



The Battle of the Somme: July - Sept 1916

When the whistles blew at 7.30am on 1st July 1916, there were over 30 men from Buriton in and around the 15 mile British line. The first day was not as deadly for our men as it was for thousands of others, but by the time the battle officially ended in November, seven of these men had lost their lives, another had been taken prisoner and a number of others had been badly wounded.

Men in the 1st Hampshire Battalion were ready to go 'over the top' near Beaumont Hamel at 7.40am, immediately after the first wave and, 700 yards away, others in the 2nd Hampshire's were ready to go forward at noon. The huge Hawthorn Ridge mine, detonated at 7.20, was mid-way between the two battalions and all would have seen (and felt) it – with the explosion being heard in London.

Following others into battle, the 1st Hampshire's will have seen much of the devastation and Basil Treagus was perhaps amongst the first to be hit. Shot in the face, he survived and was to win a Distinguished Conduct Medal later in the war.

Alfred Cook was not so fortunate. A 34-year old married man from Weston, employed on the Seward's farm, he was seriously wounded, probably close to his own trenches. He died two days later in a casualty clearing station, leaving a widow,

Mabel, and a three year old son, Horace.

At noon the 2nd Hampshires were due to follow other Regiments but found too much chaos and congestion caused by dead and wounded. Plans were abandoned and, instead, the men held the line until July 10th.

Just to the south, across the River Ancre, Douglas Harfield was with the 1st Dorset's. They also found movement impossible due to the dead and wounded in the trenches. Douglas survived a morning of artillery and machine gun fire until the unit was able to withdraw.

With no decisive breakthrough on 1st July, the British offensive was subsequently conducted in phases, with more limited objectives: a "bite and hold" operation.

Providing assistance overhead was Captain Francis Cave, of Ditcham House, who had started his duties in No 4 Squadron on 4th July. The next day he wrote in his diary: "I don't really seem to bother much about the war, now that I am out here." Two days later: "I felt a terrific bump and found the end of my plane off. Everybody was very excited when we came down and wanted it photographed. In the afternoon I was able to go to Amiens where I bought several things and the hairdresser curled my moustache."

Back on the ground, a number of



Buriton men were involved in the Battle of Bazentin Ridge: part of the second phase of the offensive aiming to push through German lines towards Delville Wood.

Victor Welch, a gardener of Bones Lane, advanced at High Wood at 9.50pm on 15th July with the 15th Warwickshire's. The attack had been raging for some time when the Germans lit up the area with flares and drove them back with machine guns.

At nearby Delville Wood, Captain Algernon Bonham Carter of Buriton Manor, was in trenches with the Kings Royal Rifles. On 27th July a barrage was poured onto the wood ahead of him and he led his men forward, from crater to crater, finding dead or surrendering Germans. They held a trench when the enemy counter-attacked.

In the same week, artilleryman Charles Lee, 22, was hit by German shelling. Charles had been a clerk in the Lime Works and a gardener for Lothian Bonham Carter but was now serving in the same unit at fellow villager Lindsay Harfield. Sadly Charles died of his wounds on 27th July.

On 30th July, just as Algernon Bonham Carter was coming out of Delville Wood, Victor Welch was attacking into it on another corner. But the Warwickshire's were pinned down by incessant fire and were stranded until relieved the following night.

After their 1st July losses, the 1st Hampshire's had received replacements and returned to trenches near Beaumont Hamel. Later in the month they transferred for some relatively routine trench life near Ypres. Just as their stint was ending, on 8th August, they were gassed with George Harding, 19, of Weston being one of three men killed.

Another casualty in August was Gunner Reginald Wareham, a printer living with his parents in Weston. He had served in France for a year but received a gunshot wound to his right foot on 16th August and was repatriated to England.

On 3rd September the 14th Hampshire's were waiting in trenches as part of the second wave of yet another attack toward Beaumont Hamel. They took enemy positions but suffered heavy casualties and had to withdraw. Caleb Chitty, just 18, from Cowhouse Farm, Buriton, was missing, presumed killed, during this fighting. His family went to great lengths to try to find out about his fate, including appeals in newspapers.

Most of July and August had been a bloody stalemate but on 15th September C-in-C Douglas Haig renewed the offensive with a push which saw the first ever use of tanks. William Porter, a



labourer living at The Landpitts, Weston, was in the 19th London Regiment, part of the second wave of infantry ready to take High Wood, and he will have seen this moment of history.

Although a success elsewhere, none of the four tanks used at High Wood made great progress over the devastated terrain. Instead of following behind, infantrymen advanced in front of the tanks and many men were killed.

William Porter and his comrades had been ready to go over in the next wave but they were held back to allow wounded to be brought back. By mid-morning five battalions were desperately trying to capture High Wood with artillery support and the Germans duly surrendered. At some stage, never having got to the front line, William Porter was wounded by a bullet in his back. After treatment he returned to the war in the Labour Corps.

On the same day, 15th September, and only half a mile away, Thomas Lovell, a 30 year old labourer on the Seward's farm at Weston, was with the 15th Hampshire's when they played a key role in taking Flers village, assisted

by several tanks. At the end of the attack one of the tanks drove up the village high street with its guns firing and infantry following behind. The diary of Flying Corps Captain, Francis Cave, noted the success of the tanks: "Push commenced today.... The Caterpillars have been an immense success..."

Although Flers was taken, attempts to capture nearby defences to safeguard the village failed. German attacks to recapture the village also failed but, at some point in these actions, Thomas Lovell was killed. As the Hants & Sussex News, reported: "he had been repeatedly rejected for military service at first but showed a dogged determination to 'have a go' at the Germans ..."

Within days another Buriton man had died when Victor Welch was killed on 24th September. His sergeant wrote to the family telling how a shell exploded in a reserve trench, killing six and wounding six more.

The Battle of the Somme was to continue until mid-November and would take its toll on more Buriton men.

Life at home: July - September 1916

The parish had read short dispatches about the 'Great Push', but now news of the casualties was arriving. Thirza Cook of Weston learned she was a widowed mother, and Mrs Woods, also of Weston, found out her son, Godfrey Harding, 19, had died in a gas attack. The Lee's mourned the death of their son Charles (his story was in the Petersfield Post, 13/7/2016), and the Bonham Carter's the death of Capt. Arthur Bonham Carter, whose memorial plaque is in St Mary's Church. George Tupper was wounded, as was Sergeant Basil Treagus.

In Mesopotamia Ernest Dennis, previously employed by Lothian Bonham Carter, had been captured by the Turks, and Sergeant Harry Rogers, born in Buriton, died from fever and was buried in Amara War Cemetery, close to the river Tigris in Iraq.

At home, the parish donated generously to the war effort, and the school children contributed about 130 eggs every month. Local farmers, such as Lothian Bonham Carter and Percy and Charles Seward, also sent essentials, such as binder twine, to farmers whose lands were near the Western Front.

Winnie Bray from Nursted Farm worked tirelessly as a VAD nurse, tending wounded soldiers. Such was her popularity that her grateful patients drew little pictures and wrote poems for her! Mrs Cave, of Ditcham Park, also worked hard

on Red Cross administration; as divisional secretary.

The lack of horses was also beginning to tell. The Petersfield Council couldn't get horses for the fire-engine for rural call-outs. They decided that villages like Buriton, must send horses to collect it!

Labour shortages led Capt. Norton at Bolinge Hill Farm to sell his stock and equipment, and Lothian Bonham Carter found it difficult to maintain his estate now 22 of his workers had left for the war. But some, at least, must have been happy when the County Education Board decreed that children between ten and twelve could be let off school to work in the fields - but only for fourteen days! The sight of men in uniform, women and children bringing in the harvest must have brought home the changes in life.

Some things however, didn't change - the women and children from Portsmouth still arrived for the hop-picking in Buriton and Weston. There was also the excitement of a visit from Lord John



Nurse Winnie Bray

Sanger's Royal Circus, with elephants and horses (although one wonders quite how they'd kept their horses away from the Army!).