

The Bousfield Family Tragedy



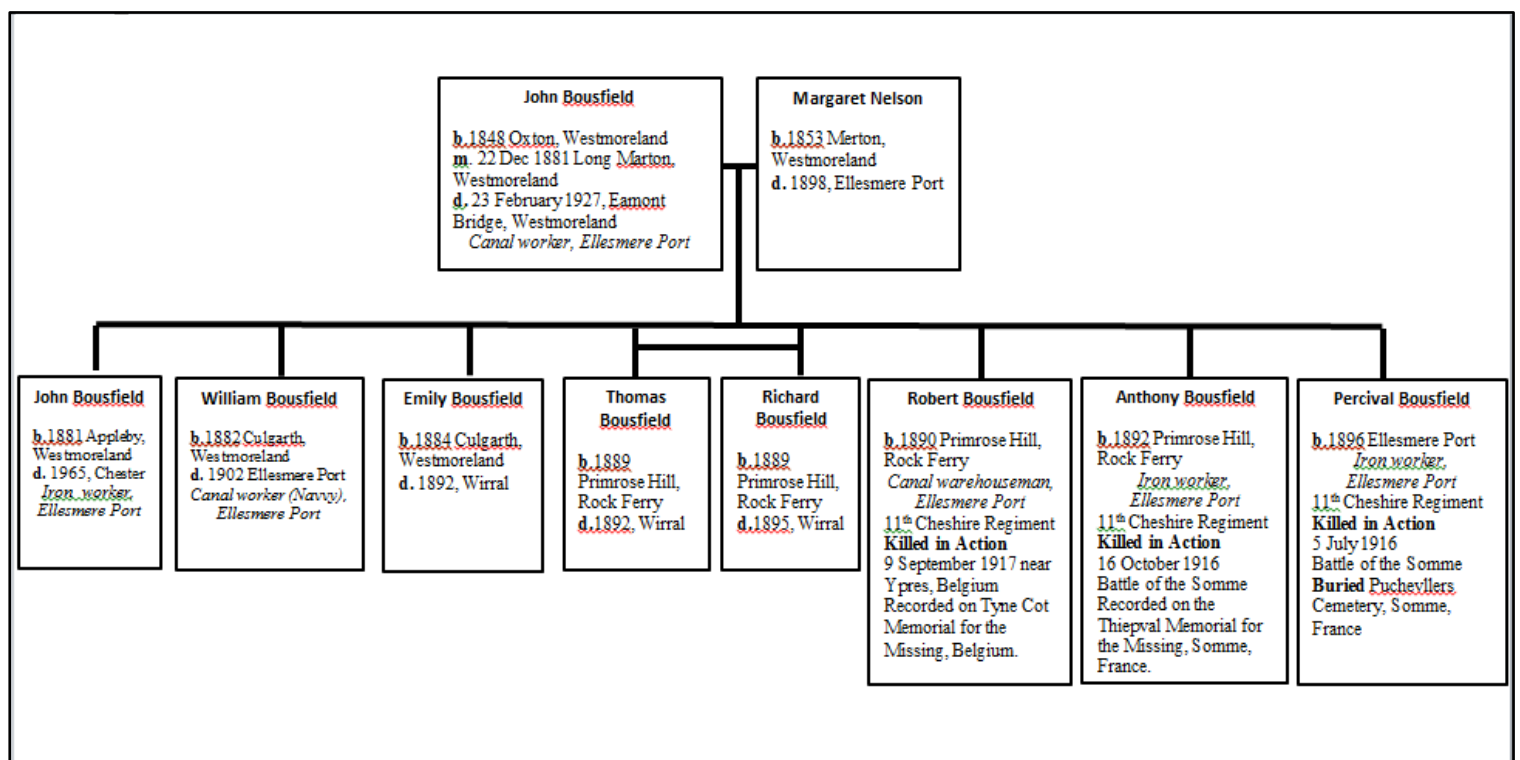
*Pictured are the men of Sunnyside Pontoon, Ellesmere Port, all neighbours, who joined the Cheshire Regiment together as part of the town's 'old pals' – the '**Glorious 514**' – the first of the volunteers. Standing are the Bousfield brothers; Robert, Percy and Anthony.*

by

Mike Royden

When John Bousfield left his home in Westmoreland in 1886 and travelled south, he was hoping for a better life for his family. He was born in 1848 in Oxton, and by the age of twelve he had moved out of the family home and was living at a nearby farm not far from Appelby, where he was working as a farm labourer. For the next two decades, he moved from one local farm to another, securing labouring work wherever he could in this sparsely populated rural landscape. At the age of thirty-two he married Margaret Nelson, a girl from the next village ten years his junior. Their first son, John, was born shortly afterwards, followed by William in 1882, and Emily in 1884. But it was clear that working as an indoor farm servant on the local farms in the tiny hamlets surrounding Appleby was never going to improve his station, and providing for his growing family was proving a serious challenge.

And so, in 1886 he decided to move to the industrial north west hoping for something better. The family settled in Primrose Hill in the Wirral, an area soon to be absorbed by William Lever's model village of Port Sunlight. He was still working as an agricultural labourer two years later, when their twins Richard and Thomas were born, who were followed by Robert in 1890 and Anthony in 1892. But the first of several family tragedies befell the Bousfield when Emily died in 1892, then Thomas, aged only three in 1892, followed by his twin Richard in 1895.



In 1895, looking for a fresh start, John moved his family a few miles south down the Wirral, to where the small town of Ellesmere Port was beginning to show signs of expansion. This growth was mainly due to the new wharves constructed where the recently opened Manchester Ship Canal passed by, from its access on the Mersey at Eastham Locks, right on into the heart of Manchester. John Bousfield soon found employment there, working on the pontoon. This was a floating dock built on the Tyne, and towed around the coast to be put into position near the Ellesmere Port wharves on the Manchester Ship Canal. Launched in August 1893, it reached its destination in October of that year. It was 300ft long and 70ft

broad, with 31ft high towers. It was able to raise vessels up to 5,500 tons out of the water to enable repairs to be carried by the dock workers. The Bousfield family moved into Marsh Cottage situated close to the pontoon.

Shortly after John had begun work on the pontoon, there was another arrival in the family when Percy was born in 1895, and life seemed to have taken a new turn, but this was followed in 1898 by the death of his wife Margaret, which must have had a devastating effect on the family. John was now forced to take in a domestic servant to work as a cook and to look after the younger children while he and his older sons were out at work. In fact, his second son William had now moved out and was lodging close-by in Stanlow Cottages, working as a navvy on the canal, but he too had contracted an illness and was dead by 1902 at the age of twenty. Eldest son John moved out shortly afterwards, taking a job at the Iron Works, which had now become the main employer in the town, while lodging with a local family in Merseyton Road alongside the docks.



By 1911, John senior was still living in Marsh Cottage and working on the Ship Canal, while Robert was also working for the canal company as a warehouse man. His younger brothers Anthony and Percy were also in the Burnell's Galvanised Iron Works working as packing checkers. John had taken in a lodger, another iron worker, to help them get by, while still retaining the services of a cook.

When the war came, the Bousfield brothers continued in their employment, but by 1915, as it was clear the war wouldn't see a swift conclusion, they decided to join up together and signed on in July. By this time, many of the iron workers in the town were either engaged in the production of corrugated sheets for use in the campaigns or in munitions. This production was clearly important and many with such skills were encouraged to stay in these positions, but it must have been difficult for these men to remain behind. Robert, Anthony and Percival joined up, while their older brother John continued in the iron works – those older than thirty-one were encouraged to stay in their jobs if they were contributing to the war effort. The three brothers went together and signed up for war service on the same day (their regimental numbers are close together - their individual records have not survived which would have listed the actual date). All three were kept together in the 11th Battalion Cheshire Regiment, as were numerous men in Ellesmere Port who would have been known to them. (Right; Wolverhampton (Mersey) Iron Works – Burnell's is to the far left, across the railway line)



CENSUS OF ENGLAND AND WALES, 1911.																	
Before writing on this Schedule please read the Examples and the Instructions given on the other side of the paper, as well as the headings of the Columns. The entries should be written in Ink.																	
The contents of the Schedule will be treated as confidential. Strict care will be taken that no information is disclosed with regard to individual persons. The returns are not to be used for proof of age, as in connection with Old Age Pensions, or for any other purpose than the preparation of Statistical Tables.																	
NAME AND SURNAME	RELATIONSHIP to Head of Family.	AGE (last Birthday) and SEX.	PARTICULARS as to MARRIAGE.				PROFESSION or OCCUPATION of Persons aged ten years and upwards.				BIRTHPLACE of every person.	NATIONALITY of every Person born in a Foreign Country.	INFIRMITY.				
of every Person, whether Member of Family, Visitor, Boarder, or Servant, who	State whether "Head," or "Wife," "Son," "Daughter," or other Relative, "Visitor," "Boarder," or "Servant."	For Infants under one year state the age in months as "under one month," "one month," etc.	Write "Single," "Married," "Widower," or "Widow," opposite the name of all persons aged 15 years and upwards.	State, for each Married Woman entered on this Schedule, the number of—	Children born alive to present Marriage. (If no children born alive write "None" in Column 7.)	Children still living.	Children who have died.	Personal Occupation.	Industry or Service with which worker is connected.	Whether Employer, Worker, or Working on Own Account.	Whether Working at Home.	(1) If born in the United Kingdom, write the name of the County, and Town or Parish.	(2) If born in any other part of the British Empire, write the name of the Dependency, Colony, etc., and of the Province or State.	(3) If born in a Foreign Country, write the name of the Country.	(4) If born at sea, write "At Sea."	NOTE.—In the case of persons born elsewhere than in England or Wales, state whether "Resident" or "Visitor" in this Country.	State whether— (1) "British subject by descent," (2) "Totally Blind," or "Totally Deaf," or "Totally Dumb," (3) "Totally Blind," giving year of naturalisation. (4) "Insane," or "Peculiarly minded," state the infirmity opposite that person's name, and the age at which he or she became afflicted.
John Millett	Head	46	Married	11	10	1	Foreman Railway Canal & Coal	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire
Charlotte Millett	Wife	46	Married	11	10	1	Coal Miner	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire
Benedict Millett	Son	30	Single	—	—	—	Coal Miner	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire
Edward Millett	Son	24	Single	—	—	—	Coal Miner	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire
Margaret Millett	Daughter	20	Single	—	—	—	Domestic Servant	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire
Caroline Millett	Daughter	20	Single	—	—	—	Domestic Servant	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire
John Bousfield	Boarder	30	Single	—	—	—	General Labourer	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire
George Bousfield	Boarder	27	Single	—	—	—	General Labourer	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire	British subject by descent	At Home	Leeds	Yorkshire

The 11th (Service) Battalion, Cheshire Regiment had been raised in Chester on 17 September 1914 as part of Kitchener's Third New Army, and joined the 75th Brigade, 25th Division.

This was the closest the town had to an 'Old Pals' regiment. The new recruits were moved out of Chester to camp at Codford St Mary in Wiltshire on November 1914 for introductory training, then to winter billets in Bournemouth. The following year the Cheshires were moved again to Aldershot in May 1915, for final training. Four months later on 26 September 1915 they had landed in France, (including the Bousfields), where the division was concentrated in the Nieppe area, where they continued their training. A few weeks later on 26 October they transferred to 7th Brigade (still in the 25th Division), but it wasn't until May 1916 before they went into action.

Meanwhile, back at home, John senior had moved into 21 Sunnyside Pontoon, an isolated row of terraces near to the pontoon dock, where many of the neighbours also had young men fighting abroad, a number of whom would not return. In his front window (like many other parents) he had proudly placed a sign bearing the red cross and the words

'Three Sons gone to War'. He received regular letters from Percy which, he said, were always cheerful. In early July 1916 he received another letter, this time more worrying,

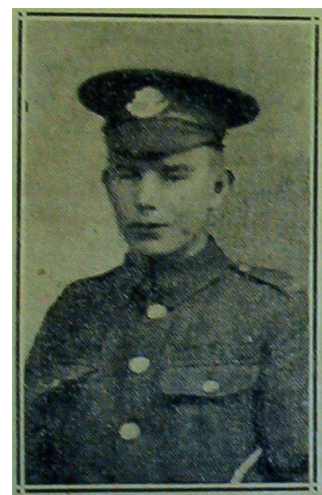
'I am quite well, except for a bit of a stiff knee, where I was wounded by a piece of shrapnel. It was only slight, for it never caught me fair or it would have been Blighty for me. It hit me on the left side and only just scarred the skin but it knocked all the use out of me for a bit. I have had a few days rest in hospital but I am going back to the trenches very soon'.

[The action was likely to have been at Vimy Ridge, north of Arras, in defence of a German attack in May 1916, the first major engagement to involve the 11th Cheshires].



But by the time John Bousfield was reading his sons letter, young Percy, who had just turned twenty-one in April, was already dead. The battalion had been moved a few miles to the south where the huge assault on the German lines on the Somme was to commence on 1 July. The 11th joined the battle just after the main attack on 3 July, with a costly attack near Thiepval.

The village of Thiepval had been an objective during the first hours of 1 July but had still not been captured. According to the Regimental History, on 2 July the 11th Cheshires received orders that they would take part in an assault on a German stronghold known as the Leipzig Salient, south of the village and close to Ovillers near the Albert-Bapume Road. Their assembly positions were near Martinsart Wood, but the planning for the attack seemed to be hurried and poorly thought out, as it was revised at almost the last moment. Their battle orders were received only three hours before the planned 3am assault, and as a consequence it had to be delayed a further three hours. The infantry may have received new orders, but the artillery did not, and their barrage went ahead three hours early. When they repeated the covering barrage for the actual attack, they had insufficient ammunition and could not sustain the support. Inevitably the results were disastrous. Accompanied by the 8th Battalion, Border Regiment, the Cheshires went over the top at 6.20am, passed over No Man's Land in



perfect order, continued advancing towards the enemy lines, but as they moved to within 50 yards, heavy machine gun fire opened up and line after line of troops were mown down. The Commanding Officer, Colonel Aspinall, was killed and every Company commander became a casualty. The Adjutant, Captain Hill, took command. The Regimental History records, *'He decided to get the men still living back into the trench they had jumped off from and to hold it as a defence line,'* and that *'on the morning of the 4th, no organised body of men existed. One simply ran about no-man's land collecting men here and there.'* Of the 677 soldiers who had gone into action, only 356 were able to answer roll call on the 4 July. Percy had been badly wounded, and like many others in this action, was recovered behind the lines to the 3rd Casualty Clearing Station at Puchevillers, about ten miles to the west. Nothing could be done for him and he died on 5 July, and was buried in the adjacent cemetery. Back home his death was not reported in the local press until 5 August, when the announcement was made in the Birkenhead News and Wirral General Advertiser,

Ellesmere Port Heroes LATEST CASUALTIES

Each week furnishes fresh evidence of the sacrifice which Ellesmere Port is making for freedom, and the latest local man to be killed is Private Percy Bousfield, the youngest of the soldier sons of Mr J. Bousfield of 21 Sunnyside. The deceased joined the Cheshires just over twelve months ago, and attained his 21st birthday in the trenches last April. He was previously wounded, but only slightly, and the cause of his death is the result of wounds received during the offensive. He was wounded on July 3rd and died on the 5th.

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Private Tom Shore, brother of Private William Shore, reported killed in our last issue, has written to the widow a letter of sympathy, in which he says he is proud of his brother because he died like a hero.

Regarding Private William Lock, whom we referred to last week, two well-known local soldiers, Sergeant Crosby and Private A. Knight, have written in sympathy to the sorrowing parents.

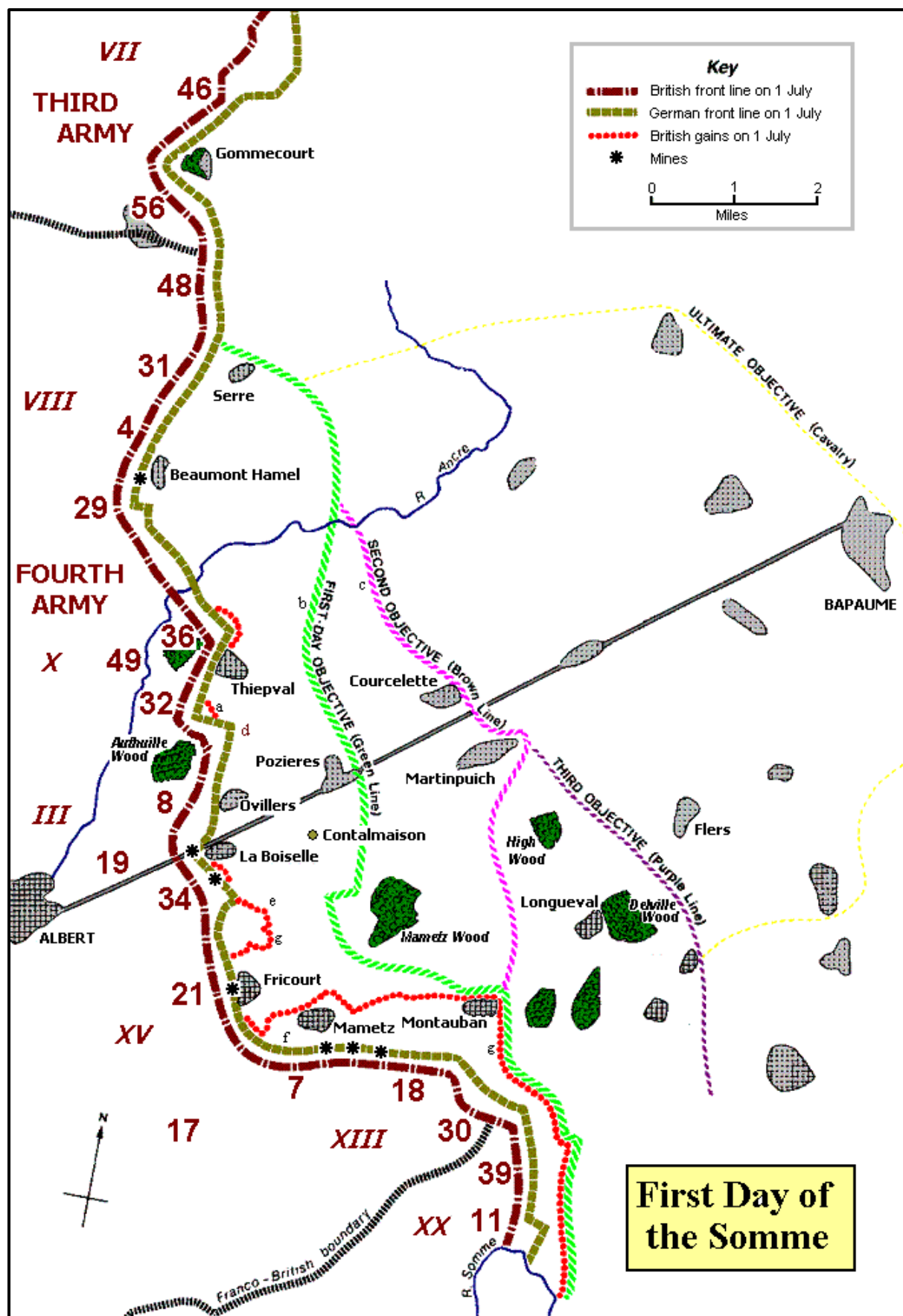
Captain Stoddart sends a letter to Councilor and Mrs. Tom Mounsey on behalf of the officers and men of his company, sympathising with them in the death of their only son Tom. He says that ever since Private Mounsey joined he had been beloved by all his comrades, and he had always done his duty.

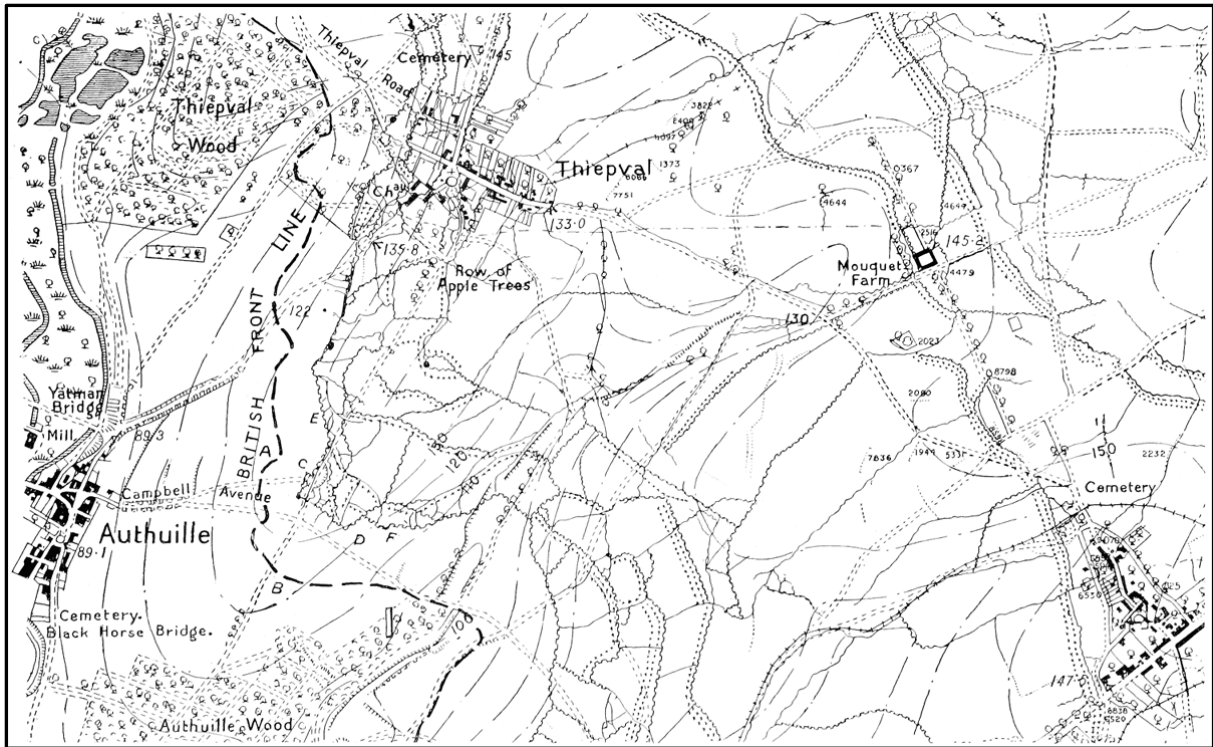
Private Arthur Shelley, formerly a well-known booking clerk at the station, has been severely wounded by a fall of earth caused by a shell explosion from a German gun at the Somme. He joined the Camerons, and is in hospital somewhere in England. He had to be dug out, and it is feared that he was injured during the process of recovering him.

Private Pugh, who was formerly a porter on the station, has been killed in the advance. His parents reside in Lincoln.

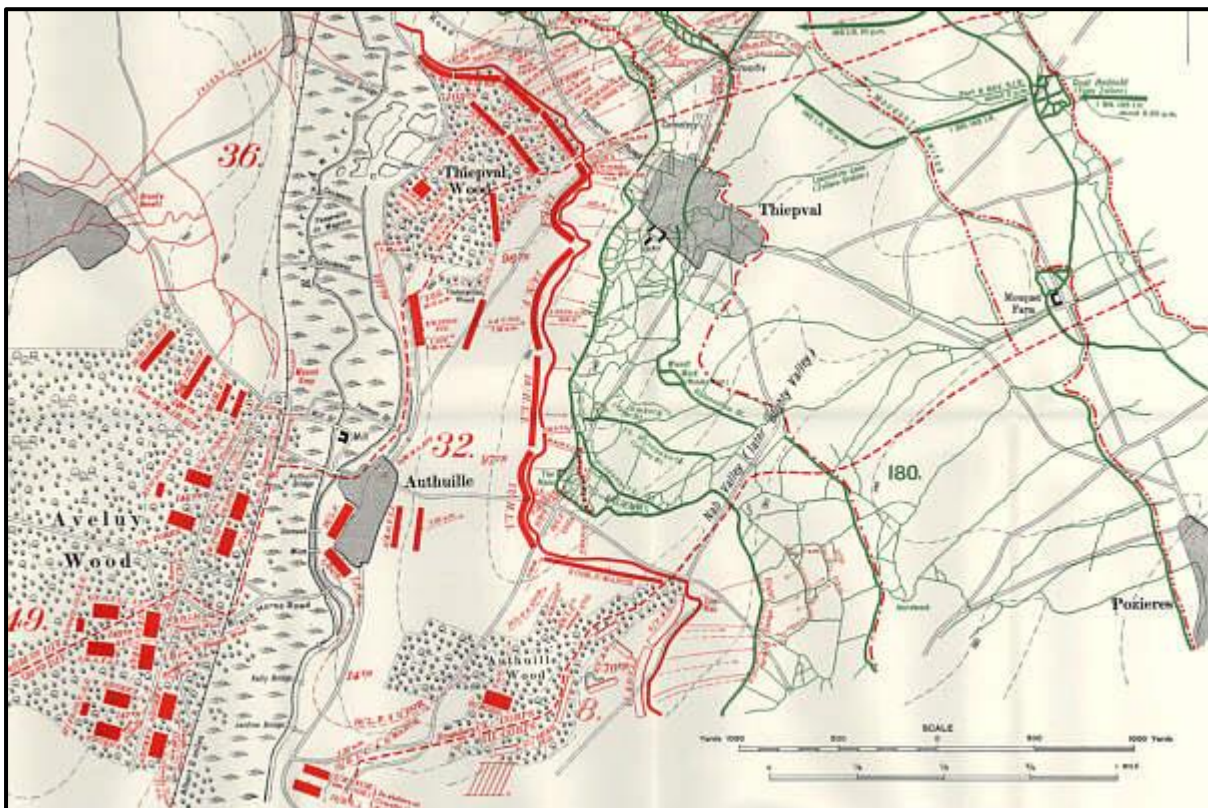
Private Shepherd, son of Mr. R. Shepherd, signalman at the station, has had a leg amputated as the result of serious wounds sustained in the offensive on the Somme.

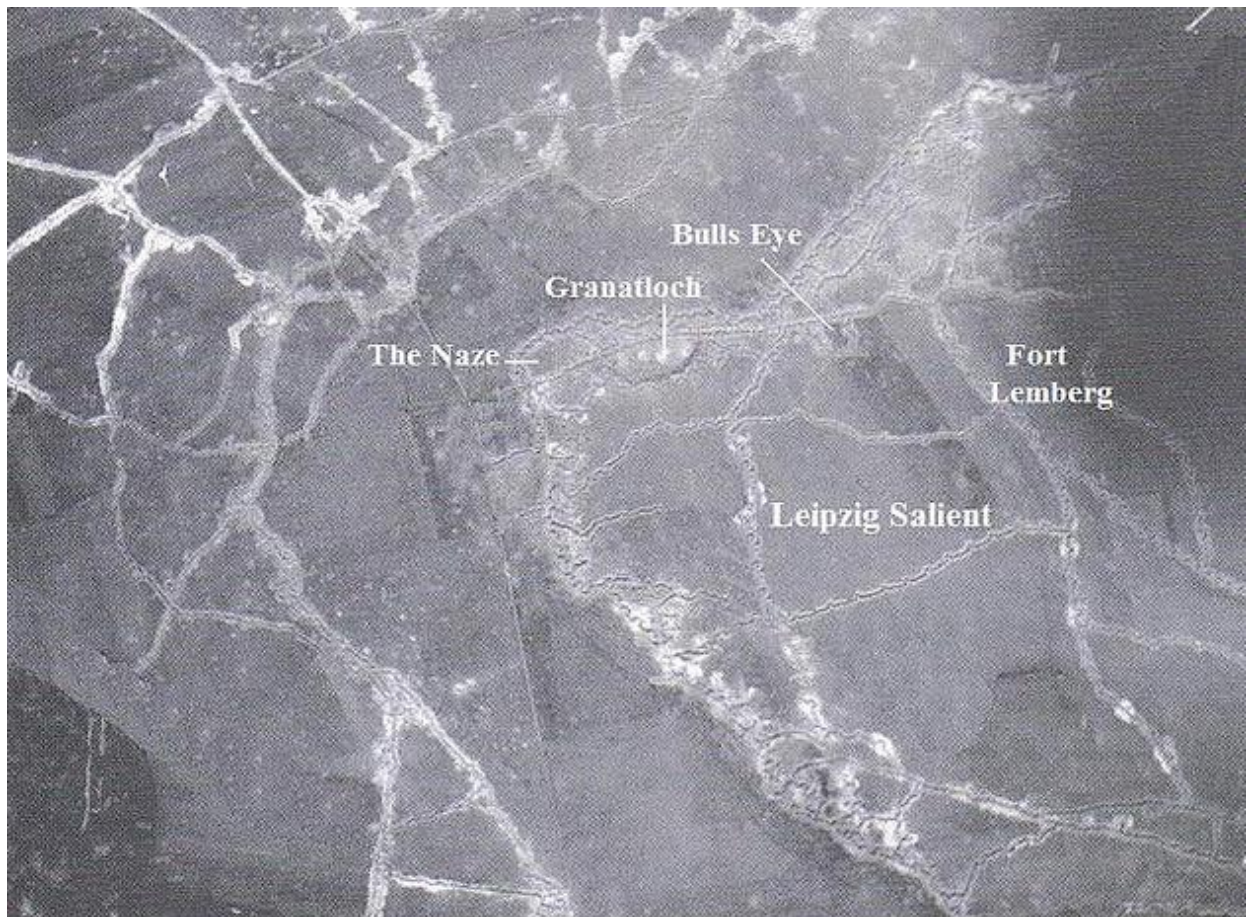
Newspaper reports such as this were now commonplace in the pages of the local press, as families and friends began to receive devastating news from the front line. Columns would list increasing numbers under headings such as 'Wounded', 'Missing', 'Prisoners of War', 'Killed in Action', with usually just the rank and names of men, but little else, and one can only image how tortuous it must have been for families desperately waiting for more information. Parents frequently wrote to the War Office trying to find out more, especially when sons were listed as 'missing'. Usually it was a euphemism for 'dead somewhere out on the battlefield', but equally, in many cases, nothing else was known, such was the nature of this conflict.





Leipzig Salient near Thiepval at the time of the Somme 1916





Leipzig Salient aerial view prior to the 1st July 1916 attack



Leipzig Salient today, looking towards Thiepval ridge, where the monument, just visible, stands today.



War grave of Percy Bousfield (4th from left)



24396 PRIVATE
P. BOUSFIELD
CHESHIRE REGIMENT
5TH JULY 1916



In the following weeks on the Somme, huge resources of manpower and equipment were deployed in an attempt to exploit the modest successes of the first days. However, the German Army resisted tenaciously and repeated attacks and counter attacks meant a major battle for every village, copse and farmhouse gained. By the end of September, Thiepval was finally captured. The village had been an original objective of 1 July. Attacks north and east continued throughout October and into November in increasingly difficult weather conditions. The Battle of the Somme finally ended on 18 November with the onset of winter.

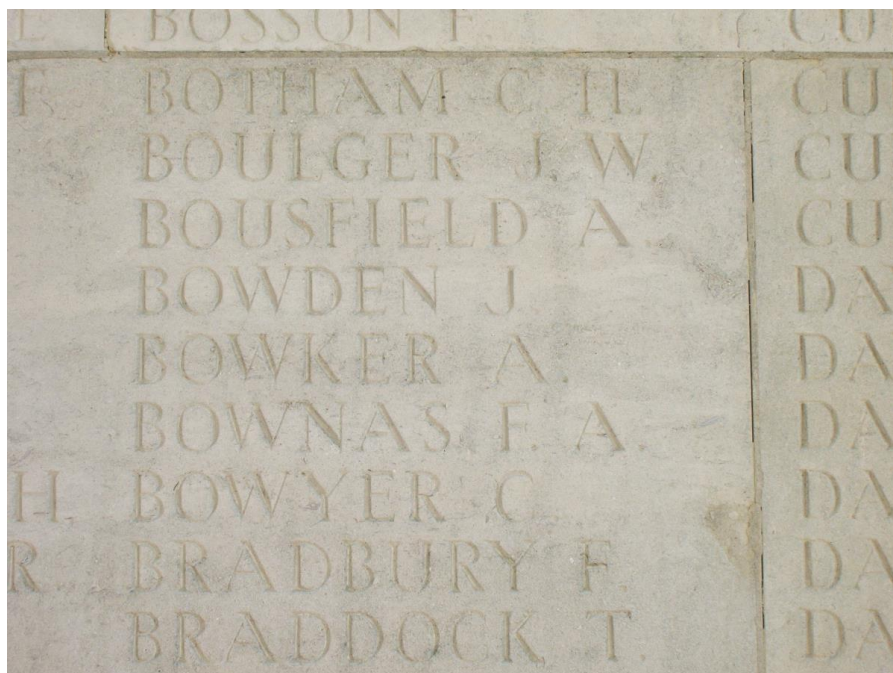


The Cheshire Regiment in trenches at Ovillers on the Somme July 1916

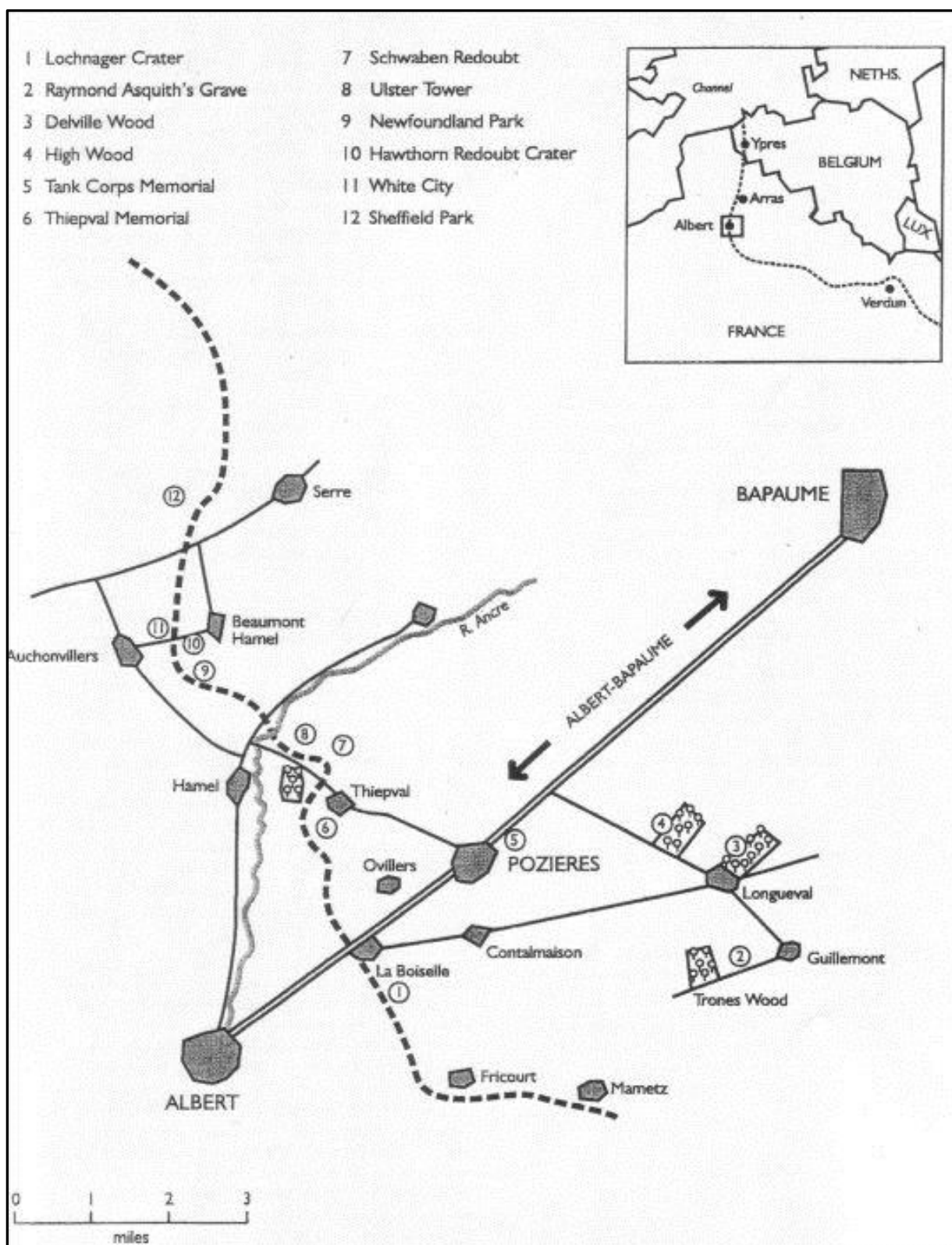
The 11th Battalion had continued in the campaign on the Somme throughout the summer of 1916 and into the autumn. On 14th October, the Cheshires were involved in the capture of the Schwaben Redoubt near Thiepval. This was a major advance, but many more lives were to be lost in the battle to hold onto it. The morning of the 16th was frosty, but bright and sunny. Studying black and white photographs of trenches and the intense bombardment over the Somme today, it is difficult to imagine sunny days and green fields flanking the battlefields. The Cheshires were again defending the area around the Schwaben Redoubt and were enduring heavy shelling. Precisely what happened to Anthony Bousfield is not known, but he did not return that day. He was never found. Today, Anthony's name is recorded on the Thiepval Memorial to the missing. He was twenty-four.

The Thiepval Memorial, the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before 20 March 1918 and have no known grave. Over 90% of those

commemorated died, as Anthony did, between July and November 1916. The memorial also serves as an Anglo-French Battle Memorial in recognition of the joint nature of the 1916 offensive and a small cemetery containing equal numbers of Commonwealth and French graves lies at the foot of the memorial. The memorial, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, was built between 1928 and 1932 and was unveiled by the Prince of Wales, in the presence of the President of France, on 31 July 1932. The dead of other Commonwealth countries who died on the Somme and have no known graves are commemorated on national memorials elsewhere.

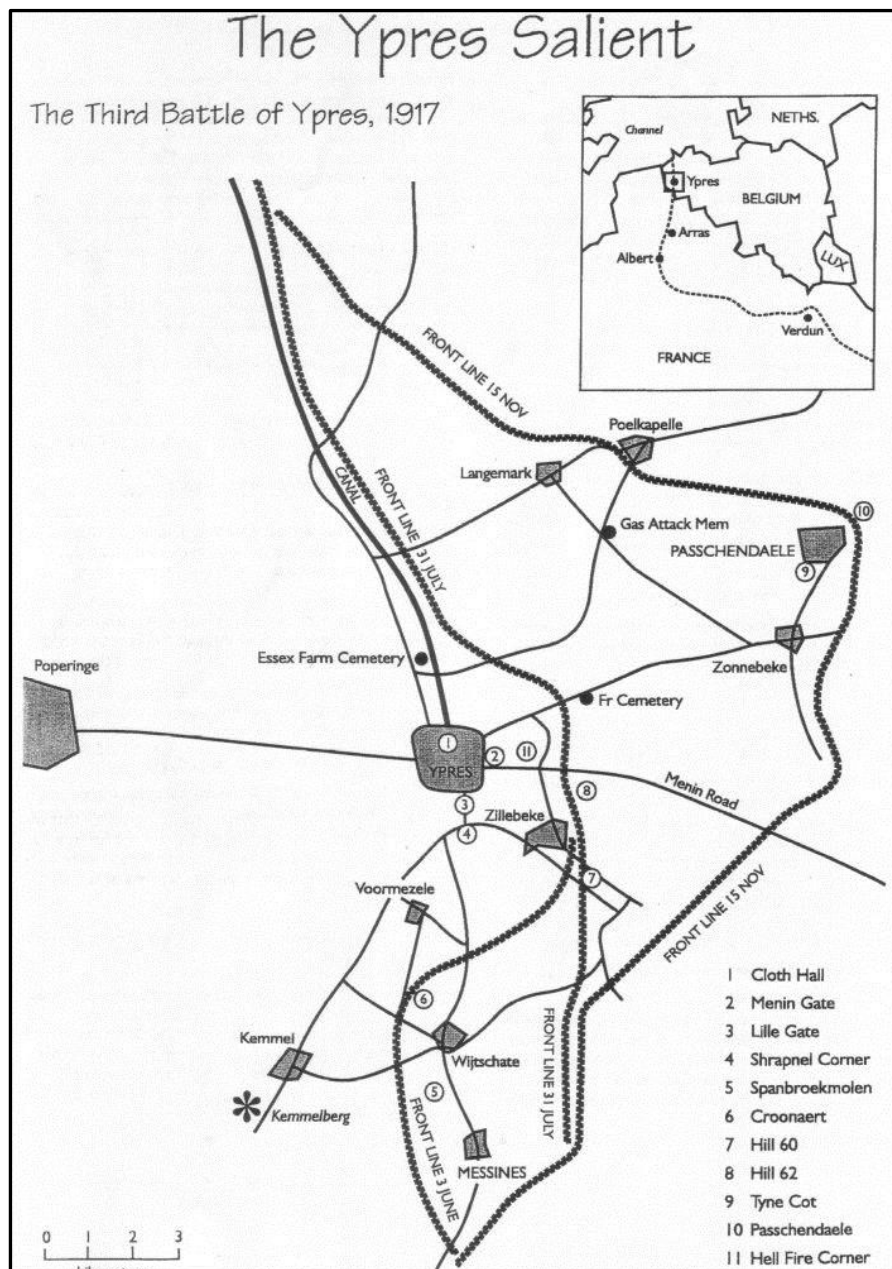


**Anthony Bousfield
recorded on the
Cheshire Regiment
Panel, Thiepval
Memorial.**

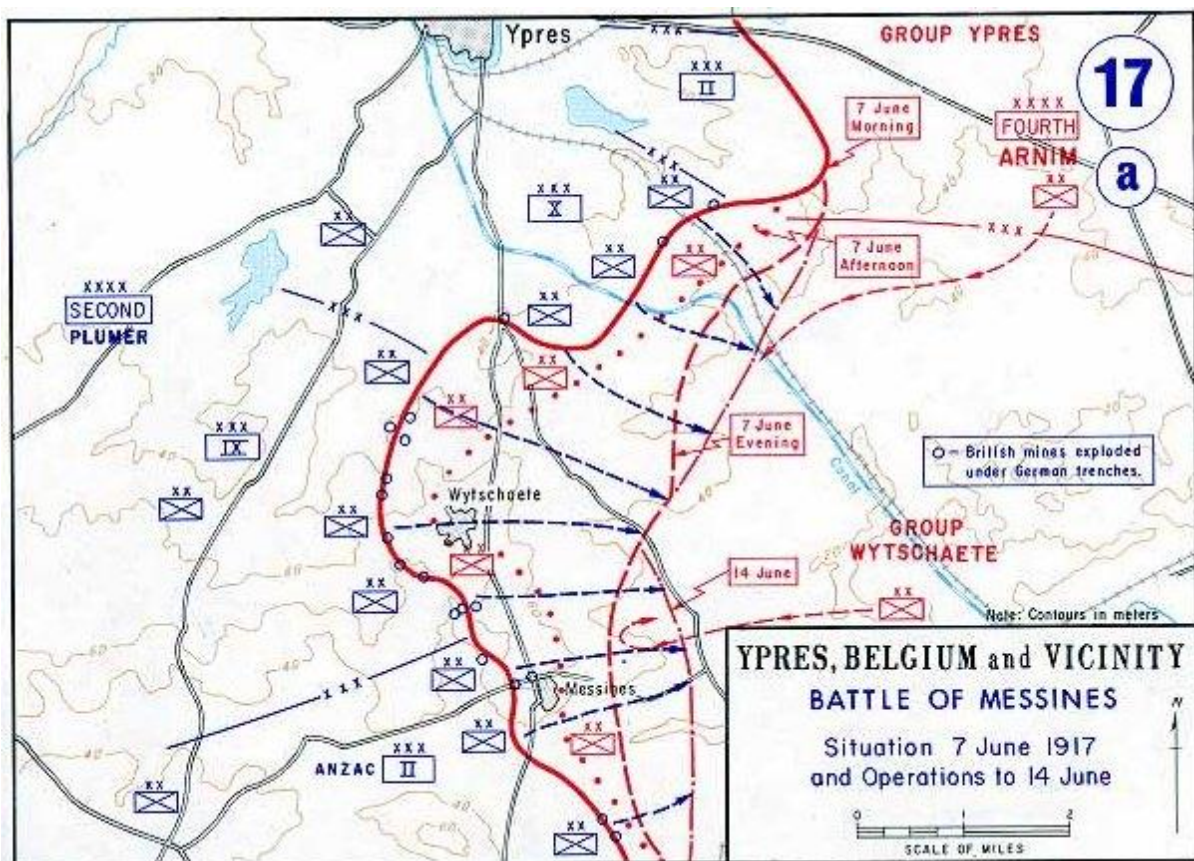


Key positions on the Somme 1916

After the conclusion of the Somme, the 11th Battalion were moved north to Belgium onto the Ypres Salient, and by December they were in the trenches to the east of Ploegsteert Wood, having relieved the 9th Loyal North Lancs on the 4th Dec 1916. The Ypres Salient was the area around the Flanders town of Ypres, which was the scene of some of the major battles in World War I, having been formed by the British, French, Canadian and Belgian defensive efforts against German invasion forces incursion during the 1914 scramble to the English Channel. The resulting Battle of the Yser and the First Battle of Ypres saved the town and surrounding area from occupation, but it led to each side digging in around the Salient line and the consequent trench warfare. Most of the area is flat and those few rises that do exist became the focus for control and intense bombardment. The area saw the first use of gas, the almost total destruction and evacuation of Ypres, and in 1917 the Third Battle of Ypres at Passchendaele. It was not until August 1918 and the Fifth Battle of Ypres before the Allies pushed the German forces out of the Salient for the final time.



When the Cheshires arrived, they set up Battalion Headquarters at Rifle House (a British Cemetery is close to the position today). The trenches in the sector were in poor condition and consisted almost entirely of breastworks which needed constant pumping and draining, plus the need to make good the trench sides and parapet where they had fallen in. The conditions throughout the freezing winter were miserable. However, at least it was a relatively quiet period regarding military engagement, and casualties were low. Much of early 1917 consisted of preparations for the assault on the Messines Ridge. Launched on 7 June 1917, the assault had been twelve months in the planning and was intended to capture the higher ground surrounding the south end of the Salient ridge around Ypres. From here they could launch an attack to the north section towards Passchendaele and then on towards the Dutch border. Preparations were intensive and detailed; road-building, communications, medical dressing stations, machine gun emplacements and so on, all had to be constructed, but the most ambitious part of the plan was the excavation of twenty-one tunnels radiating out from the British lines towards the Messines Ridge. Each one ended under the German positions, where a chamber was filled with explosive ammonal, with the connecting wire trailed back to the British line.



Four Cheshire Battalions (9ths, 10ths 11ths and 13ths) played an integral role in the attack. The 11th Battalion had assembled in Durham Trench by 1am. During the night, their position came under heavy shellfire which caused several casualties, but at 6.50am, the attack went ahead and the men left the trench to attack the most distant objectives. On reaching the top of the Messines Ridge, they came under machine gun fire from the left, and from German

positions at Lumm Farm, but managed to push on towards their objectives. These were secured by 9am and many prisoners, four field guns and a machine gun were captured. Some men pushed on to attack Despagne Farm. The officer commanding suddenly realised that they were ahead of their own artillery barrage and the men were ordered to get into shell holes and take cover. Most of the men survived and the position around the farm had been consolidated. The inevitable German counter-attack was launched at 1.45pm and around 600 enemy soldiers advanced in four waves, only to be beaten off in less than 30 minutes by determined rifle and Lewis gun fire, finally being dispersed by an artillery barrage. The attack had been a complete success, although the Cheshire Battalions had suffered a total of 86 fatalities. Robert Bousfield was safe.

However, this was just the start of the campaign which developed into the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) commencing on 30 July 1917. Regarding the weather, it was the worse rainfall the area had endured for forty years. Combined with the fact that this low lying area had had its drainage systems completely shattered by the bombardment, it meant that many soldiers of both sides fought and died in a man-made swamp. It eventually became so deep that men and horses drowned in it.

On 16 August the attack was resumed, to little effect. Stalemate reigned for another month until an improvement in the weather prompted another attack on 20 September. The Battle of Menin Road Ridge, along with the Battle of Polygon Wood on 26 September and the Battle of Broodseinde on 4 October, established British possession of the ridge east of Ypres. But progress continued to be slow and the eventual capture of what little remained of Passchendaele village by British and Canadian forces on 6 November finally gave Haig an excuse to call off the offensive and claim success.

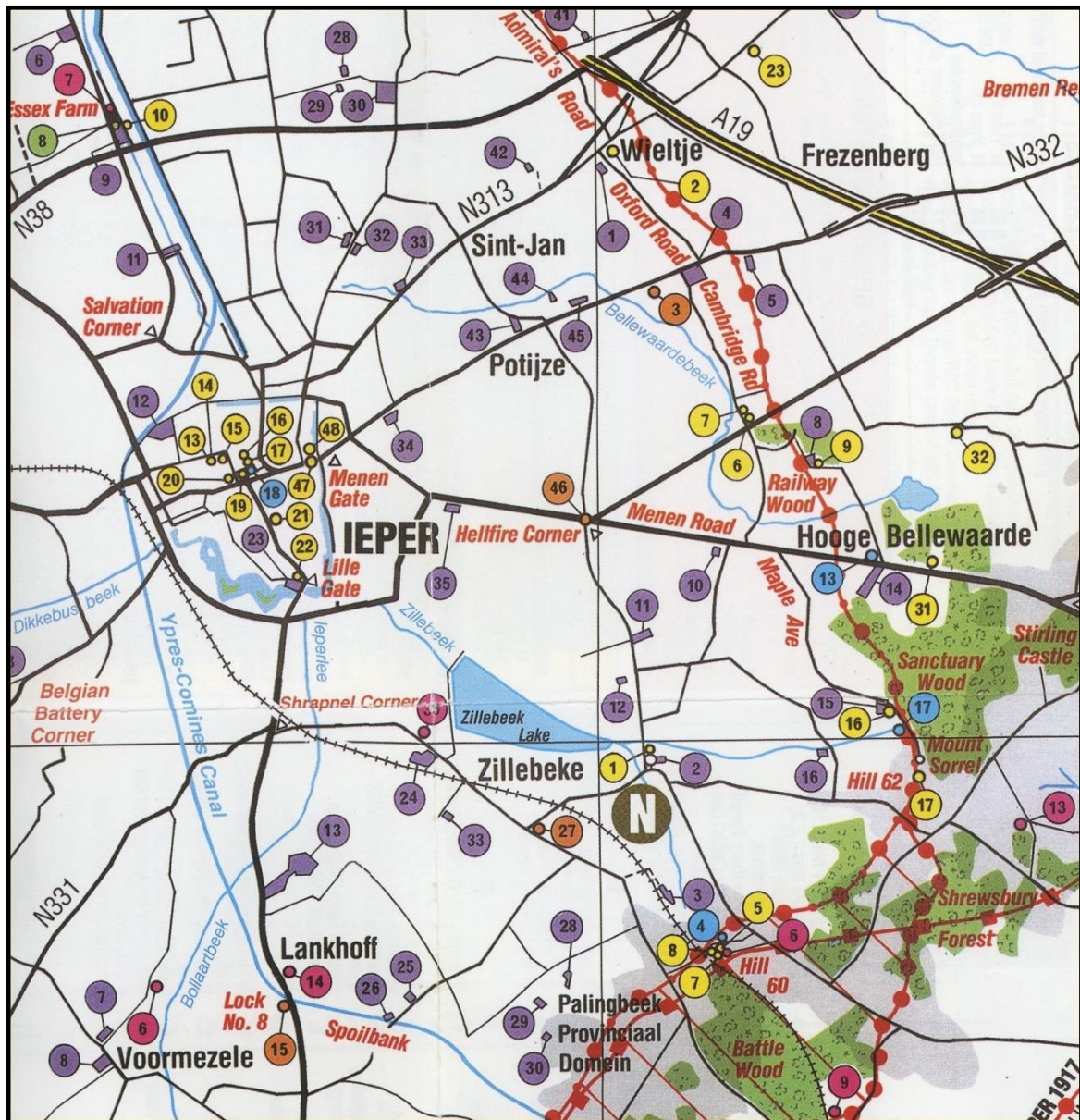


Stretcher bearers in the mud of Passchendaele

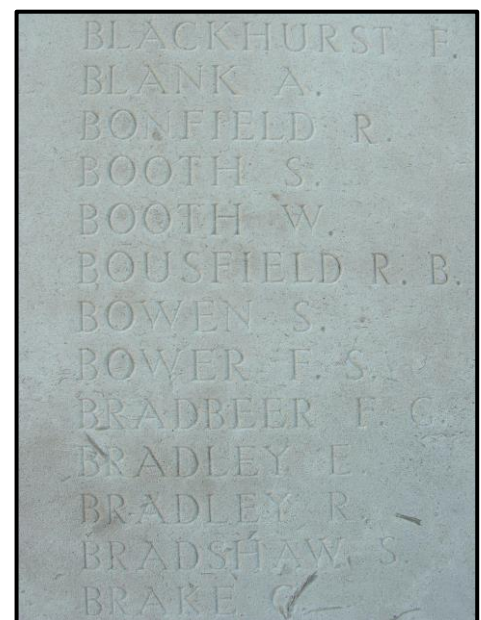
But Passchendaele village lay barely five miles beyond the starting point of his offensive. It had taken over three months, plus 325,000 Allied and 260,000 German casualties to make little more than a dent in the Salient. There may have been a need for an offensive, but Haig's decision to continue its extension into October and November with little apparent gain remains deeply controversial, and the

arguments, like the battle, seem destined to go on and on.

But Robert Bousfield didn't live to see the conclusion of this living hell. He was killed in action during this campaign on 9 September 1917 aged 27, and like his brother Anthony, he was never found. Near Passchendaele today is Tyne Cot, the biggest British and Commonwealth military cemetery in the world, with 11,956 burials. The panels in the rear



perimeter walls hold the names of a further 34,888 missing. Robert Bousfield is one of those men. He is recorded on the Memorial Panel among many other men of the Cheshires.



The memorial panels at Tyne Cot Cemetery. Robert Bousfield appears on the panel listing men of the Cheshire Regiment for the missing.

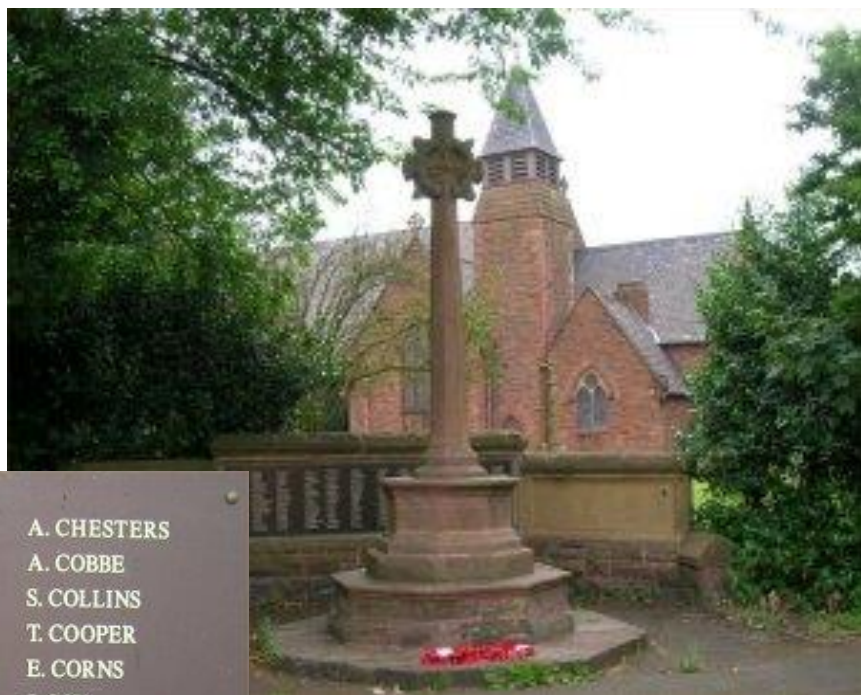
There are other families in Ellesmere Port who lost two of their sons or brothers. But the tragedy that befell John Bousfield was most cruel. He had suffered the deaths of three of his infant children, hoped for a fresh start with a move to a new town and job, only to lose his wife and second son aged twenty. His pride at three of his grown sons fighting for his country soon turned to abject despair as one by one they fell on the battlefield. Consider the fact that a major film was made about a mother who lost three sons during World War II featuring the story to save her fourth (*Saving Private Ryan*), and this may bring the Bousfield story into perspective.

John Bousfield once had a wife and had fathered seven children. By Autumn 1917 he was living alone, all his family dead, save for his eldest son. He decided to return to where he had probably been happiest, to the rural countryside of his childhood, where he died in Eamont Bridge, Westmoreland, aged 78 on 23 February 1927. His son John also lived into old age and died aged 84 in Chester in 1965.

The Bousfield brothers were recorded on Panel 1 of the original Ellesmere Port War Memorial sited outside Christchurch (near the slip road to the M53 motorway).

In this photograph the panels can be seen behind the memorial cross.

Their names are also on the new memorial facing the civic buildings (below right).



F ADEY	W. BROOM	A. CHESTERS
S. ADEY	M. BROWN	A. COBBE
J. E. ALLEN	W. BROWN	S. COLLINS
W. J. ALLEN	T. BROWN	T. COOPER
S. AMER	E. BROUGHTON	E. CORNS
W. Y. AMER	W. BROUGHTON	J. COX
W. ASHBROOK	W. L. BURGESS	JAMES DACEY
H. ASHTON	W. BURKE	JOHN DACEY
J. BARTLEY	W. BURROWS	A. DAVENPORT
R. BELLINGHAM	C. H. CADWALLADER	S. DAVENPORT
W. J. BIGGS	J. H. CALDICOTT	F. DAVIDSON
A. BOUSFIELD	W. E. CALDICOTT	F. DAVIES
B. BOUSFIELD	W. A. CARRUTHERS	E. T. DAVIES
P. BOUSFIELD	R. CARTWRIGHT	T. DAVIES
S. BOWKER	W. CATON	J. T. DAVIES
G. BRADSHAW	I. CATTON	E. DAWSON
F. BRISTOR	J. CATTON	H. DENTITH
W. J. BRISTOR	W. CHALLINER	A. A. DODD
A. BROOKS	W. T. CHAPMAN	W. DOWIE



MEDAL CARDS

22		Name.		Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
		BOUSFIELD		Ches. R.	Pte.	24386
		Robert B.		"	"	"
Medal.		Roll.	Page.	Remarks.		
VICTORY		8/2/101	2937	K. in A. 9 9/17		
BRITISH		do.	do			
15 STAR		J/2/3 B2	1018			
Theatre of War first served in		(1) France				
Date of entry therein		26.9.15.				
K. 1380.						

22		Name.		Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
		BOUSFIELD		Ches. R.	Pte.	24393
		Anthony		"	"	"
Medal.		Roll.	Page.	Remarks.		
VICTORY		8/2/101	2939	K. in A 16 10/16		
BRITISH		do.	do			
15 STAR		J/2/3 B2	1018			
Theatre of War first served in		(1) France				
Date of entry therein		26.9.15.				
K. 1380.						

22		Name.		Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
BOUSFIELD		Percy		Ches. R.	Pte.	24396
Medal.		Roll.	Page.	Remarks.		
VICTORY		J/2/101	10 2940	D. of W 5 7/16		
BRITISH		-do-	-do-			
15 STAR		J/2/3B2	1019			
Theatre of War first served in		(1) France				
Date of entry therein		26-9-15.				

K. 1380.