

William Westgate
Private G/9562,
7th Battalion,
Royal Sussex Regiment
1877-1917

By
Julia Westgate

Summary

This case study is about William Westgate, a private in the Royal Sussex Regiment. It covers his family background and some information about the two places where he grew up and worked in. It also describes what he would have experienced from the time of his enlistment in the Great War until his death as a result of wounds in the Battle of Arras.

Introduction

William Westgate was my father's uncle. He died in May 1917 and my father was born in December 1917 so he would have had no memories of him to pass on.

Background

William was born on 19 September 1877 in Manor Cottages, Hurstpierpoint, Sussex, to William, a brewer's drayman, and Betsy Westgate (nee Muzzell and then Ridley). He was the first of eleven siblings – two brothers and eight sisters. On the 1881 census the family is living at 8, Manor Cottages, Manor Road, Hurstpierpoint. These are terraced houses which are still standing today and located off Cuckfield Road. On this census his father's occupation is listed as bricklayer. Not only are William, senior, and Betsy living here with William and his younger sister, but another family is also listed – Edwin and Caroline Ridley (relatives of Betsy) and their three small children – nine people in a terraced house. Betsy's mother is living next door with further family members. The house would almost certainly have been rented.

On the 1891 census William and his family are still living in Manor Cottages with further siblings. His mother's occupation is listed as laundress, but the column 'Employer or employed' is left blank so it may be that she was taking in washing. Earlier censuses have listed her occupation as laundrymaid. William is now aged 14 years and is working as a butcher's assistant.

On the 1901 census William is still living with his family but does not appear to be in occupation. Hurstpierpoint at the time he is growing up is described by Ray Packham in the introduction to his book *Hurstpierpoint in old picture postcards*¹ as a thriving little country town in a largely agricultural area. It has a nucleus of shops and traders catering for all the needs of the inhabitants and is generally self-supporting. The *Kelly's directory of Sussex 1899* lists it as a "small market town" with gas and water supplies. Its population in 1891 is nearly 3,000 and it has its own national school. Half the parish is pasture land and there is a weekly corn market. The K Company and Volunteer Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment has its headquarters here. It has Danny Park, the seat of Colonel William Henry Campion and there are three principal landowners in the area – Lord Monk Bretton, William Borrer and S. Hannington of Hove.²

By 1911 the family has moved to Burgess Hill to number one, Pretoria Cottages, Fairfield Road, a three-bedroomed end-of-terrace house. Again this would be a rented property. At that time it was a road of terraced houses and would not have looked dissimilar to how it is today. Its toilet, although part of the house, was accessed from outside and there would have been no bathroom. William is now 32 years old and is living here with his parents, his brothers, Thomas (22 years) and Frank (16 years) and youngest sister, Edith (15years). His occupation is given as a butcher as is his brother's, Thomas.

Burgess Hill in 1912 is described in the *Burgess Hill history and guide* published by Burnett & Co., as a "pretty town ... full of open spaces" . The guide acknowledges that its present-day development would not have been reached without the railway line. The town has all the utilities of gas, water, electric light, telephone and a postal service. It is also widely known as a health resort because of its high position and water supply coming straight from the South Downs. From advertisements in Burnett's guide it appears to have a range of shops including at least four butchers, William's occupation. The town is also a place for brickmaking, tile and pottery works due to the suitability of its clay soil for such industries.

William's war experience

According to William's service record held in the National Archives (and viewed via Ancestry.co.uk), he enlisted on 23 February 1916 at Haywards Heath on the same day as his brother, Thomas. Frank, his other brother, had enlisted in October 1915, so this meant that their parents now had all three sons serving in the war. Thomas joins the Royal West Kent Regiment and Frank is in the Royal Field Artillery. On 24 February William is appointed to the Army Reserve and on 22 March he is mobilised being posted to the 3rd Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment on 25 March. On 13 July he embarks for France and disembarks at Boulogne on 18 July to the British Expeditionary Force base. On 19 July he is posted to the 7th (Service) Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment. This Battalion was formed at Chichester on 12 September 1914 and came under the command of the 36 Brigade in 12th (Eastern) Division. The main battle that William was to see action in was the Battle of Arras (4 April-3 May 1917) when the British begin a massive artillery bombardment with 2,800 guns on a 20 mile front. The British as part of General Allenby's Third Army and the Canadian Corps of General Horne's First Army commence the infantry assault. They gain three and a half miles but the German Sixth Army put in strong reserves. The Allies Fifth Army in the southern flank can make no impression on the German lines but the attack is pressed until 3 May to divert enemy attention from the even greater attack along the Aisne. The British and Empire forces suffer 84,000 casualties in the battle and the Germans 70,000.³

The following, as described in the war diary for the Battalion held in the West Sussex Record Office, shows what William was experiencing during his time in France.⁴

By 25 July 1916 the Battalion is billeted in Bois du Warne. The war diary describes the Commanding Officer, leaving for Poperinghe, as being seen on his way with the band playing the song 'Sussex by the sea' and with all the men lining the road and cheering as he is driven away! They then receive orders to move to Hedauville and march as a Brigade. By 28 July they are in the trenches but on 10 August they are marching out to near Senlis where the Brigade forms up and the King and the Prince of Wales arrive and walk down between the ranks.

From the 21 – 26 August they are in the trenches at Agny. The diary says they are quiet days with no casualties. The first half of September finds them alternating with the 8th Royal Fusiliers either in the Agny trenches or defences.

On 24 September they move off to Dainville to relieve the 8th Royal Fusiliers. 'D' Company attempts to get through the German wire and make a raid, but after cutting through about 30 yards of very thick wire they find another which is impenetrable so the Officer-in-charge throws his bombs into the German trench and withdraws. The Company returns to allied lines with no casualties.

By the beginning of October 1916 they are in the trenches at Flers where shelling is heavy on most days. On 4 October the front line and support trenches are shelled all day. In 10 days the total casualties in the trenches are approximately 185 killed or wounded.

By November 1916 they are in the Agny trenches and the days are quiet. On the 23 November the Battalion is fitted with a new small box respirator and everyone is tested under gas.

On 16 December orders are given to move to a rest area and by 17 December they are marching to Sibiville. Christmas dinner is given to the four companies in two sittings on 25 and 26 December each being followed by a concert. On 27 December there is a football match between the 8th Royal Fusiliers and the Battalion on the latter's own ground, but the Battalion lose three-nil.

January 1917 begins with football competitions between the different companies and the 8th Royal Fusiliers. There are parades most days, a church service, presentation of medals, signalling exercises and on 16 January a Divisional marathon race. Unfortunately, the Battalion is last (10th).

By the 23 January the Battalion moves into billets in Arras and is attached to the 37th Infantry Brigade for digging. This continues into February. Two of the companies experience gas shells and 20 men are affected. From now on they are primarily in the Arras area. On 26 February they take 25 prisoners. On 26 February the Brigade is inspected at Givenchy-Le-Noble by Sir Douglas Haig. By 3 April the Battalion is established in cellars and caves in the Cambrai Road, Arras. On 6 April bombardment of enemy trenches takes place and continues with a platoon raid of German

trenches taking place on 7 April. They find the front trenches have been vacated and a German rifle is brought back. On 8 April final arrangements are made for an attack. A and B companies remove all wire and obstacles from before their own front lines and ladders and bridges are placed in position. Zero hour is fixed for 5.30am on 9 April when the Battalion attacks the German trenches and about 100 prisoners and two machine guns are captured. Activity continues. On 12 April the Battalion is relieved and from 16-21 April cleaning and re-fitting takes place after the attack.

By 25 April they move to Railway Triangle from their billets in Arras with A and B companies in trenches within the Triangle and C and D in dug-outs on the eastern bank of the Triangle. From 26-29 April time is spent cleaning up and filling in shell holes in the trenches and the dug-outs are thoroughly cleaned out. On 30 April the battalion marches to the newly dug Orange Line. All companies are equally distributed along the Line and are guided by men detailed from a reconnoitring party in the afternoon. The move is timed for 9.00pm. Each company has three pack animals and each man carries three sandbags. Every available pick and shovel is also taken. On 1 May the Battalion is in trenches east of Arras and on 3 May at 1.45am Headquarters and companies move independently to assembly positions. Zero hour is set for 3.45am when the companies move forward and occupy Bayonet Triangle which has been vacated by the 8th and 9th Royal Fusiliers. After the two leading battalions have passed forward to their objective it is found that Scabbard trench has been re-occupied by the enemy. The Battalion is ordered to attack this trench at 12.00 midday and a 10 minute intense bombardment is successfully carried out by B and C companies who capture the trench and take 45 prisoners. Consolidation proceeds and connection is obtained with the 8th and 9th Royal Fusiliers. During the afternoon the enemy is reported to be vacating its positions and a further attack is ordered to be carried out by the Battalion. The attack is successful and Brown Line is reached. A and D companies are proceeding with the consolidation of the same when information is received from the Brigade that the objectives have not been gained by units attacking on the right and left and accordingly 36 Brigade is "in the air". Soon after orders are received to withdraw from Brown Line and re-occupy Scabbard and Bayonet trenches. This is successfully accomplished and soon after midnight the situation of the Battalion is as follows:

B and C companies form one composite company in Scabbard trench

D company is on the left in Bayonet trench

A company is on the right in Bayonet trench

On 4 May the Battalion is occupying Scabbard and Bayonet trenches and there is heavy shelling throughout the day.

On 5 May the enemy put down frequent barrages but not many shells come into the trenches. Consolidation is carried on and strong points are dug and manned.

William was wounded in action and died of his wounds in the 19th Casualty Clearing Station on Saturday 5 May. He had gunshot wounds in his left leg and both hands. He is buried in Duisans British Cemetery, Etrun, about nine kilometres west of Arras. Duisans and its neighbourhood came under British occupation in March 1916 and in February 1917 the site of the cemetery was selected for the 8th Casualty Clearing Station. The first burials took place in March and from the beginning of April it grew very quickly under the pressure of casualties in the 8th, 19th, and 41st Clearing Stations.

Conclusion

There are no family photographs to remember William by but his service record medical history sheet completed at the time of his enlistment show he was a short man of 5 feet two and a quarter inches tall.

The few personal effects that he had with him at the time of his death and which were returned to his parents are shown in this image held as part of his service record:

W15953—H3574 250,000 4/17 HWV(P16143)

Any further letter on this subject should be addressed to:
 Officer i/c No. 2 Records,
Hounslow
 and the following No. quoted.
 2412/3

From
 No. 2 Infantry Record Office,
 Staines Road, Hounslow.

To
 Mr. W. Westgate,
 1. Pactoria Cottages,
 Fairfield Road, Burgess Hill,
 Station Hounslow. Date 4.2.16.

Army Form B. 104—126.
 No. 2 INFANTRY RECORD OFFICE
 STAINES ROAD, HOUNSLOW
 Place 412/3
 No. 412/3

NO. 2 INFANTRY RECORD OFFICE
 STAINES ROAD, HOUNSLOW

SIR,

I have to acknowledge receipt of the articles as stated opposite.

Yours faithfully,

(Sign here) W. Westgate

The Officer i/c Records, No. 2
 Station Hounslow

I am directed to forward the undermentioned articles of private property of the late No. 9/9562. Rank Plt.
 Name W. Westgate. Regt. 4th. Bn. Royal Sussex.
 and would ask that you will kindly acknowledge receipt of the same on the form opposite:

Knife: Watch: Box Cans: Mission: Letter Case:
Whistle: Two Cigarettes: Pencil: Cap Badge:
Combs (6): Photos: Personal effects

These are the only articles at present forthcoming, but should any further articles be received at any time they will be duly forwarded.

Yours faithfully,
William Westgate Lt Col.
 Officer in Charge of Records.

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From the Draft, Enlistment and Service Record for William Westgate, National Archives.

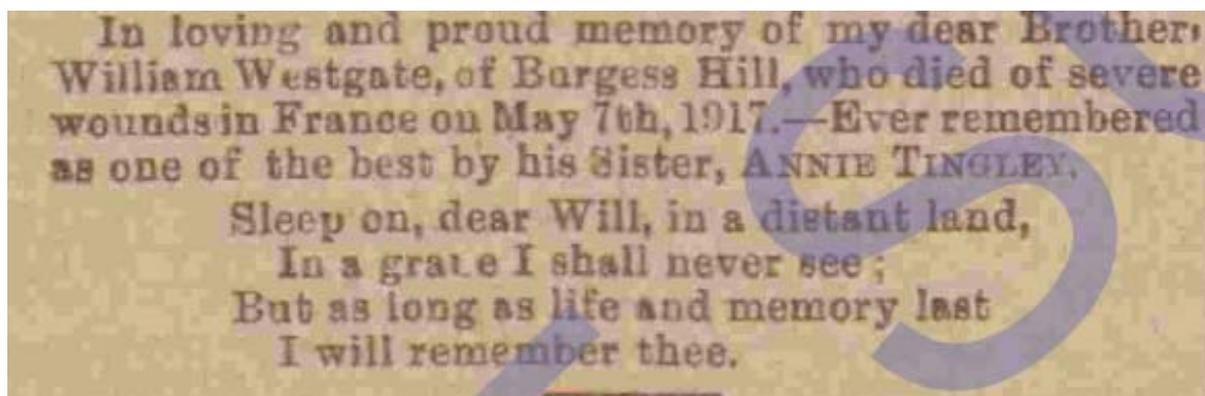
William's life is commemorated on the war memorial in Church Road, Burgess Hill, West Sussex, and the only memory the family has is that his brother, Frank, who survived the war, as did Thomas, was passing the memorial as his brother's name was being carved upon it.

During research for the case study, the following entries in the newspaper for the area, the *Mid-Sussex Times*, were found:

GAVE UP HIS LIFE It is officially reported that Private W. Westgate of Burgess Hill, has died of wounds. He belonged to the Royal Sussex Regiment.

Mid-Sussex Times, 12 June 1917, page 5, column e.

The following touching tribute was placed by one of his sisters in the 'In memoriam' column of the same newspaper a year after his death :



Mid-Sussex Times, 7 May 1918, page 5, column a.
(Discrepancy in date of death – all official records give it as 5 May)

¹ Ray Packham, *Hurstpierpoint in old picture postcards* (European Library, 1995) unpaginated

² *Kelly's directory of Sussex 1899*

³ John Laffin , *A western front companion 1914-1918: A-Z source to the battles, weapons, people, places, air combat* (Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1994), p.96

⁴ RSR MS 7/11 Royal Sussex Regiment 7th Battalion War Diary in France 30 May 1915-16 June 1919 (typescript copy) at West Sussex Record Office

Source List

Books

Burgess Hill history and guide (Burnett & Co, 1912)

Kelly's directory of Sussex 1882

Kelly's directory of Sussex 1899

Laffin, John. *A western front companion 1914-18: A-Z source to battles, weapons, people, places, air combat* (Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1994)

Packham, Raymond A. *Hurstpierpoint in old picture postcards* (European Library, 1995)

Rawson, Andrew. *British Army handbook 1914-1918* (Sutton Publishing, 2006)

Original records

RSR MS 7/11 Royal Sussex Regiment 7th Battalion War Diary (typescript copy) at West Sussex Record Office

Websites

www.Ancestry.co.uk

Commonwealth War Graves Commission www.cwgc.org

The long, long trail www.1914-1918.net