

William Henry Boxall

Lance-Corporal, No. G/13694, Royal
Sussex Regiment

“An Old Contemptible”

By Julia Westgate

Summary

This case study covers the family background of William Henry Boxall and his time as a lance-corporal in the Royal Sussex Regiment. It shows how his army service affected his health leading to a very premature departure from action in the First World War.

Introduction

William Henry Boxall was my grandfather on my mother's side. I grew up knowing that he was a member of the 'Old Contemptibles' and something to be proud of (see Appendix 1 for the entry from the book by Robin Neillands, *The Old Contemptibles* for the origin of the term). He was discharged from service early in the war due to ill-health but his story is both interesting and enlightening showing what it was like to be part of the British Expeditionary Force and BECAUSE he was an 'Old Contemptible'.

Family background

William was born on 4 June 1887 at Shaves Cottages, Hurstpierpoint, Sussex, to William and Rose (nee Lewry) Boxall. He was the fifth child of eight siblings. The fourth child, born in 1886, but who died aged five months, had also been named William Henry.

By the 1891 census the family is living in Burgess Hill at 4, Charleston. William's father is a bricklayer's labourer.

By 1901 the family is living at 7, Nye Road, Burgess Hill, a road of terraced houses. William, senior, is still working as a bricklayer's labourer and William, junior, at 13 years of age, is an errand boy.

The *Kelly's Directory of Sussex 1899* lists Burgess Hill as a town with a population (1891) of 4,415. It has a range of amenities – a railway station on the London to Brighton railway line, a police station, post office, gas and "remarkably pure water". There is also a wide range of commercial and trade operators and it has its own urban district council. There are two schools. A large sheep and lamb fair is held yearly on the "Fairfield".¹

By 1911 the family has moved again and is now living in Wivelsfield. The father is still working as a bricklayer, but William Henry is not listed at this address. This is because he has joined the army. On the 1911 census his name is listed in the "Return of all Commissioned Officers, Warrant Officers, Non-commissioned Officers, Trumpeters, Drummers and Rank and File as:

William Boxall, Lance-Corporal, 24, single, 1st Royal Sussex Regiment, Born Hurstpierpoint.

The Attestation sheet of his army service record held in the National Archives and viewed via Ancestry.co.uk gives the information that on 10 January 1905 at the age of 18 years and 7 months he joined the Royal Sussex Regiment at Chichester attesting to serve for 12 years – the first nine in Army Service or 'Colours' and the remaining three in the First Class of the Army Reserve. His occupation on joining the army is as a bricklayer.

William's career in the "Colours"

William joins the 1st Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment as a private but by 27 March 1905 he becomes a lance-corporal. He has postings in Malta and Crete but in October 1907 he is sent to India where he remains for over 5 years until March 1913 when he returns home and is transferred to the Army Reserve. It is while he is in India that this photograph is taken. It shows him as a member of 'A' Company in 1912 as winners of the Company Cup. He is in the back row, second from right.



RSR/PH/1/14 Photos principally 1st battalion RSR in India 1908-1919 at West Sussex Record Office

(The family owns a very similar photograph taken at the same time.)

On 9 August 1913 William marries Fanny Alice Stevens at St Wilfrid's Church in Haywards Heath. Fanny is the sister of Herbert Leslie Stevens (the subject of another case study *Herbert Leslie Stevens 17 March 1887 - 30 October 1914*) who has been serving in the same battalion and company as William. He is also

in the above picture (back row, first left). According to family members they enlisted at about the same time and therefore were to spend many years together. In fact, when William's first and only son is born on 29 July 1914 he is named Herbert Leslie. At the start of their marriage William and Fanny are living in Mill Green Road, Haywards Heath, a road of terraced houses.

William's experiences in the first world war

Because he is a reservist, William is recalled to the Colours and becomes part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). Robin Neillands, in the introduction to his book *The Old Contemptibles*, says ²

- the British Expeditionary Force, the BEF, or as the survivors liked to call themselves, the 'Old Contemptibles', that well-trained, highly skilled, professional army which left Britain in August 1914. In the next four months the BEF was almost totally destroyed in the battles of Mons and Le Cateau, in the fighting on the rivers Marne and Aisne, and last of all, in the ferocious battle of 'First Ypres' in October and November 1914, where this little army of professional soldiers stood and fought and died, doggedly keeping their faces to the foe.

He goes on to say that the original BEF of 1914 was a very small army, seven divisions or around 160,000 men and the original force that sailed from Britain in early August numbered only half of that and more than 60% of its soldiers were recalled reservists. He states that "it was far too small and inadequately equipped for the job it was sent to do – but it did it anyway". ³

William was mobilised on 5 August and posted to the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment, literally days after the birth of his first child. The Battalion was part of the 1st Division, 2 Brigade. William's main areas of action are with the BEF in the early days of the war and at the Battle of Aisne in September 1914. On its arrival, the BEF, along with the French Fifth Army are ordered to meet the advance of the German First, Second and Third Armies sweeping west and south-west into France. Following the Battle of Marne the German army crosses the Aisne on 13 September 1914. The French and British attempt to outflank the German right and a stand-off battle is fought until 18 September. The following account of what William would experience is taken from the war diary of the 2nd Battalion for 2 August 1914 -12 April 1919.⁴ It says that reservists start arriving at the Woking depot during 6 August and that on 12 August the Battalion leaves for Southampton. The parties set sail and arrive at Le Havre on 13 August. On the 14 August they are entrained for Etreu where they are received in a "very friendly spirit" by the French public. On 16 August they march to Esqueheries (about five miles) where they are billeted in scattered locations in the village along with the remainder of the 2 Brigade (1st Northamptonshire Regiment, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment and Kent Royal Rifles).

Over the next few days there are battalion route marches, two of them being about 12 miles each. On 19 August they receive their first mail from England and there is a Brigade concert in the evening.

They march on both 21 and 22nd August (distances of approximately 14 and 16 miles respectively). On arrival at their destination the Battalion vehicles are unloaded and horses unharnessed, but within a couple of hours the Brigade receives orders to move immediately and the Battalion is turned round in 20 minutes with each man being issued 50 additional rounds of ammunition in this time. They arrive about midnight at Villiers-sur-Nicole, D Company furnishing two piquets on the road north of the village.

On 23 August at 3.15am they receive sudden orders to move at once. They bivouac at Rouvreoi, Belgium, where the Brigade is placed in Divisional Reserve. They move into the village and are billeted and in the evening watch the Germans opening a heavy artillery fire on Mons. They see 26 Brigade who are stationed in their vicinity bring their heavy guns into action just outside the village. The Battalion turns out billets and stands by until about 9.30pm when it advances towards Mons and bivouacs by the roadside.

On 24 August, soon after daylight, the duel between rival artillery is resumed and the Battalion receives orders to march on Bonnet with artillery fire continuing on their right flank throughout the march. They take up position south of Bonnet and strongly entrench themselves. Heavy artillery fire takes place during the day, but the Battalion is not called upon to assist those at the front. At about 5.45pm the 1st Division march southwards, the 2 Brigade acting as Rear Guard with the Battalion as its Rear Guard. They arrive at Feignes at 10.00pm and are billeted.

On 25 August they move southwards again, but soon after starting the French troops commence firing at British aeroplanes "thinking apparently that they were German machines". The Battalion continues marching throughout the day arriving at Marbaix at 8.00pm

On 26 August the Division continues moving southwards and billets in a deserted farmhouse where several barrels of beer and hundreds of pounds of cheese are found "providing a good feed for the Battalion". Heavy artillery fire is kept up all day. Before leaving Marbaix they leave their overcoats in charge of 10 men of the Battalion in order to facilitate the movement of troops because an action appears imminent. Ammunition is made up to 200 rounds per man. However, on 27 August when they arrive at Hautville they learn of the loss of their coats, a party of Germans having entered the town immediately after they have left. Nine of the party left in charge are reported as captured and the overcoats burnt.

On 28 August the Battalion marches off at 3.00am with the Brigade and continues until midnight when they bivouac at Fressancourt thus completing 21 hours on the move. On 29 August they have a rest day.

From 30 August to 2 September they continue the march southwards travelling many miles on both 1 and 2 September. The diary records that on 2 September the whole march is done on no rations.

On 3 September the Division moves forwards in a south-easterly direction with the Brigade acting as Advance Guard. On 4 September the Division moves to Aulnoy and at 3.30pm the Battalion receives orders to "stand to arms" and then

moves off to the high ground in the vicinity and takes up a position with the remainder of the 2 Brigade . Artillery fire is exchanged with the enemy at once and a heavy fire is kept up on both sides until 6.20pm. The diary says “shrapnel was bursting on our position in all directions, but happily only one man was wounded and then in the hand only”.

From 5 – 8 September they continue marching – across country on 8 September to avoid the enemy’s artillery fire on the roads to Flagny. During the march, and when close to Sablonnières, they pass through an area in which cavalry action has taken place that morning. They pass the graves of two British soldiers in a churchyard and several graves of German soldiers by the roadside. They also pass many dead German horses, and carts, wagons and bicycles that the enemy has abandoned in its flight.

On 10 September, while on the move and before reaching Pretz, the enemy is seen in position on the high ground on the other side of the village. Several shots are fired at them and the Battalion advances towards them. It is raining hard and the men are wearing waterproof sheets. As soon as they clear Pretz, a heavy artillery fire is opened on them by the Germans. B Company are only 750 yards from them; Headquarters and the remaining companies just in the rear. At this point, their own artillery, which is just in the rear, commences shelling them thinking they are Germans on account of the colour of their waterproofs. The German Infantry then open heavy rifle fire, and as they are isolated from the remainder of the Brigade, the Battalion is forced to retire and move to the left flank and after a short interval re-occupy a position on the right flank. The remainder of the Brigade then come forward to assist. Their own artillery keeps up heavy fire on the Germans and at about 3.00pm the enemy is driven back. The French troops from Paris then carry on with the fighting “thus thoroughly demoralising the enemy”. 19 people are killed in this action, 85 wounded and a number missing. Four horses are also killed.

The diary comments that the Germans would have been more successfully attacked if the Advance Guard had been covered by mounted troops. Also, the position of the guns in the column prevented their giving close assistance to the Battalion. It says “These are the lessons learnt from the day’s fighting”.

On 11, 12 and 13 September they are moving again and see distinctive signs of the enemy – a bridge over a canal blown up and signs of action. Reaching high ground the Brigade takes up position and a heavy artillery duel ensues. One private is killed and seven men wounded by shrapnel.

The entry for 14 September is headed ‘First Day – Battle of Aisne’. Reconnaissance shows the enemy has piquets between Troyon and Cerny. The Battalion is sent to occupy high ground above Vendresse and their cavalry patrols are heavily fired upon by the enemy’s piquets near Troyon. The Battalion seizes the high ground above Troyon and north-west of Vendresse and 250 German prisoners are captured – surprised in their bivouacs. They surrender under the white flag. As the Battalion’s men are rounding them up, the enemy opens fire on both sets of troops and there is considerable loss. The whole Division comes up and occupies the ridge running north-east between Vendresse and Troyon. There is heavy fighting all day with heavy losses especially among officers. There are 114 missing. This is due to the fact that a

large number of killed and wounded have to be left in front of the trenches and are unable to be recovered at nightfall because of German snipers and fire from the enemy's trenches which are at very close range. The diary records the weather as very wet.

During the night of 14/15 September the enemy advances to within 600 yards where they entrench. Artillery bombardment continues at intervals all day until dusk and during the night of 15/16 September scouts who are picketing the enemy report large patrols of the enemy advancing against the front but these are easily repulsed and retire. Two scouts are wounded and one killed. The weather continues very wet. On 16 September artillery bombardment recommences and at 5.00pm general bombardment is ordered. The enemy replies with several shells dropping into the home position.

On 17 September artillery duel recommences at dawn and continues throughout the day almost without interval. At 2.00pm B Company reports enemy's machine guns and 150 men to be entrenching themselves on high ground to the right. This would have put them between "us" and 3 Brigade and in a position to enfilade the home line. The 1st Northamptonshire Regiment and Kent Royal Rifles make a successful counter attack driving the enemy away from their trenches at the point of the bayonet inflicting heavy loss and capturing 40 prisoners. The link with 3 Brigade is restored. It is very wet. Two corporals are killed and one man wounded.

On 18 September bombardment continues all day and on 19 September the Battalion is relieved at 2.00pm by the East Yorkshire Regiment. It is sent to take up an outpost position at Paissy. In the evening a Captain and 45 men who had conducted German prisoners to Le Mans return.

This is where William's time at war comes to an end because his casualty form (part of his service record) states that on 19 September he is admitted to hospital in Le Mans due to varicose veins. By the end of September he travels to England from St Nazaire on SS Carisbrook(sic) Castle. A report of the medical board in November 1914, part of his service record, says "man states that the condition gradually developed since he enlisted through marching". An operation had been performed in 1909 when he was serving in India but "he states it gave little relief, and the condition developed severely from recent marching in France" The report declares the condition permanent and on 15 December 1914 he is discharged as no longer physically fit for war service.

Conclusion

By 1917, according to his service record army pension sheet, William is working as an engineer's labourer and is living in Sydney Road in Haywards Heath. In the next few years, five daughters are born to William and Fanny – Ruby, Phyllis, Joan, Barbara and Nancy. Over the years, William works his way up to become the works manager of the Thermogene factory in Sydney Road and the family home next door to the factory goes with the job.

William's medical condition was apparent throughout his life. A grandson recalls him bandaging his legs as a daily routine and on asking why was told it was due

to conditions in the trenches and in essence a small price to pay. He never heard him complain about his legs.

He also suffered a hearing impairment which in part may have been due to shrapnel. The same grandson recalls that (probably between 1950-55) while William was shaving the blade snagged on something close to his ear. It was a small fragment of metal which must have been deeply embedded and had after all the years worked its way to the surface.

William was, as with other First World War soldiers, awarded the Victory and British War medals. However, he was also awarded the 1914 Star. This medal was awarded to those serving in France and Flanders between 5 August – 23 November 1914. These medals are now held by another of his grandsons. Sadly, his only son, Herbert Leslie, was killed in the Second World War.

On retirement, William and Fanny moved to Stradishall in Suffolk but later moved to Powerstock in Dorset to live with one of their daughters Joan and her husband on their farm in the village. He maintained his connection with the 'Old Contemptibles' and in his later years attended one of the big reunions held in London. He died in 1964 in Bridport, Dorset, and is buried in Powerstock by the side of Joan and her husband.

Appendix

From Robin Neillands book *The Old Contemptibles*, p. 2

The survivors of the BEF took their curious nickname from the Kaiser's orders, allegedly issued at Aix-en-Chapelle on 19 August 1914: 'It is my Royal and Imperial command that you exterminate the treacherous English and march over General French's contemptible little army'.

There are some doubts as to whether Kaiser Wilhelm ever issued such an order. Other claims assert that even if he did issue such a command the German word means 'insignificant' rather than 'contemptible', that what he was actually referring to was a contemptibly *small* army – and small the BEF certainly was.

No matter. The name stuck and many 'Old Contemptibles' long outlived the Kaiser. Wilhelm died in exile in 1940. The Old Contemptibles held their last parade at the garrison church of All Saints in Aldershot on Sunday 4 August 1974, sixty years after the outbreak of the Great War and took tea afterwards with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. That done, they folded their standards and passed into history. There is no one left alive today who served in that famous little force.

¹ *Kelly's Directory of Sussex 1899*

² Robin Neillands, *The Old Contemptibles: the British Expeditionary Force, 1914* (John Murray, 2004), p.2

³ Neillands, *The Old Contemptibles*, p.3

⁴ RSR MS 2/57 Royal Sussex Regiment 2nd Battalion War Diary 2 August 1914-12 April 1919 (typescript copy) at West Sussex Record Office

Source List

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