

blowing up the bridges behind them, and had laid waste to the surrounding countryside. The infantry were therefore told to advance no further but instead were to concentrate on repairing the roads and railways.



*A ward in the South African Hospital*

By this time, Ernest was seriously ill in the No 1 South African Hospital in Abbeville. This Hospital had opened in July 1916 in a chateau on the outskirts of the town. Base Hospitals such as this provided facilities for longer-term treatment and convalescence. We do not know Ernest's diagnosis but considering the conditions he must have endured for so long, it is not surprising that his condition worsened and on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March 1917, he died.

Ernest's brother, Henry, also went off to war, enlisting in the Somerset Light Infantry. He had married Edith Crook from Newnham in 1911 and Maynard Colchester Wemyss wrote in October 1916 that "One of our Relieving Officers went to the Army the other day and the Guardians agreed to pay him his full salary whilst he was away, and allowed his wife to do his duty. Her district is quite a large one, 10 miles by 4, and she has to visit poor people all over it, so she

gets plenty of travelling and she has to keep a lot of books and accounts; but before she married she was a school teacher so I don't think she finds that very difficult. One duty we had to make other arrangements for. The Relieving Officer, if any one in his district goes mad, has to take him or her to the Asylum, and we all thought a woman could not be expected to do such work as that." Henry Wherrett survived the war, returned to his duties and lived to the great age of 93 years.

His wife had given birth to a son, Eric, in 1912. Later, Eric and his wife Jacqueline farmed and raised their family at Knavingcots Farm on the Blaisdon Road in Westbury. Sadly, Eric has very recently died at the great age of 104 years, having spent the last few years living happily with Jacqueline at Chaxhill Hall.



*Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension.*

Without the tragedy of war, his uncle Ernest might well have had a similarly long life, but instead he died at the age of 30 years. He is buried in the Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension on the Somme.

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

# Westbury Remembers - Part 14

## Ernest Wherrett

Written by Di Landon

and sponsored by

**Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council**



**Ernest Wherrett** was born in June 1886. He was the son of Frederick and Emily Wherrett who lived at The Gables in Broadoak with their two older children, Henry and Joseph. Frederick was a grocer and draper and the family were comfortably off and had a living-in servant. Frederick also had many key roles in the running of the parish as he was the Relieving Officer, whose job was to examine the circumstances of all those applying for poor relief, and was also the Registrar of Births and Deaths, the



*Four soldiers of the 14th Glosters*

school attendance officer, the vaccination officer and one of the landlords of Westbury School before it became a Council school in 1906.

Ernest's older brother, Henry, appears to have followed in his father's footsteps as far as public service was concerned as he too became the Relieving Officer and Registrar of Births and Deaths and also served on the first Parish Council in 1938. The two younger sons, however, followed their father into the drapery business. In 1901, Joseph was a draper's assistant in London where he must have

worked for a very large prestigious store as he was living with over seventy other draper's assistants in Mayfair. By 1911, he was married and was clearly doing well and managing a draper's shop in Harrogate. By this time, Ernest too had left home and was working as a draper's assistant in Reading, and no doubt he too

would have prospered had his country remained at peace.

Ernest's service record has not survived so it is not clear when he enlisted but we know that he served in the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Gloucestershire

Regiment. This battalion was formed at Bristol in April 1915 and was part of the 35<sup>th</sup> Division, which was made up mainly of 'Bantam' Battalions.

'Bantam' battalions were so called because the troops were under the normal minimum height of 5ft 3ins. The first 'bantam' battalions had been recruited after a group of Durham miners, who had been rejected from every recruiting office on account of their small stature, had made their way to Birkenhead. One man offered to fight any man present in order to prove his suitability as a sol-

dier, and eventually six men had to be called upon to remove him. Local MP Arthur Bigland heard of this and was so incensed at what he saw as the needless rejection of spirited, healthy men that he petitioned the War Office for permission to establish an undersized fighting unit, and this was granted. The height requirement was between 4 ft 10 in (147 cm) and 5 ft 3 in (160 cm). The 14th Battalion of the Gloucestershire regiment was the second bantam battalion formed. Eventually two whole divisions, the 35th and the 40th were formed from bantam battalions. These

units were often featured in the press and were very popular at home. Bantam units eventually became indistinguishable from other British divisions due to heavy casualties, transfers to specialized Army tunneling companies and tank regiments, the introduction of conscription, and replacements by taller men.

After some early training, the 35th Division moved in June to North Yorkshire and then in August to Salisbury Plain. In December 1915, they were told they were going to Mesopotamia and tropical clothing and pith helmets were issued. A month later this order was rescinded and instead of the heat of the Middle East, we learn from the 14th Battalion's War Diary that they were subjected to the cold and wet of Flanders, after landing at Le Havre in Feb-

ruary 1916. They continued their training in the trenches in high winds, rain and snow before moving up to the line in March where they were soon involved in the constant war of attrition that characterised life on the Western Front. At the end of June 1916, when their brigade was relieved, the General officer commanding wrote a letter conveying to all ranks "my appreciation of the fine fighting qualities they have displayed since they have been in France. The Division has carried out four successful raids into the enemy's trenches



A train carrying British troops to Flanders

and has developed a fine fighting spirit." Almost immediately, Ernest's Division was moved to the area of the Somme where there had already been fierce fighting for a fortnight and they found that "the mud in the commu-

nication trenches was deep and holding, and taxed the men greatly." At the end of July, they were moved back from the line for what was supposed to be a well-earned rest but a few days later they were sent back and took part in several actions in the later stages of the Battle of the Somme, losing many of their men. At the end of August, the Division took over the defence of Arras and spent the next three months continuously in the trenches. Artillery attacks, sniper fire, trench mortar fire, gas attacks

and raiding parties were a daily feature, along with lice, rats, filth and deprivation and as autumn progressed, the men's situation was compounded by thick mist and heavy rain.

At the beginning of November, the Division was bombarded by trench mortars and sustained heavy casualties, as well as considerable damage to their trenches. "Owing to the bad weather, repairs became increasingly difficult. The men were working up to their knees in mud."

In December, inspections were carried out and 2,784 men were replaced because they were medically unfit, the Division was pulled back from the front and time was spent on training replacements and on working parties. Soon after Christmas, frost set in, with heavy snow falling at intervals which made life particularly unpleasant for those trying to dig in unyielding ground.

This weather lasted until well into February and the thaw, when it did come, was worse than the frost. In March, they were back on the Somme in appalling conditions. The depth of mud in the trenches



Snow in the trenches on the Western Front

made rapid movement impossible, No Man's Land was a mass of water-logged shell holes and many men had to be evacuated

and treated for trench foot.

In September 1916, the Germans had begun the construction of a new defensive position which was known by the Allies as the Hindenburg Line. This would enable them to strategically withdraw from the Somme front and counter an anticipated increase in the power of Anglo-French attacks in 1917. The new front line eliminated the bulge of the Noyon Salient and shortened the overall Front by 25 miles.

The Germans destroyed all the infrastructure and buildings in the salient before their withdrawal, and this meant that the Allies had to advance into a wasteland. The British and French armies needed about eight weeks to rebuild roads, bridges and railways in the abandoned area before they could attack. In March, the German forces began their three-week withdrawal, during which they conducted a scorched earth policy destroying everything of value.

On 17<sup>th</sup> March, Ernest's battalion was attacking in the Lihons sector of the German line and by 5pm they had occupied the original German front line and by 8pm were two miles beyond it. The

next day they pushed on, but the cavalry reported that the Germans had retreated across the Somme,