



Private

Fred Brooks

14555, 10th Bn., Sherwood Foresters (Notts and Derby Regiment) who died on 14 February 1916

Remembered with Honour

Barrow Hill and Staveley Memorials

Menin Gate Memorial Panel 39 and 41

Fanny Maria Brookes was born in 1866 in the hamlet of Over Whitacre in Warwickshire. She was the daughter of agricultural worker John Brookes and his wife Hannah. At the age of 14, she was living away from home, in service, working as a domestic servant for an agricultural implement maker and his family in Aston. 10 years later, she had progressed to the position of Cook for a Patent Agent and his wife on the Wirral, Cheshire and, by 1901, was at the top of her profession as a Cook in a wealthy household in Macclesfield where a Butler and other servants were also employed.

Fanny had given birth to an illegitimate son, FRED BROOKES, who does not appear on any census records either with her or with her immediate family. It may be that she paid someone to take care of him or that he was brought up by other family members under their name.

Several of Fanny's brothers had left Over Whitacre in the early 1880s and moved to the Derbyshire coalfields for work as coal miners. Two of them had settled in the Staveley area and became farmers; Thomas firstly in Inkersall and later at Netherthorpe and younger brother Samuel at Inkersall. (Samuels daughter Hannah married Henry Swain, a well-known local farming family.) Local newspaper reports confirm his presence in Staveley.

Fred enlisted with the 10th (Service) Bn., Sherwood Foresters (Notts and Derbys Regiment), at Chesterfield and was given the service number 14555. The Battalion had been formed at Derby in September 1914 as part of Kitchener's 2nd Army and came under orders of 51st Brigade in the 17th (Northern) Division. Early days were somewhat chaotic, the new volunteers having very few trained officers and NCOs to command them, no organised billets or equipment. They moved firstly to Wool in Dorset and then on to West Lulworth in October 1914, returning to Wool in December. In June 1915, they moved to Winchester. After receiving an order that the Division would be retained for home defence, subsequently cancelled, advance parties left for France on 6th July. Main embarkation began on 12th July and Fred landed at Boulogne, France, on 14th July 1915 where units moved to concentrate near St Omer.

Researched and written by Ann Lucas as part of the Barrow Hill: A Community Remembers project

The Division spent the rest of 1915 in trench familiarisation and then holding the front lines in the southern area of the Ypres salient. They were involved in fighting at the Bluff (south east of Ypres on the Comines canal), part of a number of engagements officially known as the Actions of Spring 1916.

'On the night of February 13/14th they relieved the 7th Lincolnshire Regiment who were holding the Bluff and trenches immediately north of the Ypres - Comines canal. The spoil from this canal when it was dug was heaped upon either side, and thin pine woods were grown on the mounds; a great accumulation of spoil, rising considerably above the level of the rest of the ridge was known as the Bluff. To the south east of the side facing the enemy it presented a very stiff face, to the north west it sloped away more gradually in the long heap known as Spoil bank. The face towards the enemy was full of sniper's posts, and men from here were able to completely overlook the German front trenches which ran almost at the foot of the Bluff. From the top of the Bluff a very extensive view behind our lines was obtained; on a clear day Abeele aerodrome could be seen, about a dozen miles away. A low ridge of ground stretched away in a north-easterly direction from the Bluff; our front trenches were about 100 yards over the crest of the ridge; on its crest and westerly side were our support lines and Reserve Wood - a tangled mass of undergrowth and tree stumps about 200 yards from east to west. The possession of the crest of this ridge would give the enemy good observation, but not as good as from the top of the Bluff.'

Major J. C. Keown was in command of the battalion as Lieut.Col. Banbury was on leave at the time. All ranks were wearing steel helmets for the first time. The next 24 hours tested the fighting qualities of the battalion severely. The relief was a quiet one. About 8.30am on the next morning a slow bombardment of our front and support lines started, and the enemy apparently registered these lines with all his available artillery, trench mortars and rifle grenades. At about 2.30pm the bombardment suddenly assumed tremendous intensity, every bit of Hun frightfulness seemed to be going off at once. This continued for about two hours; all telephonic communication with the front line was soon cut, but the seriousness of the shelling could be seen from Bn. HQ, which was in Spoil Bank, about 600 yards west of the Bluff. Artillery retaliation was called for but this proved quite inadequate. The Divisional artillery had only just completed their relief the night before and their guns were not accurately registered; the sound-deafening effect of a strong west wind was also very marked, and unless one was actually in sight of the bombardment, or worse still in the middle of it, it was very difficult to realise that anything serious was occurring.

At about 5.40 pm a mine exploded under the trenches occupied by 'C' company which unfortunately caused many casualties to our men. This was followed by an enemy attack which reached our front line but was unable to make further headway.....'

10th (S) battalion: The history of the battalion during the great war by Lieut W N Hoyte.

Fred Brookes was killed in action at the Bluff on 14th February 1916, one of 136 casualties suffered by the 10th Battalion on that date. Amongst them were three other local lads, Donald Houston, Frank Alton and Lister Wilson.

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Fred Brookes is remembered with honour on Panel 39 and 41 of the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial. The site of the Menin Gate was chosen because of the hundreds of thousands of men who passed through it on their way to the battlefields. It bears the names of more than 54,000 officers and men whose graves are not known.

Fred was posthumously awarded the 1915 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

In his final handwritten will, Fred spelt his name Brookes, with an e. The will was dated July 15th 1915 and in it he left all of his property and effects to his “mother, Miss Fanny Maria Brookes c/o Mrs H. Brookes, Over Whitacre.”

Sources include

1. *England Census 1841-1911*
2. *Warwickshire, England, Baptisms, 1813-1910*
3. *FreeBMD Birth/Marriage/Death Indexes*
4. *UK, Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914-1919*
5. *British Army Medal Rolls Index Cards 1914-1920*
6. *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*
7. *National Archives: Handwritten will.*
8. *10th (S) battalion: The history of the battalion during the great war. Lieut W N Hoyte.*