, his youngest son, was living at 77 Southall Avenue in 1931¹⁹ and sometime after moved to Coldean²⁰.

Alec's wife, Lucy was living at 61 Hamilton Road in 1917 and stayed there for at least a further 11 years²¹. His eldest and only son, Ernest Leonard, married Dora A Levett in 1926 in Brighton and had two children, Ernest and Unis²². They were living at 119 Queens Park Road in 1935²³. His second daughter, Ivy L, remained single and died in 1979 in Brighton. His third daughter, Gertrude Mabel, possibly married in 1929 or 1933 in Brighton.

Oscar's wife, Ethel Jane, remarried in 1920 to Bert H White. They had seven children between 1920 and 1934. Ethel died in 1977 in Brighton. Oscar's son, Edward S, died in August 2000 in Brighton. Edward was living at 12 Dudley Road in 1940 and 1951 and at 140 Cuckmere Way, Hollingbury, in 1960²⁴.

In the year that the three brothers died, their surviving brothers' residences were recorded as follows: Arthur at 9 Newhaven Street, where he remained until at least 1937 and then 79 Osborne Road in 1951²⁵, and Archie at 92 Washington Street.²⁶ Charlotte, their mother, was still living at 29 Blackman Street in 1931²⁷; she died in 1936 in Brighton.

Endnotes

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- ¹ www.findmypast.co.uk (3.12.2013)
 - ² www.findmypast.co.uk (3.12.2013)
 - ³ T Carder, "The Encyclopaedia of Brighton/London Road/Side Streets", (East Sussex County Libraries, 1990) Section 91c
 - ⁴ T Carder, "The Encyclopaedia of Brighton/London Road/Side Streets", (East Sussex County Libraries, 1990) Section 126c
 - ⁵ Simon Adams, "Eye Witness WW1" (Dorling Kindersley, 2008) p26
 - ⁶ Simon Adams, "Eye Witness WW1" (Dorling Kindersley, 2008) p18
 - ⁷ www.findmypast.co.uk (3.12.2013)
 - ⁸ Service Record from Ancestry Library Edition (8.4.2013)
 - ⁹ <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/455404/ELLIOTT,%20SIDNEY> (3.12.2013)
 - ¹⁰ <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/52500/KLEIN-VIERSTRAAT%20BRITISH%20CEMETERY> (3.12.2013)
 - ¹¹ www.findmypast.co.uk (3.12.2013)
 - ¹² <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/142279/ELLIOTT,%20L> (3.12.2013)
 - ¹³ <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/14800/VLAMERTINGHE%20NEW%20MILITARY%20CEMETERY> (3.12.2013)
 - ¹⁴ Service Record from Ancestry Library Edition (8.4.2013)
 - ¹⁵ <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/447308/ELLIOTT,%20D%20H> (3.12.2013)
 - ¹⁶ <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/51502/MINTY%20FARM%20CEMETERY> (3.12.2103)
 - ¹⁷ C Horlock, "Brighton, The Century in Photographs", Volume 1, (SB Publications, 2000) p55
 - ¹⁸ Pike's Directory, 1928
 - ¹⁹ Kelly's Directory, 1931
 - ²⁰ Kelly's Directory, 1940 and 1951
 - ²¹ Pike's Directory, 1925 and 1928
 - ²² www.findmypast.co.uk (3.12.2013)
 - ²³ Pike's Directory, 1934/5
 - ²⁴ Kelly's Directory, 1940, 1951 and 1960
 - ²⁵ Kelly's Directory, 1937 and 1951
 - ²⁶ Service Record from Ancestry Library Edition (8.4.2013)
 - ²⁷ Pike's Directory, 1925, and Kelly's Directory, 1931