

# Private John Leonard France M.M.

51531 17<sup>th</sup> (Reserve) Battalion Cheshire Regiment

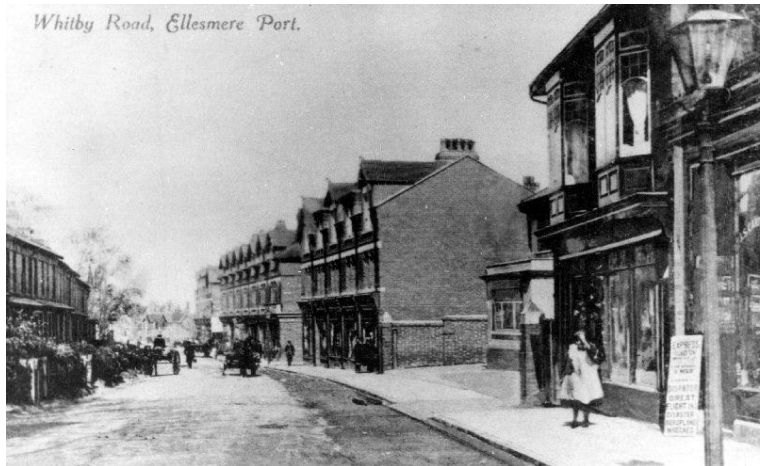
15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Bantams), Cheshire Regiment

## Field Ambulance

Born in Tilstock Park near Whitchurch, Leonard Davies had a tough start to life when his father John died before Leonard had reached his first birthday. He was a brick setter in the small hamlet of Whixhall in the mosslands north Shropshire. Leonard's mother Elizabeth was only thirty-two with seven children all under the age of eleven. After a period of hardship working as an agricultural labourer, Elizabeth married again, to a local man Frederick Betteley in March 1910. By that time, Leonard had moved to Ellesmere Port, lodging with his Aunt Elizabeth France (Bridge Street), and working on the dock site as a

warehouse porter for the Shropshire Union Canal Company. Other family members had migrated to the expanding town from Shropshire, and soon his mother with her new husband would arrive too (*Stanlow Cottages – pictured on the left in this view of Whitby Road*). Leonard then worked for the Mersey Iron Works for a couple of years before signing on to the Cheshire Regiment on 9 December 1915. He was only 5 feet 1¼ inches in height, under the regulation minimum of 5 feet 3 inches, suggesting he may have tried to sign on earlier with

the rest of his pals, but told to come back when he was taller. The height restriction became somewhat blurred as the need for recruits became more acute and a Bantams Battalion was formed in Cheshire to take men under height. Leonard was posted to the 17th (Reserve) Battalion, which was a reserve battalion for the 15th and 16th – both Cheshire Bantams - and on 13th April 1916 was sent to Prees Heath camp for training, just a mile or so from Whixhall where he grew up, it probably felt like going home again. On 27 July, he was in France posted to the 16th Battalion (Bantams), who that night had relieved the battle weary brother battalion of the 15ths in the trenches near Trones Wood, at Guillemont, suffering heavy shelling before they could get into position. Leonard had missed the opening of the Battle of the Somme, but this was still a battle at its height.



A week later on 6 August, Leonard had been moved to the battle weary 15ths. According to Stephen McGreal in his excellent work on the *Cheshire Bantams*,

The strain of almost constant trench warfare interspersed with backbreaking work was beginning to have a noticeable effect on the little men; officers and men were reported as being over tired and morale was in decline. The first week in August offered little to improve the situation for the infantry of the Division. This period was scheduled to be a

rest period, but the days were now spent carrying out physical drill, bayonet fighting and practice in trench attack. The overworked men were also required to carry out night-time exercises, practicing trench attacks, carried out in front of the Brigadier. This disappointing course of events came about due to the arrival of fresh drafts of men, the vast majority of whom were poorly trained and physically under developed. Converting these men into troops fit to enter the line demanded considerable attention from the officers and left little time for more relaxing pastimes.

August 1916 was a gruelling experience for the Bantams and they were no doubt relieved to be moved north to the Arras sector in early September. However, on 6 December 1916 it had been decided that the 35th Division would no longer be a 'Bantam Division' and men of average height would now be accepted, and reduced the strength of the Division by rejecting 25% of their men, many of who had fought admirably thus far. In January, the 15th lost sixty-one men in this cull of which Leonard France was one, being moved to the Field Ambulance on 14 January 1917. Weeks later on 16 March, he was transferred to the newly formed 189th Company Labour Corps at Calais before they moved to Rouen on 14 May 1917. There they were engaged in a wide variety of work, consisting of building and maintaining the huge transport network, stores, dumps, telegraph and telephone systems, and moving and supplying stores. By 15 October 1917, he had rejoined the Cheshires, having been transferred into the 1st Battalion, where they were in support at Broodseinde during the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele). After a short period of rest, they were back into the front line on 23 October 1917 near Bedford House on the Ypres Salient.

By December 1917, they were sent as part of a joint Anglo-French force to aid the Italians after their heavy defeat by Austro-German forces at the Battle of Caporetto. On 24 October 1917, a combined German and Austro-Hungarian force had scored one of the most crushing victories of the war, decimating the Italian line along the northern stretch of the Isonzo River. Though the Italians managed to strengthen their defences over the next few weeks, by the end of November the Germans and Austrians had driven them back some 60 miles to the River Piave, just 20 miles north of Venice. Italian casualties at Caporetto totalled almost 700,000—40,000 killed or wounded, 280,000 captured by the enemy and another 350,000 deserted. Consequently, British forces were deployed to the area in December 1917 and the Division positioned along the River Piave. On the 18 March, still in Italy, Leonard received a head wound which failed to heal, causing an abscess to his face, and from the casualty clearing station he was sent to hospital in Pavia.

[A soldier who was injured in the field would be treated firstly by the Battalion Medical Officer and his orderlies and stretcher bearers, and at a Regimental Aid Post in the trenches, then moved to an Advance Dressing Station close to the front line, manned by members of The Field Ambulance, RAMC. If further treatment was needed, he would be moved to a Casualty Clearing Station, a tented camp behind the lines, and then, if required, moved to one of the base hospitals usually by train, the seriously wounded were taken back to Britain by Hospital Ship and onto the relevant hospital for further treatment].

On 13 April 1918, the day he was released from hospital care in Pavia to return to the 1st Cheshires, he seems to have got himself so drunk that he became violent trying to resist arrest. Consequently, he was given 28 days field punishment No.1, which would have seen him shackled to a fixed object such as a wagon wheel for two hours a day, usually for three out of four days during the 4 week period. He would also have lost privileges and pay during the punishment, while also being subject to hard labour.

In April 1918 the 1st Cheshires returned to Belgium, where they took part in the Battle of Hazebrouck, fighting in the Defence of Nieppe Forest, before moving south once more to the

Somme, fighting in the Battle of Albert, the Battle of Bapaume, and the Battle of the Epehy. In September 1918, they moved a few miles north to enter the Battle of Canal du Nord, part of a general Allied offensive against German positions along an incomplete portion of the Canal du Nord and on the outskirts of Cambrai between 27 September and 1 October 1918. At the commencement of these hostilities, Leonard was involved in the battle that saw him awarded the Military Medal, which also cost him his life as he was killed in action on 27 September 1918.

At home, a notice appeared in the local press the following month, just days before the Armistice.

#### **Private Leonard John France**

51531 Private Leonard John France, son of Frederick and Elizabeth Betteley, was employed at the Mersey Iron Works before signing on to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Cheshire Regiment. The circumstances of his award for gallantry are as yet unknown, but he was killed in action near Arras on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1918. His body was never recovered, and he is recorded on the memorial panel in the Vis-en-Artois Memorial, on the Arras to Cambrai road, Pas De Calais. He was twenty-seven years old.



#### **Vis-en-Artois Memorial**

Vis-en-Artois and Haucourt are villages on the straight main road from Arras to Cambrai about 10 kilometres south-east of Arras. Within the grounds of Vis-en-Artois British

Cemetery, which is west of Haucourt on the north side of the main road, will be found the Vis-en-Artois Memorial. This Memorial bears the names of over 9,000 men who fell in the period from 8 August 1918 to the date of the Armistice in the Advance to Victory in Picardy and Artois, between the Somme and Loos, and who have no known grave. They belonged to the forces of Great Britain and Ireland and South Africa; the Canadian, Australian and New Zealand forces being commemorated on other memorials to the missing. The Memorial consists of a screen wall in three parts. The middle part of the screen wall is concave and carries stone panels on which names are carved. It is 26 feet high flanked by pylons 70 feet high. The Stone of Remembrance stands exactly between the pylons and behind it, in the middle of the screen, is a group in relief representing St George and the Dragon. The flanking parts of the screen wall are also curved and carry stone panels carved with names. Each of them forms the back of a roofed colonnade; and at the far end of each is a small building.





**DESCRIPTIVE REPORT ON ENLISTMENT.**  
(To correspond with Entries on the Medical History Sheet.)  
Applicable to all ranks.

Name Leonard France

Apparent age 22 years 242 months. Height 5 feet 14 inches.

Chest Measurement { Girth when fully expanded 36 inches.  
Range of expansion 23 inches.

Distinctive marks fit for General Service

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**INFORMATION SUPPLIED BY RECRUIT.**

Name and Address of next-of-kin Frederick Betty  
14 Stanton Cottage, E. Port Relationship Stepfather  
Hanlow Cottages, White Rd. Billermea Park.  
Particulars as to Marriage.

(a) Christian and Surname of Woman to whom married, and whether spinster or widow. (b) Place and date of marriage.  
(c) Present address. (d) Initials of Officer verifying entry.

(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)

Enlistment - Extract Leonard France's War Record documents

Army Form B. 103. Regimental Number 51531

**Casualty Form - Active Service.**

Rank Pt Regiment or Corps Cheshire Regt  
Surname France Christian Name L

Religion ..... Age on Enlistment ..... years ..... months

Enlisted (a) ..... Terms of Service (a) ..... Service reckons from (a) .....

Date of promotion to present rank ..... Date of appointment to lance rank .....

Extended { } Re-engaged { } Qualification (b) .....  
or Corps Trade and Rate .....

Occupation ..... Signature of Officer .....

Report		Place of Casualty	Date of Casualty	Remarks Taken from Army Form B.213, Army Form A.36, or other official documents
Date	From whom received			
		Embarked ...		
		Disembarked ...		
<u>30/9/18</u>	<u>ob</u>	<u>Killed in Action</u>	<u>27.9.18</u>	<u>Major for</u>
		<u>Huddersfield</u>		<u>O 1/5 No. 8 Infy Sec</u>
				<u>G.H.Q. 3rd Echelon FRANCE</u>
		<u>Awarded Military Medal</u>		
		<u>Vide Supp. London Gazette 4/12/18</u>		

(a) In the case of a man who has re-engaged for, or enlisted in Section D, Army Reserve, particulars of such re-engagement or enlistment will be entered.  
(b) Signaller, Shoeing-Smith, &c. (17591.) Wt. W 1887-P 1124, 1,000,000, 6/18, D & S. Form B.103, (E. 1906.)

Active Service Record - Extract Leonard France's War Record documents

Name.	Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
FRANCE,  Leonard	bles R.	Pte	30817
	Lab corps		112968
	bles R.		51531
Medal.	Roll.	Page.	Remarks.
VICTORY	J/2/101 - B17	5498	
BRITISH	<u>2</u>		
STAR			
Theatre of War first served in			
Date of entry therein			

K. 1380

Leonard France's Medal Card

### Military Medal

*Military Medal was instituted by Royal Warrant on the 25th March 1916 to be awarded for "acts of gallantry and devotion to duty performed by non-commissioned officers and men of our army in the field"*



**Biography researched and written by Mike Royden.**

**Photographs of the Vis-en-Artois Memorial, France,  
also by Mike Royden.**