George Robert Powell
Royal Army Medical Corp
World War One

Photograph of George R Powell from my own family collection

By Elizabeth Y Wickstead
George Robert Powell (1887-1968)

I feel it is of importance to chronicle a war as seen through the eyes of one who served. My father held great respect for his chums he was always a caring and compassionate man. By studying his diaries and researching his service records I feel I have been able to understand him even more. Those who served during those dreadful years should forever be remembered.

My father George Robert Powell was born in 1887 at 15 Clermont Road, Brighton. He was the only son of George R Powell and Sarah, (nee) Bishop and was educated at York Place Grammar School. At the age of 18 years he enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corp for year in the army and 11 on reserve (Army Form : B50 The Small Book), Regimental Number: 427. After this he worked for his father, a wholesale provision merchant, in London and Brighton.

In 1910 he married Lillian Maude Elsey, of Lindfield, at the All Saints Parish Church in the village. Lillian had met George Robert when she had worked as a dressmaker at ‘Barrance & Ford’ of 51 to 53 Kings Road Brighton. The couple went to live in a house called ‘Pendennis’ in Compton Road Lindfield.

In 1912 at the age of twenty-four George Robert Powell joined the Royal Army Medical Corp, Private no. 6194. Here he served until the end of the First World War and this is where my story begins.

My father served in the RAMC in Egypt, Palestine, France, Belgium and Malta. In 1914 he took part in the famous ‘Retreat from Mons’.

He was reported ‘missing’, at Mons and was injured while nursing on a hospital train at Poperinge.

George Robert Powell wrote a lengthy diary of his experiences, details which were published in ‘The Mid Sussex Times' newspaper, during the time he was at home recovering.

LIFE WITH THE RED CROSS IN WAR-TIME.
(From the Mid Sussex Times 1915 'A Lindfieldian’s diary')

'An interesting diary covering four months experience in France and Belgium has come into our hands. It is that of Private G. R. Powell, of Royal Army Medical Corp, who went out at the beginning of the war and who owing to injuries and an operation...
which left him very physically weak, has now returned for a period of convalescence to his residence, ‘Pendennis’, Compton Road, Lindfield. We had a chat with him for a little while on Saturday morning, and he told us several things of interest.

It appears that Pte. Powell, who was one of the earliest to be sent out, was first attached to the Howitzer Brigade of the Field Artillery, much of his work being connected with the purification of the water supply for the men. He, however, got placed in the “missing” list in the famous retreat from Mons, and thereby hangs an exciting story. He with some more fellows, were left in a cart shed whilst the others were going back, though at the time, he thinks, they hardly knew what they were really doing. The Captain said that those in the shed, right between the two lines, would be fetched later on. A Bombardier was left in charge who intended to obey orders and stay in the dangerous position, but a wounded Major to whom they wished to attend told them to get out of the way at once. They got on the water cart and started up a hill amid a rain of shrapnel which did a great deal of damage. Some of the 15th Hussars had been watching events from a wood, and took the men in tow for two or three days.

Pte. Powell next fell in with Lord Murry’s Company of the Cameron Highlanders. They went down to St Quentin, thence on to Meaux. At the latter place, where they had to blow up the bridges, the tradesmen cleared out all the food they had got, loaded the soldiers up, and threw the rest into the river to prevent the Germans from having it. The British then began to advance, and got to Coulommiers, where the streets were covered with blood, and dead bodies were strewn all over the place. Pte. Powell here did duty as an escort for German prisoners, and his after doings are told in the following extracts from his diary:-

**September 1st**: Retired. Attached to General Hague’s Guard (Cameron Highlanders). Stayed at big a private park. Had a swim, and did some fishing.

**September 2nd**: Retired. Left the park early in the morning, stayed at another big estate. We had to leave suddenly about mid-day. We nearly
ran into enemy, but were warned by a British airman who came down. The Camerons fired on a German aeroplane later in the day, but unsuccessfully; however, the man was brought down later on by some of our infantry, Camped at Chaumes that night. Large reinforcements of French, and English arrived.

**September 3rd.** Advanced from Chaumes. Passed grave of Private Blood, of the Irish Guards. Not much to note, but plenty of reinforcements on the road.

**September 4th.** Enemy on retreat. Many captured.

**September 5th.** We had a bit of a skirmish with the enemy. Captured their outposts.

**September 6th.** Stayed at a large house on the road. Big battle in progress. Many aeroplanes with us, all bringing in good news.

**September 7th.** Advanced to Coulommiers. Many of the villages we passed through were wrecked and smothered with blood. Lot of German equipment lying about and German motor lorry loaded with petrol captured.

**September 8th.** Left Cameron Highlanders. Went from Coulommier to Chaumes by motor lorry. Passed over yesterday’s battlefield. Many dead horses and cattle about: the air smelt of them. We had five German prisoners and one civilian (suspected of being a spy) with us, and we picked up six more prisoners. Stayed at Chaumes that night and slept in a coal truck.

**September 9th.** Left Chaumes early in the morning. French people very good to us. Passed through Versailles, and arrived at Le Mans in the evening. Spy tried to escape, but caught three bullets. Handed over twelve prisoners to fresh escort and slept in the barracks.

**September 10th to 15th.** Le Mans. Stayed at French recruits Artillery Barracks. Went to another French gun park and drew new boots and haversack, as mine were done in.

**September 16th.** Drew equipment and entrained for Versailles. Travelled all night.

**September 17th.** Left Versailles by train for Villeneuve St. George’s-on-the-Seine. Stayed at U.U.S.A. V.A.D. Improvised hospital for the night.

**September 18th.** Fitted up hospital train with provisions, &c.

**September 19th.** Left the town about mid-day. Travelled all night on train. Put in charge of No 1 set of carriages to look after the nursing.

**September 20th.** Arrived at Braisne and loaded with about 250 bad cases (about a dozen of them German). Left the same night.

**September 21st.** Arrived at V, St, George’s unloaded patients and left again.

**September 22nd.** Passed through Le Mans and Angers, and unloaded patients at Nantes. Worked till early hours of next day.

**September 23rd.** Disinfected one ambulance train and went out in the town in the evening.

**September 26th.** Arrived at Braisne early in the morning. Had to wait till evening till another train loaded and then we loaded part of our train. Wounded not so plentiful as on last journey.

**September 27th.** Left Braisne empty in my section, but picked up 37 French patients on the line. Stopped at Fere en Tantepois and other stations for patients.
September 28th. Stopped at V. St. George’s and unloaded some of the worst cases. Departed at 9. 25 and left my French patients in suburbs of Paris, en route for Bordeaux.

September 29th. Arrived at Rouen and unloaded. Left the same day and went to V St. George’s.

October 1st. Depart from V, St. George’s for the front at 9. 46 pm.

October 3rd. At Braisne. Loaded with medical and surgical cases. Left about midnight. Had 20 medical cases in my compartment.

October 5th. Arrived at Rouen at 2 am. Left again an hour later for Le Harve, which we reached at 6. 30 am. Saw French troopers leaving the harbor, also a torpedo flotilla.

October 7th. Arrived at Crepy en Valois. Took on a few sick and wounded.

October 10th. Took on 18 patients in No. 1.

October 11th. Left Crepy en Valois about 10 am, foe at Versailles, where we unloaded about midnight.

October 12th. Left Versailles and went to Rouen.

October 13th. Left Rouen at noon and travelled all day and night, via Beauvais.

October 14th. Arrived in Bethune early this morning. Wounded plentiful. Big battle progressing around Lille; our boys holding their ground well. Left Bethune and travelled all the same night. Eleven lying down cases in No 1.

October 15th. Arrived at Calais about 2 am, and unloaded the wounded on a boat. Assisted by detachment of St, John A. A. and sick bay staff from ship. Stayed in Calais Harbor until mid-day. Hundreds of Belgian Refugees and troops arrived from Ostend by boat and reported that the Germans were in Ostend the evening previous. Many French warships about, and French Garrison Artillery prepared. Proceeded to Boulogne and stayed the night.

October 16th. Arrived at St. Omer about 7 a.m. and loaded with patients. Left about midday and got to Boulogne same evening. Unloaded some of our patients. Twelve lying-down cases in No 1.

October 17th. Finished unloading. Returned to St. Omer.

October 19th. Left Bailleul about 6 . 30 a.m and proceeded to Steinwerck, where we got full of patients and departed about 5 p m. The enemy have visited this place and made a great mess. The railway is blown up, the store shed barricaded and the buildings and telephone wires destroyer.

October 20th. Travelled all day and night stopped for a while at Calais and proceeded to Boulogne.

October 21st. Up all night with patients. Unloaded in the morning and cleaned out the carriage. Left Boulogne about 6 pm and travelled all night.

October 22nd. Arrived at Ypres in Belgium. Went to a convent and helped with wounded. Afterwards went to Hotel de Ville with French civilian who was on a special mission. Travelled all night with wounded.

October 23rd. Got to Boulogne early this morning and left again. Up to sate we have taken 3,000 wounded from the front.

October 28th. Took on patients at Bailleul and Nieppe. A German aeroplane had a try to get the range of us, but was driven off by British and French aeroplanes.

November 1st. Left Calais and proceeded to Ypres. Whilst loading we were shelled by German big guns. One man was killed and three of the wounded hurt. Many windows on the train damaged. The explosion of the shell close by knocked me down and caused me internal injury.
November 2\textsuperscript{nd}. Left Ypres at 5 am under heavy shell fire and proceeded to Calais-sur-Mere. Afterwards to Boulogne, where we unloaded the wounded.

November 3\textsuperscript{rd}. Left Boulogne and went to Calais.

November 4\textsuperscript{th}. Proceeded to Poperinge and loaded.

November 5\textsuperscript{th}. Unloaded at Boulogne.

November 6\textsuperscript{th}. Proceeded to Hasbrouck and Poperinge, where we took on a few patients. Very few wounded.

November 9\textsuperscript{th}. Arrived at Boulogne and unloaded wounded. I also had to report myself to No 13 General Hospital with internal hernia, caused on November 1\textsuperscript{st}. Left Boulogne by special train.

November 10\textsuperscript{th}. Arrived at Rouen in the afternoon and was admitted to No 6 General Hospital on the field.

November 11\textsuperscript{th} to 18\textsuperscript{th}. In hospital at Poiien. Transferred to convalescent camp at Rouen.

November 20\textsuperscript{th}. Discharged. Left Rouen in the morning and went by train to Le Harve, where I entered the rest camp.

November 22\textsuperscript{nd}. Le Harve rest camp. On guard all night with fixed bayonet and ammunition.

November 23\textsuperscript{rd}. Put before medical board, found unfit for further service in firing line and detailed for base garrison duties.

November 24\textsuperscript{th}. On guard at camp.

November 25\textsuperscript{th}. Left rest camp at mid-day and went to ordnance store at docks.

November 26\textsuperscript{th}. On guard over ordnance store till 7 p m, then took over rail truck- load of clothes &c, for 1\textsuperscript{st} Cavalry Division at front. Left Le Harve about 10 o’clock.

November 29\textsuperscript{th}. Arrived at Hazelbrook, but as there was no transport to take convoy off I had to return to Boulogne.

December 4\textsuperscript{th}. Maroc Le Mans. Unloaded convoy and reloaded again the same evening.

December 6\textsuperscript{th}. Arrived at Mezidon about 8 am and left at mid-day.

December 9\textsuperscript{th}. Hazelbrook, German aeroplane passed over and tried to blow station up. Eighteen people killed and others injured.

December 10\textsuperscript{th} to 16\textsuperscript{th}. --- Boulogne, Somerville and Le Havre.

December 16\textsuperscript{th}. Admitted to hospital again at Le Harve.

December 19\textsuperscript{th}. Embarked on hospital ship. Had a very rough passage.

December 22\textsuperscript{nd}. Disembarked and sent to No. 2 Temporary Hospital at Exeter.

December 31\textsuperscript{st}. Went under operation.

Pte. Powell has a high opinion of the ability and the kindness of the Exeter V.A.D workers. He expects to go to the front again; he feels that he ought to do so when he remembers what a terrible amount of suffering there is and now comparatively few are those who can render aid. The ambulance train he was on was an Anglo- French one, with staff largely French. Most of the Belgians speak English, and generally seem a lot better educated than the French. They are also very very generous. The Germans seem able to endure pain particularly well. The average wounded German tries to act as he thinks a German ought to act and so doesn’t complain. Of course some are very treacherous and have to be carefully watched. Quite a lot can speak English.
Pte. Powell said it was very pitiful to see the refugees and the children. One little girl, he said - she was between four and five years old - had a bullet wound through one of her arms and came to the soldiers ambulance to be attended to.

For interest, more details of the R.A.M.C can be found on the web in The Long, Long Trail. [www.1914-1918.net/ramc.htm](http://www.1914-1918.net/ramc.htm)

The next part of Pte. G. R. Powell’s diary tells of his time spent in Malta which was also published in ‘The Mid Sussex Times’

"The Wounded at Malta.

Lindfield man’s story of their arrival.

The work of tending those who are wounded in operations in the Dardanelles is carried out in part at St Andrew’s Hospital Malta and from that place a Lindfieldian, Private G. R. Powell, of the Royal Army Medical Corps, writes interestingly in diary form. We make extracts as follows:- "My work at present is just a bit risky, as I am working in the fever wards, doing my bit for those who have been stricken down".

The diary from May 12th to 29th is a record of hospital routine:- unloading wounded from successive hospital ships; the deaths of various patients; their burial; and so on.

June 3rd. Today’s celebration of the anniversary of the birthday of His Majesty King George V, was marked by a profuse display of Union Jack, flown over the forts, civil institutions, private houses and public establishments. Strada Reale was particularly attractive in a dressing of flags which decorated the balconies and terraces. In the evening the band of the King’s Own Malta Militia played on the Ghar Id-dad. Sliema, from 7 30 to 8 30, in the presence of a large gathering of people.

June 4th. At about 6 30 am a stately vessel, distinguished by the Red Cross flag and having the same emblem painted on both sides entered the Lazaretto harbor. The Union Jack down at half-mast from the stern signified that death was present with the living. Shortly afterwards the vessel slowed down and took up mooring off Sa Maison, from where a strong party of the R A M C proceeded on board to assist in the landing of the wounded. Many were patients from the Red Cross Hospital at Lemnos;
others came direct from the firing line. The place where fighting is going on our troupes have christened ‘Shrapnel Valley’. The patients from the hospital at Lemnos had a bit of excitement the night before they left when a Turkish taupe dropped two bombs near the hospital. Happily no one was injured. The vessel left Lemnos on Tuesday night. During the passage, the weather for which was fine, four bodies were buried at sea. A Marine died on Friday morning the body being brought to Malta for interment. The work of landing commenced about 10 30, by which time the shore arrangements were in readiness under the A.S.C. who controlled a long line of motor cars and ambulance wagons. Operations on board were necessary very slow as cots had to be carefully lowered over the side whilst the wounded who could walk filed with difficulty down the ladder, many of them having to be carried or otherwise assisted by men of the R.A.M.C. On the P. and O landing stage were assembled a St John Ambulance party and a detachment of R.A.M.C. from the hospital, who assisted the patients into their conveyances. About 11 o’clock the first tender put off with it’s covered barge conveying the wounded officers who, on being assisted to land, were conducted to motor cars in waiting, which were driven off in the direction of the hospital and other quarters assigned to them, some being taken to St Andrew’s Hospital others to Valletta Military Hospital and others to the Blue Sister’s Hospital according to the nature of their wounds. The arrival of the second barge was awaited and as it approached the sight of about 30 prostrate warriors created great interest amongst the crowd of spectators. With great care the R.A.M.C. stretcher bearers, boarded the barge and carefully carried on to the pier where they were first seen by a medical officer and afterwards put onto the different ambulance wagons for the different hospitals, accordingly as their wounds necessitated. The people of Malta showed great sympathy, and gave the wounded cigarettes, matches, chocolate and flowers. Afterwards the barges arrived in quick succession with their loads of wounded all war-worn and limping many of them bearing bloodstains on their uniform. There were troops of all sorts of regiments: - English; Australian; New Zealanders; French; Italian and Turkish amongst the wounded. We took 281 wounded to our hospital.

**June 6th.** The weather here is just a bit warm, and we get worried by mosquitoes and other insects. We have had some very sharp thunderstorms the last three days. The climate does not agree with us all here, as we have had quite a number of our fellows down with colic.

Private Powell says that if those at home who are eligible and who have not yet joined the colours hear the tails he has heard and see the sights he has seen, Lord Kitchener would not appeal in vain for recruits, and there would be no need to talk of conscription. The work of tending the wounded from the Dardanelles, he goes on, is still being carried out in part in St Andrew’s Hospital and he is still working in the fever wards.

At Poperinge he received an internal injury while nursing on a hospital train which was used for the many Tommy’s injured at Ypres. The railway station at Poperinge became one of the most important on the Western Front in WW1 as it was used by both military and refugees in Ypres and was a constant target of German artillery.
These Ambulances were horse drawn used for a short time in 1914. Picture of George Robert Powell second from the left from my collection.

The R.A.M.C. were responsible for getting fresh water and were in charge of the horse drawn water purification carts.

Horses and water carts, Imperial War Museum Photo Q 5943

Details in his diary have been backed up by several days spent at the Public Record Office (now The National Archives) at Kew.

The Medal Index Card (M.I.C.) shows the entitlement to campaign medals for the First World War. The 1914 Star, popularly but inaccurately known as the ‘Mons Star’ was the least common campaign medal as it was only awarded to those who had served in France between August 5th 1914 and midnight of November 22/23rd, 1914. The Aug-Nov clasp goes on the medal ribbon of the A` Rosette” denotes the entitlement of the clasp and is worn in undress service uniform when only medal ribbons are being are being worn. The small silver rose is worn in the centre of the 1914 Star Ribbon.
Old Contemptible George, R, Powell with his wife Lillian M, (nee) Elsey. Image from my own collection

In 1942, at the age of 55, George R. Powell volunteered his services again and went into the Royal Air Force as a medical orderly and served till 1945. During this time he served at various airfields on ambulance duty to assist the injured air crew on return from their missions.

He received a letter on joining during World War Two from G. S. Sherwood a cartoonist who lived in Hayward’s Heath, who showed his admiration and drew the cartoon below.

Mr Sherwood says in his letter, “How nice to think that you do not have the morning wash and shave out in the open as happened in the last war. Taken from letter sent to my father in my collection.

We take off our hats to the "old contemptible " AC.2 G. R. Powell.

Yours G.S. Sherwood.
My father died in 1968 in Cuckfield leaving 5 daughters and his wife Lillian.

**Bibliography**

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WO 95-1399 " " Royal Field Artillery.
WO 95-1248 " " 15th Hussars.
WO 95- 1264 " " Cameron Highlanders
WO 95- 5449 " " Malta Troops.
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WO 73- 98 General monthly return of army.

The story of Pte Michael Blood of the Irish Guards on
www.connaughtrangers/history.Soldiers-stories

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British Campaign Medals of the First World War
www.greatwar.co.uk/medals/campaign-medals.htm

Medal Index Card from The National Archives www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

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