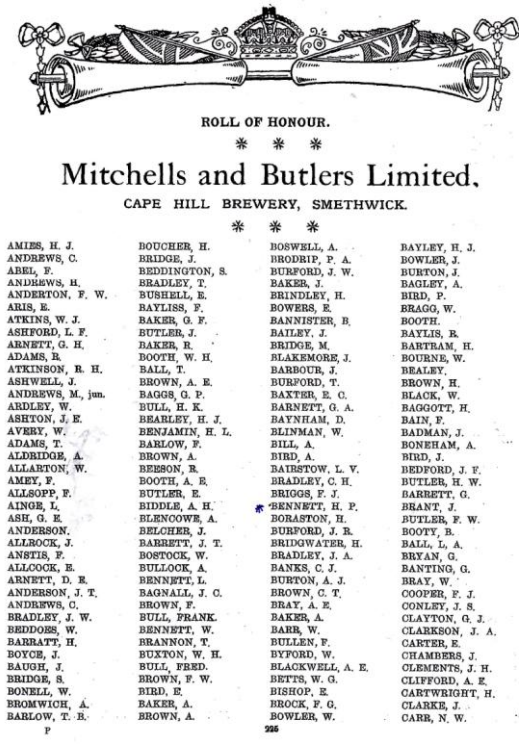
Second Lieutenant Harold Presdee Bennett

The regimental diary of the Loyal Lancashire Regiment records that on 16th November 1916, 8 officers were killed as a result of friendly fire from a British artillery barrage. One of these officers was Harold. Letters to the family, informing them of his death, tell a very different story.

Harold Prisdee Bennett was born on 23rd August 1897[i] to George Frederick Bennett, a building surveyor and his wife Ann Bowden[ii] (nee Rawson[iii]). Harold's grandfather, William, also in the building trade, is described in the 1881 census as a 'master builder employing 60 men'. In the 1901 census, the family are recorded as living at 120 College Road, then in the Solihull district of Warwickshire, with the services of a general domestic servant to help with the daily domestic chores.

In 1906, Marjorie Bowden Bennett, Harold's sister was born and by 1911 the family had moved to 93 Willows Road, Balsall Heath. Harold, then aged thirteen, attended Birmingham Central Secondary School where he was a noted athlete winning many cups and prizes at the annual sports day before matriculating at London University.[iv] Central schools provided an improved general education of a practical character, sometimes with a slight industrial or commercial bias, for pupils between the ages of 11 and 14 or 15. A considerable number of such schools, both selective and non-selective, were established in London, Manchester and elsewhere from 1911 onwards.[v]



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ABEL, F.	BEDDINGTON, S.	BURFORD, J. W.	BURTON, J.
ANDREWS, H.	BRADLEY, T.	BAKER, J.	BAGLEY, A.
ANDERTON, F. W.	BUSHELL, E.	BRINDLEY, H.	BIRD, P.
ARIS, E.	BAYLISS, F.	BOWERS, E.	BRAGG, W.
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ADAMS, R.	BOOTH, W. H.	BLAKEMORE, J.	BOURNE, W.
ATKINSON, R. H.	BALL, T.	BARBOUR, J.	BEALEY.
ASHWELL, J.	BROWN, A. E.	BURFORD, T.	BROWN, H.
ANDREWS, M., jun.	BAGGS, G. P.	BAXTER, E. C.	BLACK, W.
ARDLEY, W.	BULL, H. K.	BARNETT, G. A.	BAGGOTT, H.
ASHTON, J. E.	BEARLEY, H. J.	BAYNHAM, D.	BAIN, P.
AVERY, W.	BENJAMIN, H. L.	BLINMAN, W.	BADMAN, J.
ADAMS, T.	BARLOW, F.	BILL, A.	BONEHAM, A.
ALDRIDGE, A.	BROWN, A.	BIRD, A.	BIRD, J.
ALLARTON, W.	BEESON, R.	BAIRSTOW, L. V.	BEDFORD, J. F.
AMEY, F.	BOOTH, A. E.	BRADLEY, C. H.	BUTLER, H. W.
ALLSOPP, F.	BUTLER, E.	BRIGGS, F. J.	BARRETT, G.
AINGE, L.	BIDDLE, A. H.	*BENNETT, H. P.	BRANT, J.
ASH, G. E.	BLENCOWE, A.	BORASTON, H.	BUTLER, F. W.
ANDERSON.	BELCHER, J.	BURFORD, J. R.	BOOTT, R.
ALLROCK, J.	BARRETT, J. T.	BRIDGWATER, H.	BALL, L. A.
ANSTIS, F.	BOSTOCK, W.	BRADLEY, J. A.	BRYAN, G.
ALLCOCK, E.	BULLOCK, A.	BANKS, C. J.	BANTING, G.
ARNETT, D. R.	BENNETT, L.	BURTON, A. J.	BRAY, W.
ANDERSON, J. T.	BAGNALL, J. C.	BROWN, C. T.	COOPER, F. J.
ANDREWS, C.	BROWN, F.	BRAY, A. E.	CONLEY, J. S.
BRADLEY, J. W.	BULL, FRANK.	BAKER, A.	CLAYTON, G. J.
BEDDOES, W.	BENNETT, W.	BARR, W.	CLARKSON, J. A.
BARRATT, H.	BRANNON, T.	BULLEN, F.	CARTER, E.
BOYCE, J.	BUXTON, W. H.	BYFORD, W.	CHAMBERS, J.
BAUGH, J.	BULL, FRED.	BLACKWELL, A. E.	CLEMENTS, J. H.
BRIDGE, S.	BROWN, F. W.	BETTS, W. G.	CLIFFORD, A. E.
BONELL, W.	BIRD, E.	BISHOP, E.	CARTWRIGHT, H.
BROMWICH, A.	BAKER, A.	BROCK, F. G.	CLARKE, J.
BARLOW, T. B.	BROWN, A.	BOWLER, W.	CARR, N. W.
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On leaving school in the middle of 1914 he became a member of the brewing staff of Messrs Mitchells and Butlers Ltd (his name appears on their WW1 Roll of Honour - see left, third column asterisked name) and combined his work for the firm with a course of study with the Birmingham University School of Brewing. He proved himself a most promising and capable student passing his end of year exams in 1915.[vi]

Harold combined his work and studies with training in the Army reserve, joining the University Officers' Training Corps on 10th November 1914, four months after war was

Figure 1: 2nd Lt H M Bennett

declared.[vii] His father was already serving with the Army reserve, and became the Company Commander of 'B' Company 4th Battalion Warwickshire Volunteer Regiment based in Stoney Lane, Sparkbrook with the rank of Captain[viii]

After his initial training period with the reserve, Harold was recommended to the War Office for a commission, and on 23rd October 1915, his university exams now over, he was appointed to the position of a temporary Second Lieutenant. His commission papers were actually signed by his father! On receiving his commission, Harold was posted to the Sherwood Foresters (Nottingham and Derby Regiment). His training with the regiment commenced at Hornsea in Yorkshire before he joined up with the 14th (reserve) Battalion at Brocton Camp on Cannock Chase, where he qualified as a bombing officer.[ix]

Two days after attaining the age of 19 on 25th August 1916, Harold joined the 10th Loyal North Lancashire Regiment in France as their Company Bombing Officer.[x] There followed spells in and out of the front line but with only sporadic enemy action. In November the regiment was moved forward ready to take part in what became known as the Battle of the Ancre. This was the final set piece British operation of the Somme Campaign.

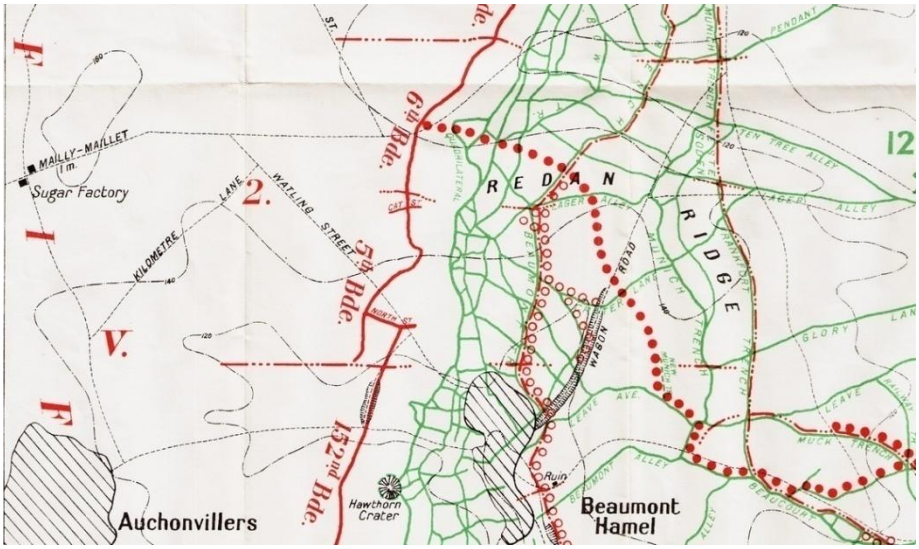


Figure 2: Battle of Ancre, 13th-19th November 1916. The red blank circles show the positions held by the British on the 14th November. The line to the right with a dash and two dots indicates the location of the objective. The Munich Trench is shown as a thick green line to the left of it. The red coloured dots show the actual line that was consolidated by 19th November.

Very early on November 15th the attack went in. Their objective was an enemy position called the Munich Trench near the infamous village of Beaumont Hamel. As they were regrouping to attack the German 3rd trench, an intense British artillery barrage, intended to soften up the enemy, hit their own troops causing several casualties. The war diary mentions that 8 officers and several other ranks were killed. One of these officers was Harold.[xi]

Figure 3:
Photograph of British artillery bombing the German trenches at Beaumont Hamel in November 1916. Anybody at the receiving end of the bombardment would have had little chance of survival.

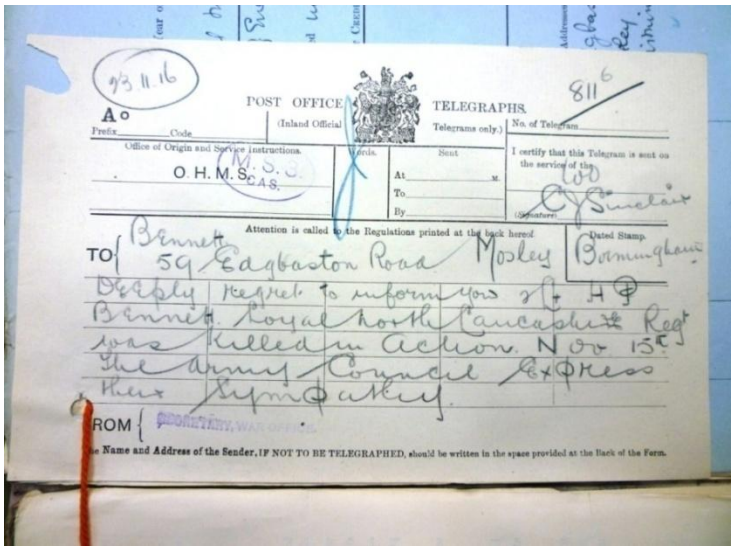


Figure 4:
Telegram informing Captain and Mrs Bennett of the death of their son, dated 23rd November 1916

A few days later after this incident at Munich Trench, the Battalion Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel R F Cobbold wrote his report which was passed up the line to the Fifth Army HQ. He states:

We lost at this trench almost entirely from our own barrage. 8 officers killed and 6 wounded out of 15 and approximately 170 men. Three shrapnel and one heavy shell burst in our midst – one group was annihilated by the big shell [xii]

A letter was sent by the chaplain of the regiment to Harold's parents at 59 Edgbaston Road, Moseley informing them of his death. It read:

He was wounded at first but refused to desert his post until he received his second wound from which he died a few minutes later. He acted with the utmost bravery and unselfishness throughout the engagement showing a splendid example to his men.[xiii]

There followed a series of letters by Harold's father, Captain Bennett, to the War Office requesting the return of Harold's personal effects. At first they were reported as having been sent in error to the Sherwood Foresters Regiment. As this search drew a blank, further letters by his father ensued, resulting in the following placatory letter dated 3rd December 1916 from Lieutenant Howell, adjutant:

Second Lieutenant Harold Bennett was killed in an attack on a German Trench. He was shot through the abdomen by a machine gun bullet and must have died instantly. Of the officers killed your son was the only one brought in and buried. The place is marked and registered by the Graves Registration Committee.

Still not satisfied with the explanation, as it was usual to remove personal effects before burial, the correspondence continued until the 22nd May 1917, when a final letter arrived from the Deputy Adjutant General at the War Office in London. The information it contains is completely at odds with the earlier letters and seeks to draw a line on the matter. It states:

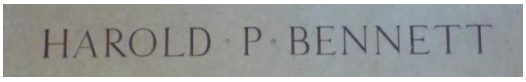
For sometime his body was not recovered. Eventually, however, two men ran out into No Man's Land and hurriedly buried the body apparently taking no personal effects off him.[xiv]

The two earlier letters could be seen as an attempt to soften the blow to the family as to the actual circumstances surrounding the death of their son but the final one is clearly intended to stave off any further awkward questions.

Harold was but one small statistic in a total casualty list for the 5th Army of 23,274 in this battle, which is classified as an Allied victory, as the German losses were in the region of 45,000. Significantly, both sides called off any more major action after this battle, which brought down the curtain on the whole Somme Campaign.

Harold, however, is remembered and commemorated in a number of places. His name appears on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing, also the memorials at St Mary's and St Anne's Churches in Moseley and the WW1 memorial in the Aston

Webb building at the University of Birmingham. Mitchells and Butlers Ltd also honoured him in their WW1Roll of Honour. He was just 19 years old when he died.



Top left: WW1 memorial at St Anne's Church, Moseley

Top right: Thiepval Memorial

Bottom left: WW1 memorial Aston Webb building, University of Birmingham

Bottom right: WW1 memorial St Mary's Church, Moseley

Researched and written by Jim Hone and Edwina Rees

Moseley Society History Group

Endnotes

i National archives, Kew. Ref WO339/45481

ii 1901 census

iii England & Wales marriages 1837-2008 transcription, Solihull, 3rd quarter, volume 6D, page 1046

iv *Birmingham News,* 2nd December *1916*

v Birmingham Central Secondary School
http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history/chapter04.html

vi See iv
Ivana Frian, archivist. Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham

vii See i

viii Birmingham Daily Post, 27th November 1916

ix See i and iv

x See iv

xi Loyal North Lancashire Regiment War diaries, pp 120-137

xii See x, p 141

xiii See iv

xiv See i

Illustrations

Figure 1 Birmingham Mail, 30th November 1916

Figure 2 Map of the Battle of Ancre
http://www.lightbobs.com/1916-somme---battle-of-the-ancre.html

Figure 3 Photo showing the bombardment of the German trenches at Beaumont Hamel in November 1916
http://51hd.co.uk/history/battle_ancre_beaumont_hamel

Figure 4 National archives, Kew. Ref WO339/45481