

If Remembrance Day is epitomised by the slaughter of the First World War, then for most the first day of the Battle of the Somme, is the most vivid reminder of the carnage so many young men faced.

### **Frederick John Prime**

Frederick John Prime was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1887. He was baptised in Harlton church on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1888 and at this time, his surname was actually spelt Pryme, although in all the ancestry records this appears to be the only time it was spelt this way.

His father, William Prime, was originally from Toft where he was brought up by his grandparents. In 1861 William appears on the census still in Toft living with just his 72 year old Grandmother, she is described as a 'pauper', he as an agricultural labourer.

We next see William in 1870 when he marries a Harlton girl Elizabeth Beard. She appears to be one of at least eight children.

In 1871, the newly married Elizabeth and William Prime are living in Harlton, although we do not know where, he is still an agricultural labourer and they now have an infant daughter - Lydia.

By 1881, the family has grown by four more children – Robert, Charles, George and Thomas, and William senior describes his employment as a Coprolite Digger – which was a major employer in Cambridgeshire at this time. Interestingly their address is given as 'Back of Church' Harlton.

In the 1891 census, the family has grown again. As well as the birth of Frederick the ten years since the last census has seen the family grow by three more daughters – Alice, Agnes and Phyllis (spelt Phyles). Although Lydia has now left home, William and Elizabeth are now living with eight children in Barton Road Harlton. William senior and the four oldest boys (12 – 18 years) are all described as Agricultural labourers.

The following ten years sees the family shrink dramatically, and by 1901 Frederick who is now 13, is living with his parents and only his youngest sister (now spelt Phillis) in Orwell Hill, Harlton. William senior is now described as a farm labourer along with Frederick.

More change follows, when in 1904, at the age of 62 William senior dies.

By 1911, Frederick is living with only his mother in 'Wash Pitt Road' Harlton; Frederick, now 23, is still a farm labourer. Phyllis by now is living as a nurse to the Vicars' three young daughters in the vicarage at Caxton. Phyllis returned to Harlton in May 1913 when she married a 27-year-old Edwin Curtis from Caxton.

In 1914, the outbreak of war saw a number of new Battalions formed from the many young men you volunteered to fight for their Country. One such Battalion was the 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks, which started life in September 1914 when the Lord Lieutenant of Cambridgeshire approached the War Office to raise a "Kitchener" Battalion of men from Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely.

From his army number we know that Frederick enlisted around November 1914. No doubt, this would have been the end of the farming year and the promise of regular meals and wages would have been at least part of his motivation to enlist.

Although formally named the 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolk Battalion, the Battalion was (at least in its early months) mainly resourced from men from Cambridgeshire and was frequently referred to as the Cambs Suffolk's. It was to all intents a 'Pals regiment' with nearly every local village represented in its numbers.

The early months of the war were relatively easy for the 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks, initially barracked for sixth months in Cambridge; it wasn't until May 1915 that the Battalion moved out to Ripon in Yorkshire for further training. Through the rest of 1915 there were a number of further moves within England, before the men saw out Christmas and the New Year near Warminster.

Initially the plan had been for the Battalion to be posted to Egypt in early 1916, fatefully however this was amended, and as a result, on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1916 they left for France.

By the end of June 1916 the regiment had seen some action, and had lost nearly fifty of its initial establishment of over 1300 men, to battle, illness or accident (eight fatalities were while still in England), however, as the 1<sup>st</sup> July approached they were still a long way from seasoned or experienced soldiers.

The area of the Somme that was to be the target for the 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks sits to the North East of the small town of Albert. The 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks were one of four battalions that formed the 101<sup>st</sup> Brigade - which itself was one of the three brigades forming the 34<sup>th</sup> Division. The 34<sup>th</sup> Division had the objective on the 1<sup>st</sup> July of attacking northeast towards the German held village of La Boisselle.

The geography of the area would have been very familiar to Frederick Prime; the countryside although by now largely altered by months of trench warfare, is similar to what he would have remembered from home. La Boisselle sits on slightly raised chalky land overlooking the much heavier clay soils leading up from the Somme river. The ground at La Boisselle sits on a lightly raised elevation and in front of it the trenches were bunched perilously close. This narrow slightly steeper incline was to be the objective for the 103<sup>rd</sup> Brigade – the Tyneside Irish Battalions. To their left would come the 102<sup>nd</sup> Brigade – the Tyneside Scottish battalions, while to their right would come the 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks and the remainder of the 101<sup>st</sup> Battalion.

Each objective had their own 'Tommy' names. The 103<sup>rd</sup> would be attacking the 'Glory Hole', while the 101<sup>st</sup> would be attacking 'Sausage Valley', so named due to the sausage shaped observation balloon the German forces maintained at the highest point of the valley. In true Tommy wit, the valley adjacent to Sausage Valley – where the 102<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was to attack was named 'Mash Valley'.

I need not repeat the well-documented disaster that the 1<sup>st</sup> July – the first day the Somme offensive - was to be for the French and British troops. The twelve battalions of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division committed approximately 9000 men 'over the top'. By the end of the same day over 6000 were killed, injured or captured, giving the Division the unfortunate honour of suffering more losses than any other in the entire Somme offensive. The 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks fared very badly, of the 750 men who climbed of their trenches, 190 were killed outright and a further 300 wounded.

The following days must have been a nightmare for Cambridgeshire as news filtered home, with hardly a settlement left untouched; locally Little Eversden had lost Wilfred Bester, Meldreth – Reuben Dash, Barton – Herbert Disbrey, Bourn – Charles Keep, Wimpole – Frank Skinner and William Wayman, Harston – Percy Northrop, Haslingfield – both Arthur Pagram and David Matthews.

Comberton was hit especially with Percy Harper and William Humphreys killed alongside brothers Alfred and Walter Day – all within the space of a couple of hours on the 1<sup>st</sup> July.

In addition, at some point on the following days Elizabeth Prime received the news that she would have been dreading - her son Frederick was amongst those killed.

The majority of those who fell have no known grave – the continued battles to achieve the initial objectives of the 1<sup>st</sup> July, the foul conditions and mud claimed the vast majority of the fallen and assigned them no known grave. Frederick Prime was an exception. Today he rests in Gordons Dump Cemetery near the top of his objective on that fateful day – Sausage Valley.

Rupert Brooke in his poem 'The Soldier' describes 'A corner of a field that is forever England', and in many ways Gordons Dump Cemetery epitomises this sentiment. It lies a couple of hundred metres from a quiet lane overlooking open gently sloping countryside. Frederick's plot is near the corner of what for the Somme is a relatively small cemetery.

On the 1st July this year, probably within an hour or two of the exact time when 96 years ago Frederick met his fate, I had the privilege of visiting his grave, photos of which are below.



