

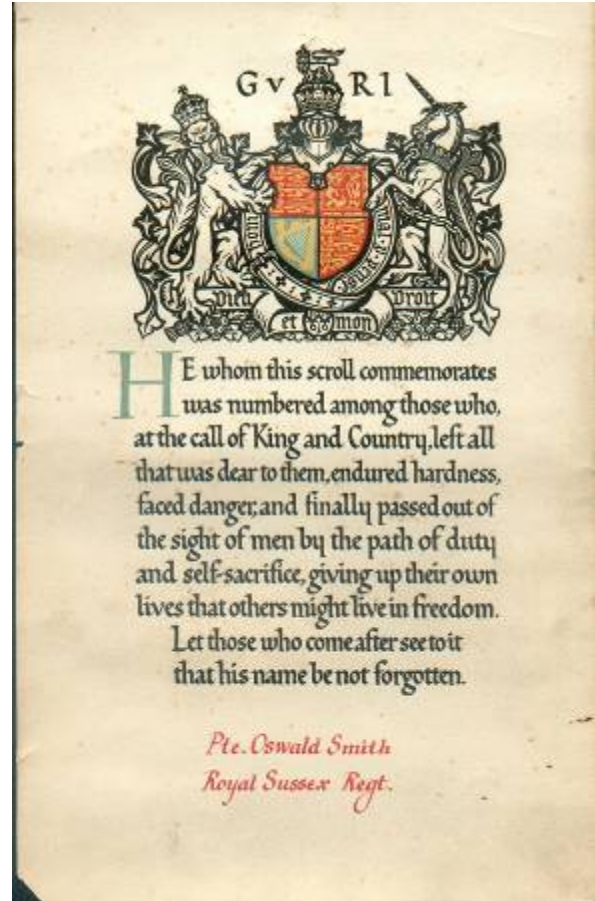
OSWALD SMITH

1895 – 1915

A GREAT WAR SOLDIER FROM WICK,
LITTLEHAMPTON

By Leigh Lawson

Oswald Smith was born at 23 Little High Street Worthing on 20 April 1895, the son of William Oswald and Fanny Smith but by 1907 the Smith family had moved to Dorset Road, Littlehampton and in 1911 were living at 1 Gladstone Terrace, Wick – their home for many years. My father Leslie Speller was born there in December 1914 only weeks before Ossie was killed. Ossie had four older half brothers and two older half sisters, as well as two older sisters (one of whom was my paternal grandmother Minnie), three younger brothers and three younger sisters. Three of the older brothers Reginald, Sydney and Archibald were soldiers in the Royal Sussex Regiment before 1914



Ossie was recruited to the 2nd Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment in Chichester in August 1914; regimental number G/1481 He trained at Newhaven before being posted to Annequin, France in January 1915. He is now believed to have died at Cuinchy on 25/26 January 1915 after only 12 days in the trenches. This is earlier than the official date of death, 12 February 1915.

He has no known grave, and is commemorated at the Le Touret Military Cemetery Memorial.

[Images and items from authors collection]

Nick Ward, the local military historian (ww1tommyresearch@yahoo.co.uk), who kindly took me to Cuinchy, writes:

'I believe Oswald Smith died 25th/26th January 1915 along with many others and joined his unit on the 13th January which means he survived only 12 days in the trenches!

I know he was recruited in August as his name appears in the Chichester Observer in early September 1914 under a heading of 'new recruits'.

Extracts from Regimental Diary WO/95/1269

13th January 1915, a draft of 210 arrived at 2.10 pm and 2nd Lt Gramshaw. These went straight into the trenches when they arrived from Annequin where they had billeted the night before. All Kitcheners August recruits. They seemed a good lot.

'It would seem this draft must have included Oswald Smith as no other drafts had joined since his arrival in France and without any further training sent straight into the front line'.

15th January 1915, today we fired rifle grenades from our left trench at the Germans digging along the bottom of the embankment (railway) and succeeded in frightening them and stop digging for a while. Very busy improving trenches.

'Another entry in the diary a few days later gives a snapshot of life behind the lines'.

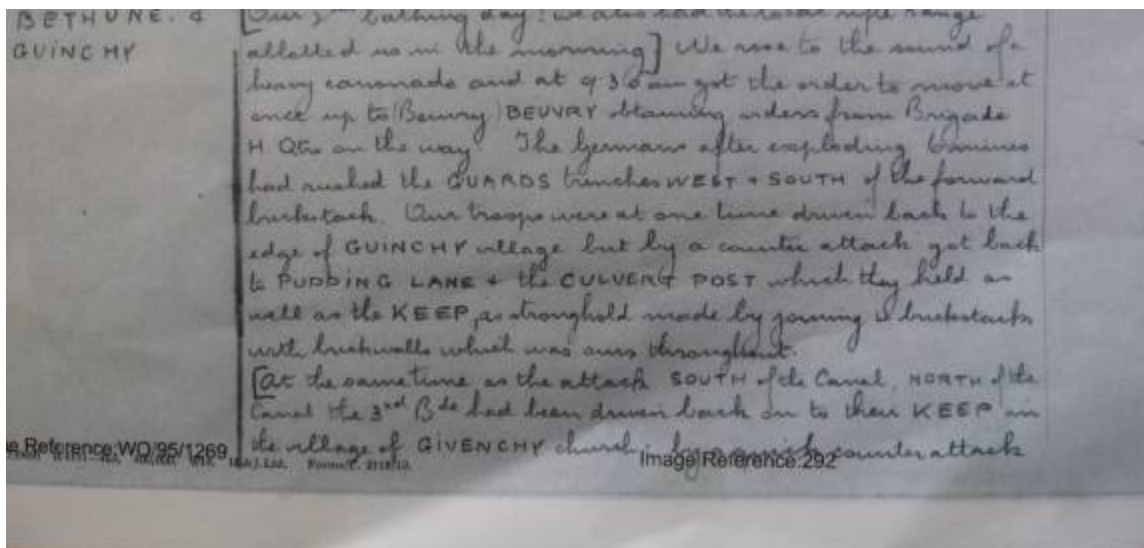
17th January 1915, today we bathed B Company not before it was wanted! And then had the baths equally divided between Companies for their use while we are here. Underclothing sent from England was very useful as it enabled us to give a certain amount of men clean clothing after their baths.

'The following day they were back in the line for several days and then rest until given rushed orders on the 25th January as the Germans had detonated 6 mines beneath our lines and were intent on taking our trenches'.

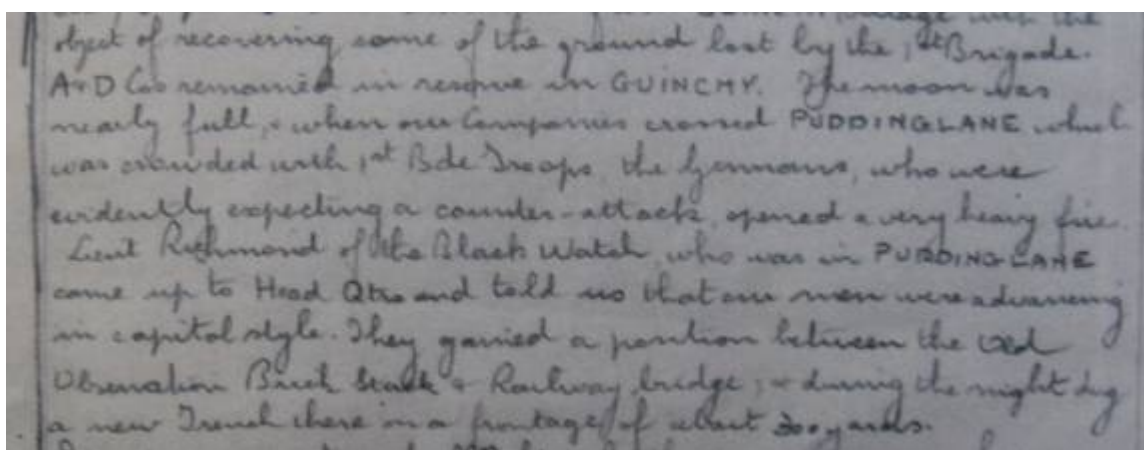
25th January 1915, B and D Coy's advanced from the village with object of recovering some of the ground lost by 1st Brigade, the moon nearly full when our Companies crossed PUDDING LANE which was crowded with 1st Brigade troops. The Germans were evidently expecting a counter-attack and opened very heavy fire. Lt Richmond of the Black Watch who was in PUDDING LANE came up to our HQ and told us that our men were advancing in capital style.

'Oswald and his comrades evidently fought well and recaptured a lot of lost ground but at the cost of one Officer wounded and 64 Other Ranks killed, wounded or missing and I am certain Oswald Smith was one these casualties. His body was never found and he is commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial, panels 20 and 21, Pas de Calais.'

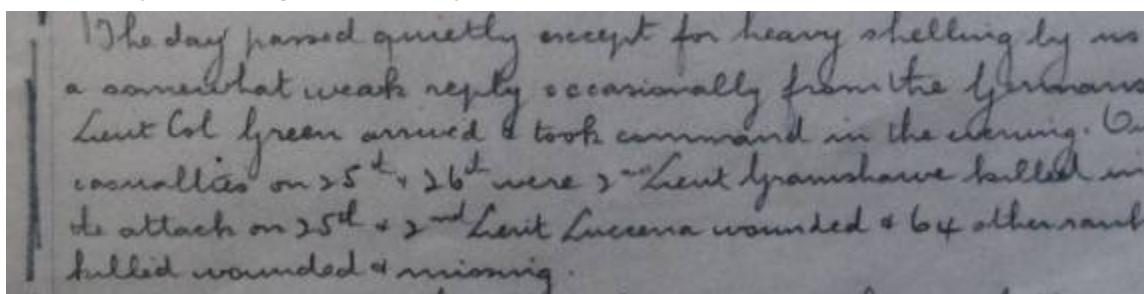
On the official date of death, 12 February 1915, the 2nd Battalion were 47 miles away from Cuinchy in Allouagne on platoon training. Therefore it seems highly unlikely that Ossie died on that date. They were not involved in fighting again until 10 March 1915.



24 January 1915 Regimental diary extract WO/95/1269

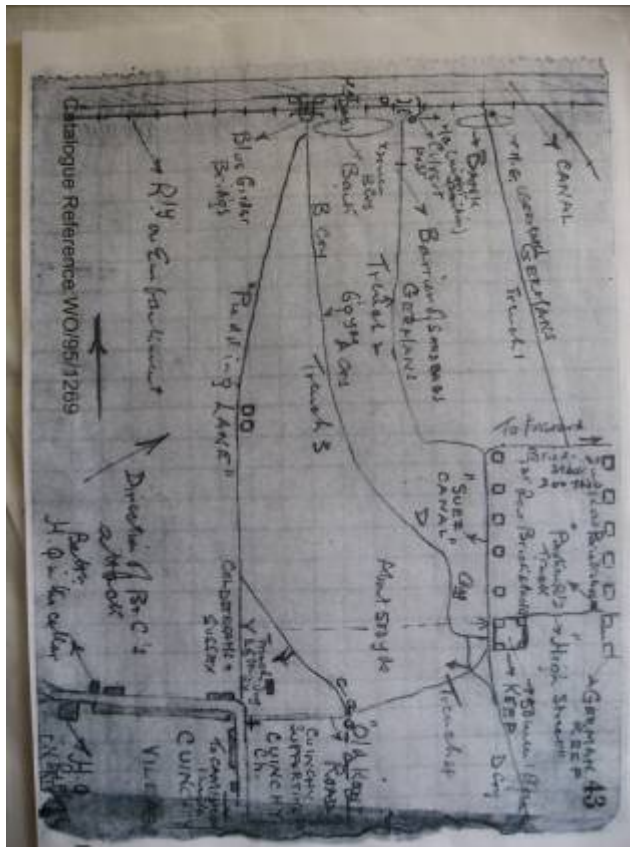


25 January 1915 Regimental diary extract WO/95/1269



26 January 1915 Regimental diary extract WO/95/1269

In the diary the name Cuinchy is usually spelt as Guinchy. It mentions the brickstacks which were grouped in the area and used as defences. They were joined with brick walls to form the 'Keep'. 'Pudding Lane' trench ran down from the culvert past the brickstacks and across a field, it was occupied in January 1915 by the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards with the 2nd Battalion Royal Sussex.



Trench Map 1915 WO/95/1269

The flat ground near Cuinchy was covered by brick stacks, big cubical heaps of bricks about 12 square yards and 16 feet high still standing in the position in which they were burnt. Each had a hollow in the centre at ground level which contained the fire with flues through the structure by means of which the fumes escaped. The bricks were packed in such a way that there remained minute spaces between each so that the mass was very elastic and practically impervious to shell-fire.

(from an article about the Follows brothers
www.ww1wargraves.co.uk)

'Cuinchy bred rats. They came up from the canal, fed on the plentiful corpses, and multiplied exceedingly...

There has been a lot of fighting hereabouts. The trenches have made themselves rather than been made, and run inconsequently in and out of the big thirty-foot high stacks of bricks; it is most confusing. The parapet of a trench which we don't occupy is built up with ammunition boxes and corpses.'

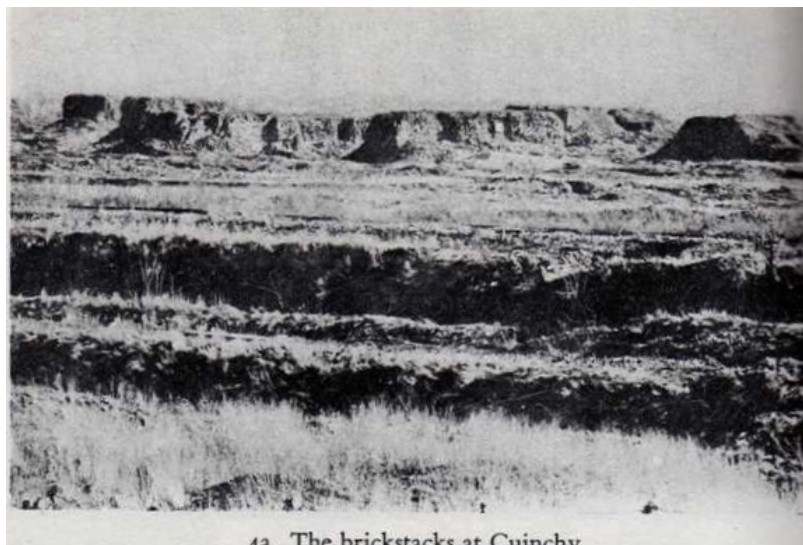
Robert Graves, *Goodbye To All That*, autobiography published 1929

'The red-brick hollow ruin of a station marked 'Cuinchy' told us we were almost at our journey's end...

Cuinchy was a slaughter-yard. The front line... ran through an extensive brickfield, with many massive foursquare brickstacks, fused into solidity; of these historic strange monuments about a dozen or so lay in our lines, and about the same number in the German lines...

Who that had been there but a few hours could ever forget the sullen sorcery and mad lineaments of Cuinchy? A mining sector, as this was, never wholly lost the sense of hovering horror... Over Coldstream Lane, the chief communication trench, deep red poppies, blue and white cornflowers and darnel thronged the way to destruction.'

Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, autobiography published 1928



'The brickstacks, such of them as were occupied, were approached by insecure, narrow windings through wicked clay; our domestic arrangements naturally grouped themselves on the home side of them, and no less naturally the Germans at their discretion belaboured them and their precincts with high explosive.'
Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*

Photo *Goodbye To All That*, Robert Graves, published 1929



photo ww1battlefields.co.uk

Disturbed ground on the site of the brickstacks.



photo Leigh Lawson 16 Dec 2012

Looking towards the railway embankment and canal.

Beside the railway line at Cuinchy 2012. The surface of the Boules pitches is made not of gravel but of ground-up bricks.



photo Nick Ward 16 Dec 2012
ww1tommyresearch@yahoo.co.uk

Le Touret Military Cemetery and Memorial.
Richebourg L'Avoue, Pas de Calais.

The memorial commemorates over 13,000 servicemen who fell in this area before 25 September 1915 and who have no known grave. One of those named is Oswald Smith.



[Images taken by author]



SMITH. O.



Royal Sussex Panel 20/21
[images taken by author]



[From authors collection]



Littlehampton cemetery. The grave of Ossie's father William Oswald Smith, who died in 1941. Young Ossie's name was included in the inscription.

The grave can be found in the N/E corner of the cemetery near the path towards the main road.

The gravestone with Fanny Smith's name added to it when she died in 1947. Photographed in the 1990's.

In loving memory of my dear husband
William Oswald Smith
Died Feb 25th 1941 aged 84
Also of Pte Oswald Smith
Dearly loved son of above
Killed in action Feb 12th 1915 aged 19.
Rest in peace
Also of Fanny Edith Smith
Beloved wife and mother of above
Died Dec 4th 1947 aged 82.
Re-united



