

# John (Jack) Philby – A Bandsman from Amberley in the Great War – 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment



Uncle Jack front left - with moustache Front right and rear right? The Jackson Brothers  
[Photograph from family collection]

By Ian Evans

## Summary

3189 Bandsman J Philby, A Company 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment; 116<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 39<sup>th</sup> Division, British Expeditionary Force (BEF) France.

John (Jack) Philby was my Grandmother's second oldest brother and, along with her sisters, her favourite. Friends of Jack's from Amberley and nearby had already joined the Royal Sussex Regiment (RSR). He was one of four who trained together (and shared tents) at Cooden Camp near Bexhill as part of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Jack had been a shepherd and farm labourer, although his father and (later) other brothers worked at the Peppers Chalk Pits at Houghton (now a museum).

Jack had never travelled far from the village and he saw joining up and seeing other places as an adventure, including Cooden and Bexhill when he arrived there. The contrast between being a shepherd on the downs and military training let alone the Western Front later was huge. Jack, his father and brothers belonged to the Amberley Brass Band, as did his friends, so he and others carried this on into the army and became bandsmen and hence stretcher bearers.

We have quite a few letters and postcards sent throughout Jack's service, kept by my Grandmother (not all the cards are mentioned below). While they are interesting and intended to comfort and please his sisters he almost entirely avoided mentioning anything about what he found at the Front. However Jack was concerned about a lack of scissors to cut away uniforms of the wounded and poignantly in one of his last letters (May 1916) asked if he could be sent several pairs if possible. It suggests a problem with some medical supplies during the period a few months before the battle of the Boars Head and the Somme.

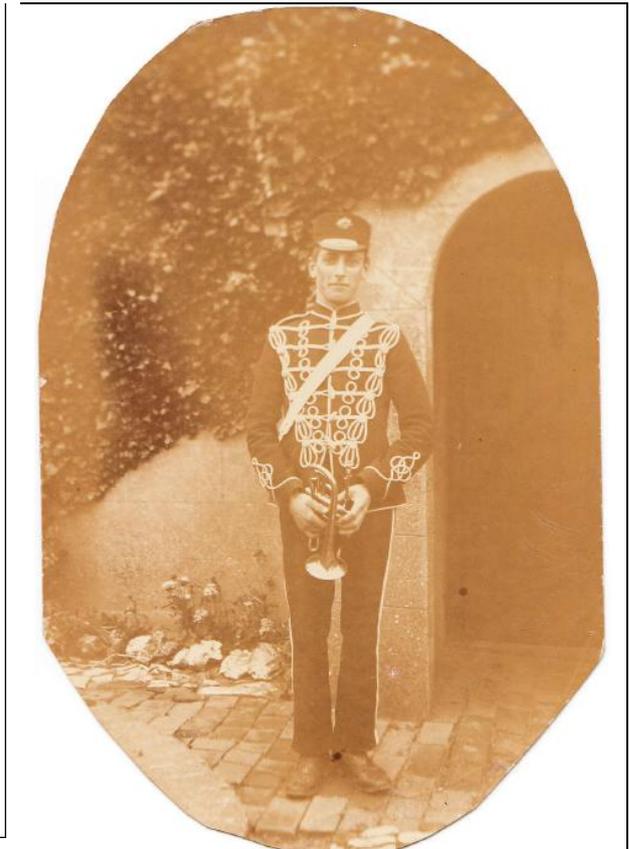
## Introduction

While I have other family members who fought and in several cases also died in the Great War I wanted to write this case study because my grandmother often thought about her brother and kept his letters and medals in the bottom of her longcase clock as well as showing me pictures of him and his original burial place. It is possible that Jack's loss led to my grandmother becoming a Red Cross Nurse and indirectly to my mother becoming a nurse and Ward Sister, if so leaving a legacy up to the present time. Also when I became interested in World War 1 (WW1) as a teenager the contrast between life at home in the tranquil (if not very exciting for a young man) downs and the Western Front struck me. My grandmother and great aunts talked to me about Jack and showed me pictures when I was young and I knew some of his brothers quite well, I always knew him as "Uncle Jack". Several of Jack's brothers worked in the Amberley Chalk Pits (Peppers) and his father Robert was foreman of the pits/lime works for many years. The men of the Philby family made up a large proportion of the Amberley Brass Band, football and cricket teams. I learnt to play clarinet using my great grandfather's instrument!

## Background

John Philby was born on 30th August 1885, the second of the 14 children of Robert & Elizabeth Philby of Amberley. Robert worked at the Amberley Lime Works and by the turn of the century had become manager of the Lime Works.

In the 1901 census John's occupation is listed as Shepherd and in 1911 as Farm Labourer.



Uncle Jack - with dog - and as an Amberley bandsman  
[Photographs from family collection ]



Amberley Brass Band c1909 (date blurred) – Jack far right 2<sup>nd</sup> row  
[Photograph from family collection]



One of Jack's pictures - Royal Sussex Regiment Military Band – Jack second row from front  
2<sup>nd</sup> left? [Family collection]

John joined up at the beginning of January 1915 with other young men from the village including brothers Reggie and Ralph Jackson and Herbert William Launder. All four became members of the 13th Battalion. Many of the young men who joined up were also members of the village band, and the football and cricket teams.

Four young men from Amberley joined the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment (part of Lowthers Lambs).

These were 3150 Ralph Jackson, 3151 Reginald Henry Jackson, 3157 Herbert William Launder (became Lance Corporal - died 23/03/1918) and 3189 John Philby (Others from the village joined other regiments or services e.g. Bob Philby joined the Royal Flying Corps). At least three, and probably all of them stayed together while training and shared the same billets or tent.

The two Jackson brothers (top and bottom right in the title page picture) were sons of the landlord of the Black Horse in Amberley. Some people think that the two brothers were twins, but they were not, although they may have been close in age. Because of this they may be in some accounts of twins killed together. They were killed at the battle of the Boars Head, one outright and one shortly after as a result of wounds, along with my Great Uncle Jack. All three were clearly close friends and the two brothers were friendly with Jack's sisters. There was also another Jackson brother and the pub remained with the family up to the early 1950's at least. According to my mother (whose home was opposite the pub) Mrs Jackson (possibly wife of the third son?) was running the Black Horse in around about 1950.

#### From Jacks Letters, his experiences:

By 10<sup>th</sup> January 1915 Jack had joined the 3<sup>rd</sup> South-Down Battalion, billeted at 1A Park Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, having sent a card (postmarked 10<sup>th</sup> Jan 1915) to my Grandmother to cheer her up and to say that Reg and Ralph (Jackson brothers) wanted to be remembered to her.

By 27<sup>th</sup> January (letter dated) Jack was at Eversly Road, mentioning he was sorry to miss seeing another Jack from Amberley, (a boyfriend of my Grandmother, back on leave from another battalion of the RSR, based at Ewshott), but especially saying that he was very pleased to think that he enlisted as he did "you get to see more life and it opens anyones eyes too, when you get away from home and get amongst other people. I am still in the band..." He also mentions that the town is more like the country with shaded lights (the coastal blackout I take it) and trams finishing early. He mentions Reg and Ralph again and that they are billeted in a good place together.

1<sup>st</sup> May (postmarked): E Company 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Cooden Camp: "...not such a good living as we had at first..." Mentions that they (band) have been playing down at Bexhill earlier and going again the following afternoon. Also mentions that the following week there will be three field

days (training) from 6:00 am on. Sending (probably sheet music) Sussex-by-the-Sea shortly.

Postmarked 9<sup>th</sup> May: E Company: Detling Camp Nr Maidstone: 4 miles from camp Berstead village "nearly as large as home". "Found a woman to do my washing (hard to keep clean in camp)". Current routine up at 5am, breakfast 6;45, parade at 8:00 am then up a hill like Whit-ways Lodge (i.e. steep/long – refers to where modern road from Amberley and A29 meet) followed by 3 miles for troops to go trench digging (band I think follows and plays for them), back to camp, go and meet troops at 5 pm and play them home. Tents crowded some prefer to sleep outside if fine. Need passes to go to Maidstone. Has (other) Jack been in action yet? "I don't think we are going to stop here long only to do the trenching it is the third line of defence for London in case of invasion". ...there is a song I was going to get for you (to sing) but I could not get it at Bexhill if I do happen to see it about I will send it to you it is (Keep the home fire burning) I heard it at the Bijou at Bexhill it is a fine song.." (Jack sent the words later, I note that it was an Ivor Novello ballad and entitled 'Till the Boys Come Home).

Postmarked (PM) 15<sup>th</sup> July 1915 Detling Camp: Most evenings go down to the village for a walk around, "...some very nice walks about just right for young couples to go it is a pretty little place...". "The troops are getting on fine with heir trench digging the General was very pleased with them of course they are making them like they are at the front they look all right when they are finish you can hardly tell they are there till you get quite close to them and they have got tunnels and all." "We have to go in under a tue? practise all three bands playing as one band about 75 men in all so you may guess it is a pretty big thing."

PM 9<sup>th</sup> September 1915: Mentions plenty of hoppers coming to Maidstone. Apparently back from leave, with Reg and Ralph to go soon. "Old Bill gone home again this week going to do some harvesting for his Boss". (Possibly this was Herbert William Launder).

PM 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1915 Milford: Christmas Cards to Grandmother & sisters; On Active Service YMCA paper (Prob. Whitley) Camp Godalming. "...we are learning musketry mornings and do stretcher drill afternoons" (plus long marches) will be playing at a Battalion concert. Asking again how the other Jack is, writing with a fountain pen from I think girlfriend Blanche. Asks not to be sent Christmas cards. In a ps, signs off Bonjour (?something).

PM 4<sup>th</sup> March 1916: From Whitley Camp; nature of letter makes it clear that the battalion is about to leave for France " ..do not worry over me I shall be alright...". He asks for some sort of powder and says "we are not going so soon as expected owing to submarines being in the channel or that is what they say." " ..talk we are going on Saturday night we have got our ammunitions every-thing ready to go at a moment's notice. We are having awful weather again now been raining and snowing all day long it is a perfect slush around our huts..." Asks that (other) Jack is told they are on their way. Marched with the troops playing after a long time

without doing so. "We have a load when we get everything on with the 120 rounds of ammunition and then carry our instruments". "I shall think of that song Sing me to sleep where bullet ?fall when I get out there where they whizz over ones head. Bonjour ? you better not write any-more here wait to you hear from me."

PM 27 March 1916 Field Post Office: Jack was in huts about ½ mile from a town, better than previous billets, written to the other Jack hoping to hear back. "...we seem to be moving more south now, shall be back in the firing line again soon I expect".

12<sup>th</sup> April 1916 Field Post Office: Jack mentions nothing about what is happening. He tells my Grandmother that "if you do wish sometimes that you were out here I am afraid you would soon wish your-self back again as there is nothing out here very inviting for anyone. We are having lovely weather out here but there are no hills to climb like there is at home it is nice level country."

PM 7th May 1916 Field Post Office: "We are having lovely weather at the time of writing and the trees are coming out in full bloom making the surroundings much more cheerful..." "...we shall be going up again before long, when you go home again please ask Mary (a sister) if they have got a pair of scissors they could send out when they send again two pairs if you got them, we want them for cutting the clothing off the wounded they would be a good help to us for a jack knife is not much for the job and it is a case of getting them dressed as quickly as possible. So if you could manage to send it, it would be a great help to the wounded and make it much better for me (and us) SB). When we were in last time we had several casualties but hope we shall come out next time with less. You might tell Bess (another sister) Reg and Ralph send their best wishes I gave them a bit of the cake she sent me."

PM 31<sup>st</sup> May 1916 Field Post Office: Jack thanks the girls for a parcel "I will send them one of the cards when we get out of the trenches again if we are spared; it is rather a hot part of the line where we are at; the Germans keep us busy at times. P S One of the ?Frenche's (could be a fellow RSR soldier or French civilian/soldier? (letters not clear)) got killed last night. Jack said he had little time to write letters but would when possible. (Possibly these last letters might be switched round as I am relying on postmarks on the different sized envelopes though the sizes seem right for the letters)

Jack was killed during the Battle of the Boar's Head, June 30<sup>th</sup> 1916 (The Day Sussex Died). He was 29.

Someone there at the time said that Uncle Jack and others had gone out during a cease fire to help/bring back the wounded, but that one side or the other recommenced shelling before this was completed and that Jack was looking after someone, bending over, and was hit with shell shrapnel in the back. This was what was passed on to me as far as I remember by my Grandmother and my mother remembers the same story. I think one

of the soldiers who knew him must have come back on leave with this account.

I have largely not included personal, family and other aspects in the letters, although they should be recorded – (some very poignant) or a full transcript made.

### Conclusion

My Grandmother was very close to her bother Jack and fondly kept his letters with other precious things, she never forgot about him and I think this may be why she was so active in the Red Cross and therefore also got my mother involved in nursing. Jack himself had the experience of many men who joined up. He hoped for a bit of an adventure, enjoying doing something different although accepting that a soldier's life involved things you didn't want to do. From small clues in his letters he got more disillusioned with time. In his early letters he talked about everything he was doing, but once at the front did not mention what the fighting itself was like, writing about things going on at home (not covered above) and other less unpleasant things, only breaking out from this because of the lack of scissors to remove the clothing of wounded men.

There is more that I have not covered and perhaps I will add to this case study and look into what happened to his friends. Sadly the Jackson Brothers (not twins though some people thought they were) also died and later in the war his other friend in the RSR, I am not sure what happened to the other Jack, my Grandmother's friend. There is also a picture of a soldier (I think still RSR) not named amongst the others, though it appears he was a friend of one of Jack's sisters. It has a note on the back to say he was killed and missed.

The final picture below is of Jack's original grave. I know that someone set up an organisation to send back pictures to families. However the origin of this and other pictures of Jack's grave we have is not known.



Jacks original resting place [author's image]