

opportunity to get dry. However, the daily oiling of their feet, which was now strongly encouraged, had paid off and there were few cases of ‘trench foot.’

In November, Robert’s company took part in a raid in which 16 men were killed, but after a further action on 18th November they were safely withdrawn from the line and moved to tented billets. They then marched 13 miles to Gezaincourt and then another 3 miles in pouring rain to Candas. The diary reports that the men were in a ‘verminous condition’ and having had a long awaited bath, they must have been unhappy when no clean shirts were available.

The weather now was very cold indeed and the men were put to work on improving the billets, building latrines and bunks, cutting steps, and improving roads. Daily training took place but there was also time for football and church parades. A committee had been formed to organise Christmas dinner for 750 men.

Another of Robert’s letters is dated 16th December 1916, by which time he was facing his first Christmas away from home. He describes “working very hard the last few days navying for I have been on road making and timber felling”. There are no complaints as he tells them “if you feel as fit as I do this Xmas you will be able to make a good hole in the turkey or goose that you will be sure to have.”

In Candas, Robert’s battalion were celebrating Christmas early with a dinner and concert on Christmas Eve, as 200 of them had to supply ‘a fatigue’ on Christmas Day. Worries that the Christmas beer would not arrive in time

were unfounded and each man was given a small Christmas present.

As 1917 arrived, there was more marching, this time on very bad roads to Couin where they were ordered back into the line on 22nd January. The weather was cold and frosty and working parties hurried to unload stores before the thaw came, despite “light shelling” by the enemy. On 31st January, the war diary records that “the enemy’s artillery was very active during the afternoon causing several casualties and setting fire to A company’s bomb store.”

And so Robert’s promising life was brought to an end before it had hardly started. In his last letter he had written

“It looks as though we shall soon have peace...for every nation is fed up and a tremendous effort will be made to bring about peace now that the first step has been made.”

Sadly, the peace came too late for Robert, but his letters and medals survive as treasured family possessions. His sister, Violet, married Maurice S Watkins, whose undertaking firm, M.S. Watkins and Son, continues in the capable hands of Mike Matthews. Their son, Bob, who was named after his Uncle Robert, continued the business until he retired to Dartmouth, and he has kindly provided so much of this, Robert’s story.

For further copies of this leaflet or if you have any information to add, please contact Di Landon on 01452 760531



Couin New British Cemetery, where Robert Boughton is buried.

Westbury Remembers

Part 12—Robert Boughton

Written by Di Landon
and sponsored by

Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council



The Battle of the Somme eventually came to an end in the wintry weather of November 1916, having claimed well over 300,000 lives, with over 95,000 British and Commonwealth troops killed or missing, presumed dead. To most people now, the Battle of the Somme appears unremittingly futile, but the scale of the disaster on the northern part of the front line has meant that the suc-



Private Robert Boughton
Photo courtesy of Lloyds Banking Group Archives

cesses at the southern end of the British line are overlooked. Here the 30th Division surged forward and took their objective, showing that Kitchener’s men could fight and overcome the German defences.

This was the first time in the war that planned objectives had been taken and held in a major offensive, and this represented the beginning of a process of growth and development that continued through to the end of the war and eventually led to the German defeat. The British Expeditionary Force on the Somme was reinforced by men from the Commonwealth, and many lessons were learned by the generals and their troops

about tactics and the use of new weapons. By November 1916, when the weather forced the suspension of operations, the surviving men of the British Army formed a more professional force fighting a very different war from that of 1st July.

German casualties on the Somme had been even higher than those of the Allies, and this price was considered too

high. Field Marshal von Hindenburg and General Ludendorff took over dual command of the German forces, and a new policy led to the construction of a heavily fortified line of defence behind the current German line, to which they would make a planned withdrawal. Known as the Hindenburg Line, the Germans believed it to be impregnable. It was during the advance on the Hindenburg line that Robert Boughton was killed. At only 18 years of age, he was the youngest of Westbury’s soldiers to die in this war. The son of Oliver and Emily Boughton, he was born in April 1898 and had an older brother and

sister as well as a younger sister, Violet and a younger brother, Oliver. They were a farming family who lived at Arles Farm, at the end of Elton Lane.



Arles Farm as it is today

He may have been one of the first from the parish to attend Cinderford Higher Elementary School as, at this time, the school leaving age was 12 and most children gained all their education at their local village school. However, there was growing pressure for a secondary school to be opened for East Dean, despite resistance from the authorities, who felt that it was unnecessary as "boys were only going to work in the pits, and girls in service". Councillors sympathetic to the cause persevered and in 1910 the Cinderford Higher Elementary School was opened. The fee for admission was £1 and there were some free places for qualifying children whose parents could not afford the fee.

Robert must have shown promise in order to gain a place at the new school and, when there, his school reports confirmed this. Although his arithmetic was "not as good as it should have been", he had achieved very good marks in all other subjects.

He stayed at school until he was sixteen, by which time he was rated 3rd in his class of 23, and had earned the

praise of his headmaster. On leaving school he chose a career in banking, was accepted for training by Lloyds and was soon working in the Abergavenny branch of the Bank.

But in January 1916, the Military Service Act was passed, meaning conscription for Robert as soon as he reached his 18th birthday in April 1916. He enlisted in Newport as a private in the 7th Battalion of the South Lancashire Regiment. New recruits

were generally put through three months of basic training to build up physical fitness and confidence, instill discipline and obedience and teach fundamental military skills.

Robert's service record has been lost so it is unclear when he joined his battalion in France but a letter to his family after his return from embarkation leave tells them "We have had all our Infantry kit given us and we are going off tomorrow, where I am not quite certain and will write you when I arrive at my destination."

He added "I will let you know the rest in a few days so do not worry if you do not hear from me." On his way back to camp he headed for the photographers in Gloucester, arranging for the prints to be sent to his family direct. He told his parents "when you get them do not give any away until you have sent one



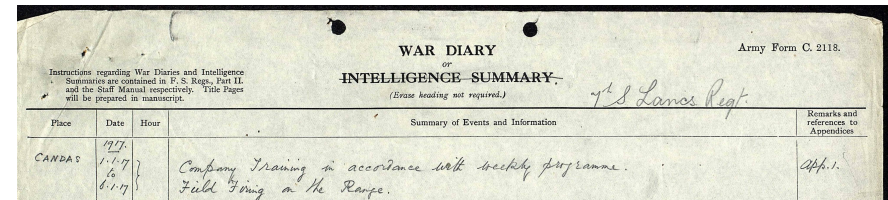
South Lancashire Cap Badge

for me to see."

Meanwhile his battalion had been in France since July 1915 and had been fighting in the region of the Somme throughout the summer of 1916. Their War Diary has survived and can be viewed online. It is hard to imagine how these neatly handwritten reports, that we can now see on our computer screens, were produced in the midst of such appalling conditions. Frequently the frustrations of the officers writing them comes to the surface, as they struggled with poor communications, last

"dead beat." Worse still, their billets were very crowded.

Within a couple of days, they were in the trenches, being attacked with shells, bombs and 'minenwerfers', which were short range mortars. Fortunately, they sustained few casualties and were soon out of the line again and able to enjoy the luxury of a bath, and victory in a football match against the North Lancashire Regiment. Over the next few months, much of their time seemed to be spent marching—and this was no parade ground exercise but route



The South Lancashire 7th Battalion War Diary from Jan 1917

minute changes in plans and incorrect map references. The trenches were often in poor condition and needed major reconstruction to make them "fightable and inhabitable."

On 21st Sept 1916, while 'resting' in billets close to the Belgian border near Bailleul, the 7th Battalion were joined by a draft of 250 newly trained recruits and Robert Boughton could well have been one of them. After some more training they were ordered to move to billets at St Leger-les-Authie in the Somme region. The diary shows the difficulties they encountered — a 3.15 am start, a long march after the train journey, their transport and their dinner getting lost and their eventual arrival at their destination at 11.30pm, by which time they were

marches of 10 miles or more with full packs.

As the diary continues through October and November, it is clear that conditions were worsening. On 30th October "It rained heavily all night and the men are up to their knees in water." The officer writing the diary was moved to protest to the commanding officer about the poor organization of relief operations and the short notice given when working parties were needed. He wrote that "no regard for the condition of the men seems to be ever taken."

After each tour in the front line trenches, the men were exhausted and soaked through, and even when they were relieved, the 'rest billets' were also trenches which were often in poor condition and gave little