Captain Thomas Sidney Wathes

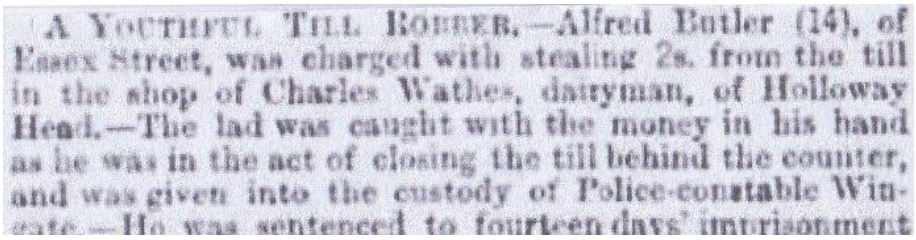
Thomas was reported missing on 19th July 1916 during the first action of the inexperienced British 61st Division and the newly arrived 5th Australian Division in the Battle of Fromelles. The huge losses raised doubts about the judgement of the High Command and badly damaged relations between the Australian Imperial Force and the British.

The Wathe family origins can be traced to Atherstone, Warwickshire, where Charles Wathes (born c1814) married Mary Ann Wilson from Ansley on 22nd December 1836.[i] Charles ran a 242 acre farm at Culey Banks in Ratcliffe Culey, employing two agricultural labourers and two house servants.[ii] The couple had six children. Charles Weetman Wathes (born c1847) was their fourth child. When Charles died in 1856, Mary took over the running of the farm, employing four men and ten boys, but had to sell some pasture and meadow land in four lots the following year to raise the capital sum of £22 3s 5d.[iii]

Charles Weetman Wathes married Caroline Watson on 26th April 1876 in Atherstone.[iv] By 1881 the couple had moved to Birmingham where Charles had set up business as a dairyman in Holloway Head. The family resided at 27, Dudley Street, Birmingham, with their two children, Arthur and Charles together with Elizabeth Philips, the shop assistant and a domestic servant and nursemaid.

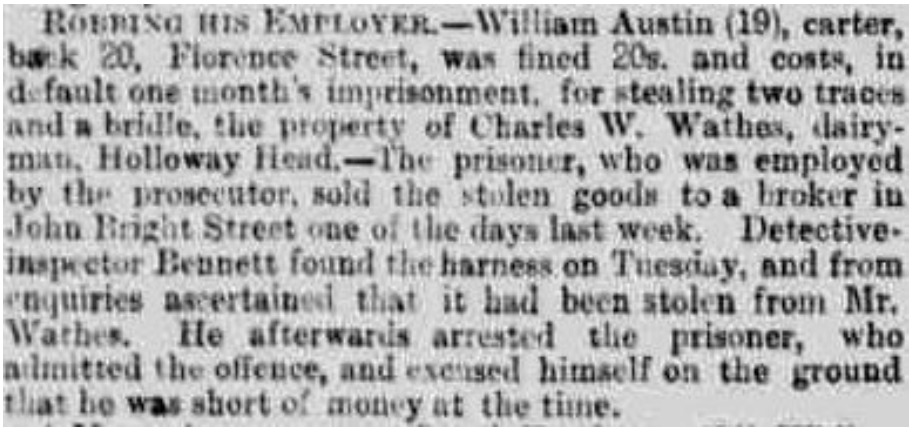
Figure 1: Holloway Head, Birmingham c1870

The shop was subject to two attempted thefts, one in September 1885, when a young boy was caught stealing money from the till[v] and again in February, 1887 when an employee carter, being short of money, sold the bridle and traces of Charles' horse.[vi]



A YOUTHFUL TILL ROBBER.—Alfred Butler (14), of Essex Street, was charged with stealing 2s. from the till in the shop of Charles Wathes, dairyman, of Holloway Head.—The lad was caught with the money in his hand as he was in the act of closing the till behind the counter, and was given into the custody of Police-constable Wingate.—He was sentenced to fourteen days' imprisonment

Figure 2: Newspaper cutting reporting the theft from the shop of Charles Wathes in 1885



ROBBING HIS EMPLOYER.—William Austin (19), carter, back 20, Florence Street, was fined 20s. and costs, in default one month's imprisonment, for stealing two traces and a bridle, the property of Charles W. Wathes, dairyman, Holloway Head.—The prisoner, who was employed by the prosecutor, sold the stolen goods to a broker in John Bright Street one of the days last week. Detective-inspector Bennett found the harness on Tuesday, and from enquiries ascertained that it had been stolen from Mr. Wathes. He afterwards arrested the prisoner, who admitted the offence, and excused himself on the ground that he was short of money at the time.

Figure 3: Newspaper cutting reporting the theft of a bridle and two traces, property of Charles Wathes

The 1891 census records that Charles and Caroline now had five children, including Margaret Ann (b 1883), Thomas Sidney, born 22nd November 1888[vii] and newly born John. The move to Numbers 6 and 8 Holloway Head, provided increased accommodation for the family and close proximity to the shop.

In 1893, Charles was one of ten officials who set up the Birmingham and District Association of Dairymen, which was registered as a limited company. This was carried out in order to:

Raise a fund for the purpose of carrying out the business of the association: to protect the cans or milk-vessels or other property of the association, and which bear their names or trade mark, from being used or dealt with by any other person not having lawful authority for the same; to organise and carry into effect a system of recompense to the members of lost, misplaced, stolen or misappropriated milk cans or vessels or other property; and generally to protect, further and promote the interests of the trade. No person shall be permitted to become a member who is not a farmer, milk seller, master or a partner or manager in a dairy or a manager, secretary or director of a dairy company carrying on the business of a registered dairyman.[viii]

By 1901, the family had moved away from Holloway Head, taking up residence at 'Hazlemead', Vicarage Road, Kings Heath with their youngest two children, Thomas and John. Thomas attended King Edward's School, New Street, Birmingham from 1902 to 1904.[ix] He studied a classical curriculum. In his final year Thomas was placed in the top five of a class of seventeen boys. He was also an able mathematician, winning *proxine* (second place) for his set in July 1904. Thomas' classmate was the well known Harold Godfrey Bache a brilliant all round sportsman and centre forward for the West Bromwich and Corinthian football club.[x] On 8th July 1904, Thomas' father, Charles died (suicide).[xi] He was 58 years old and left an estate worth £7,558 7s 7d (about £830,000 in today's money).[xii]

Figure 4: Carlisle Grammar School, Cumberland

Perhaps as a result of his father's death, Thomas was sent up north to Carlisle Grammar School, Cumberland as a boarder to complete his education..[xiii] As a student he excelled, gaining a place at Wadham College, Oxford in 1906 where he obtained a BA (4th Class Modern History) in 1909. During his time at Oxford, Thomas joined the University's Officer Training Corps (OTC).[xiv]

The Old Carliol, which regularly reported from Oxbridge on former students, said this in the December 1908 magazine: "*Wathes, at Wadham, spends his leisure hours reading History on the river toggering (sic). He recently made a startling appearance at the Jesus Smoker*[xv] *and may be the cause of the disappearance of several name plates. But stop – not a word!*"[xvi]

Figure 5: Wadham College, Oxford

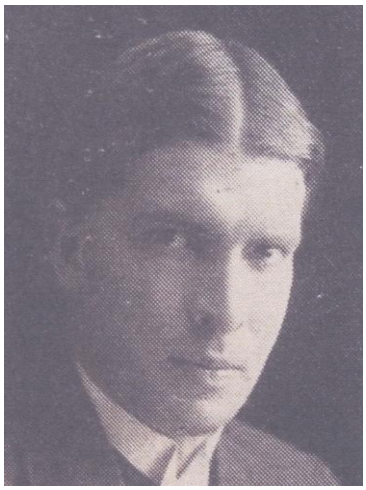


Figure 6: Thomas Wathes

After graduating, Thomas returned home to live with his mother and his brothers, Charles and John, now residing at 52 Park Hill Road, Moseley. Thomas is recorded as working in the family business as a 'dairyman's assistant' with his elder brothers Arthur and Charles.[xvii]

In 1913, he married Doris Collins, daughter of Mr Arthur Reuben Collins, Estate Agent and Auctioneer, of 2 Highfield Road, Moseley. They married in the Parish Church of Balsall Heath, before setting up home at 11, St Albans Road, Moseley.[xviii]

Figure 7: Captain T S Wathes

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Thomas and his elder brother Charles joined the 2/6th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment (Territorial Force). On 19th October they were both gazetted Lieutenants in the same Regiment.[xix]

During the course of 1915, the 2/6th Warwicks underwent training based at various locations around the country. Thomas and his brother, at Epping at the time,[xx] were gazetted Captains with effect from July 17th 1915.[xxi]

Figure 8: Ludgershall Station on the Midland and South West Junction line (MSWJ)

From 3rd September the Battalion was based at Maldon before moving to Perham Down, near Andover. It was from near here, at Ludgershall Station, that the Battalion entrained for Southampton on 21st May 1916. Overnight, the Battalion, consisting of 33 officers and 936 other ranks, together with, 21 vehicles, 64 animals, 21 bicycles and 4 Lewis Guns, made their way to Le Havre. After two days of rest, the 2/6 Warwicks made their way to Gonnehem, where training in the necessary skills for trench warfare continued in the sector ready for the 'big push'. The battalion formed part of the 182nd Brigade of the 61st Division.

On the first day of the Battle of the Somme the Battalion were holding the front line trenches near La Gorgue. Despite many casualties sustained by artillery barrages from enemy positions over the next few days, the line held. The Battalion received a message from General MacKenzie saying:

I am desired by the Corps Commander (General Sir R Haking KCB) to convey to you his appreciation of the conduct of the three battalions of the brigade holding the line last night. I take this opportunity of expressing my own hearty appreciation of the soldierly conduct of all ranks on that occasion.[xxii]

However, on the 19th July, these same three battalions, still inexperienced in any direct action, as part of British 61st Division together with the Australian 5th, who had only arrived in France a few days before, were ordered to attack Fromelles on the Aubers Ridge as a major diversionary action to stop the Germans from moving troops away from this sector of the Somme. This was considered a quiet sector at the time and a good place to introduce inexperienced troops to trench warfare.[xxiii]

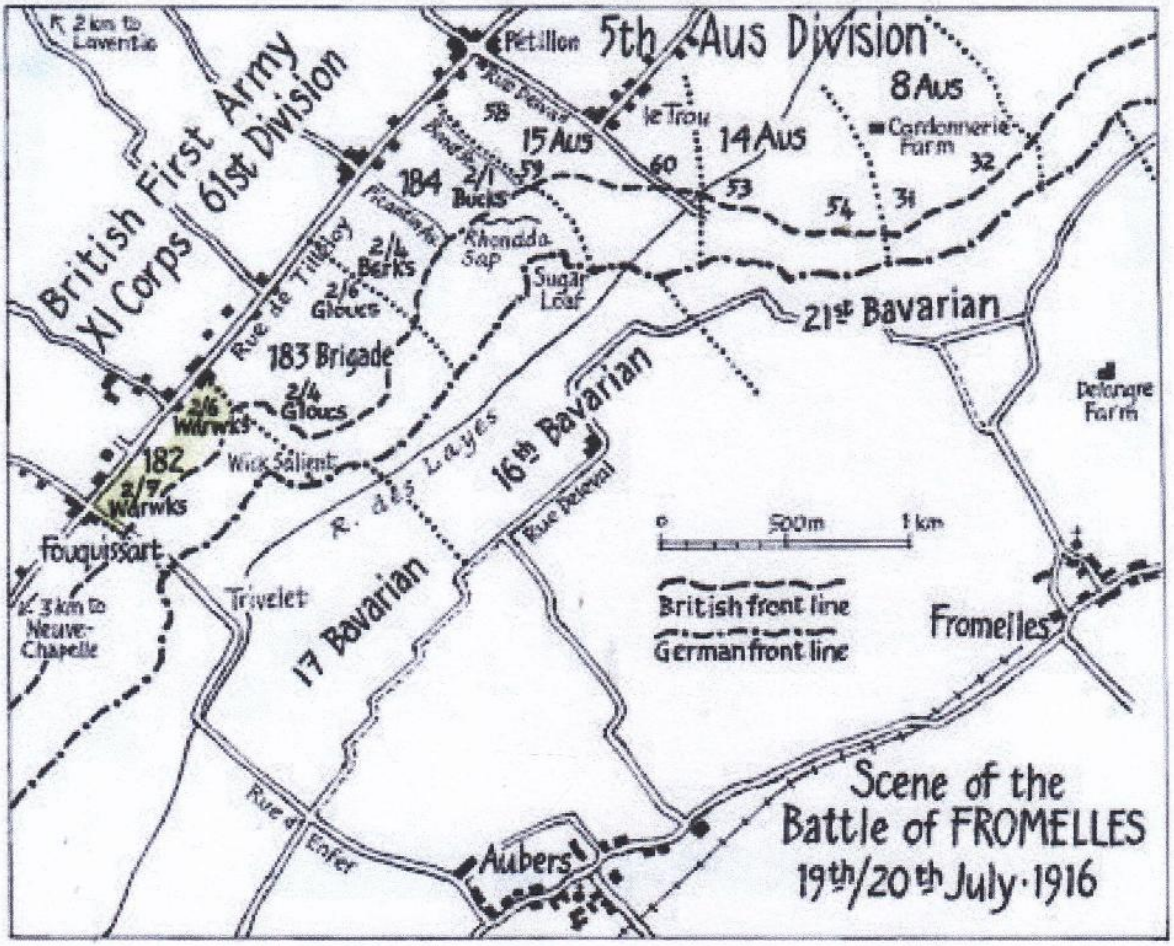


Figure 9: Map showing the position of the 2/6th Royal Warwickshire Regiment on 19th/20th July 1916 and the position of the Wick salient

By 9.30 am on 19th July, the day of the attack, the 'A' and 'C' Companies(Coys) of 2/6th Warwicks were in position in the front line trenches at Fouquissart (see map), 'B' Coy in support and 'D' in reserve They had been given a particularly difficult objective, an enemy trench in the Wick salient that was strongly defended. The Commanding Officer, after a conference with the Campany Commanders and specialist officers, fixed zero hour to 11 am, when the British artillery barrage was to commence. At noon the Coys reported 'all well' but because the Germans had taken up positions over 200 yards behind their front line in concrete bunkers they were soon able to respond with their own bombardment, with shells thought to be 4.2", as soon as the British artillery had ceased firing. By 4pm the enemy shelling had moved from the reserve trenches to the front lines. The 2/6 Warwicks had escaped remarkably unscathed upto then with only twelve casualties reported. However, because the distance between the German and British trenches was as much as 400 yards at certain points, many of the infantrymen came under heavy machine gun fire as soon as they left their trenches, the officers were killed or wounded all and the men

suffered heavy losses. Consequently the 2/6 Warwicks were forced to retire back to their front line trenches under cover of a British barrage at 7.10 pm. The attack was postponed until 9 pm and then abandoned altogether. At 1 am the next day, the 2/8 Warwicks relieved the Battalion, spending the rest of the night searhing for and bringing in the wounded.

The tally of casualties sustained on the 19th July by 2/6 Warwicks was 247 men. It included one officer killed, five missing and five wounded. Of the other ranks, 9 were killed, 68 reprted missing and 159 wounded.[xxiv]

From a letter received by Thomas' brother Charles, it appears that he was shot in the head and killed while leading his men close up to the German trenches. Thomas, however, has no known grave and is commemorated on the Plogsteert Memorial, France.[xxv] He was just 28 years old.

Figure 10:
(Top left) Ploegteert Memorial
(Top right) Cumbria School memorial
(Botton leftl St Mary's Church, Moseley WW1 memorial
(Bottom right) St Anne's Church, Moseley WW1 memorial

Thomas is also commemorated at Carlisle School, St Mary's and St Agnes' Church, Moseley. He is also on the Roll of Honour at Wadham College, Oxford.

Probate for Thomas' estate was granted in March 1917. He left an estate of £140 5s 1p (about £11,000 in today's money).[xxvi]

Thomas left a wife, Doris, and a son Richard Sidney Wathes, born on 10th August 1915.[xxvii] Five years after Thomas' death, in the autumn of 1921, Doris died, aged 31 years, leaving Richard, who was only six years old, as an orphan.[xxviii]

The 1939 register records Richard as a student doctor married to Margaret E Phillips.

Both Thomas' brothers served in WW1.

His elder brother, Captain Charles Henry Wathes, served in the 2/6 Royal Warwickshire Regiment, attached, 182 Infantry Brigade, and survived the Battle of Fromelles. He continued to serve throughout the war until demobilisation. When he applied for his medals, his registered address was 9 Cartland Road,[xxix] Kings Heath, Birmingham. In the 1939 Register, Charles, a widower, is recorded as Managing Director of a dairy business and still living at 9 Cartland Road.

Thomas' youngest brother, Second Lieutenant John Watson Wathes, joined the RAMC as a Private. He was promoted to Corporal and attached to the 2/4 Berkshire Regiment. John was commissioned 2nd Lieutenant and posted to the 10th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment. He finished the war as a Lieutenant. When he applied for his medals his registered address was 84 Blenheim Road, Moseley, Birmingham.[xxx] In the 1939 Register John, a widower is living at New Farm, Wilnecote and working as a milk lorry driver.

The eldest brother, Charles, in 1939 is Managing Director (wholesale retail dairyman) living at 26 Wesley Hill Birmingham with his wife and two children.

Written and researched by Edwina Rees

Moseley Society History Group

Endnotes

i Warwickshire marriages

ii 1841 census

iii *Coventry Standard*, 2nd March 1866

iv English marriages 1538-1973

v *Birmingham Daily Post,* 16th September 1885

vi *Birmingham Daily Post, 10th February 1887*

vii Carlisle Grammar School Cumberland, Memorial Register 1264-1924, Part III, 1883-1924, p 309

viii *Birmingham Daily Post*, 21st March 1893

ix Service Record of King Edward's School 1914-1919

x a) From the archive of King Edwards School, Edgbaston, Birmingham. With thanks to Alison Wheatley, archivist
b) Remember the fallen, Harold Godfrey Bache
http://www.rememberthefallen.co.uk/casualty/bache-harold-godfrey/

xi See x (a)

xii a) Probate Calendars of England & Wales 1858-1959
b) Historic inflation calculator
http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/bills/article-1633409/Historic-inflation-calculator-value-money-changed-1900.html

xiii See vii

xiv Wadham College, Oxford, Roll of Honour WW1 1914-1918
https://www.wadham.ox.ac.uk/news/2014/february/1914-2014-wartime-wadham-centenary

xv 'Togger' is derived from the use of the word togs when describing a bathing suit
A Jesus Smoker is a theatre associated with Jesus College, Cambridge.

xvi Carlisle School
http://www.trinity.cumbria.sch.uk/warmemorials/thomas-sidney-wathes/

xvii 1911 census

xviii England & Wales marriages 1837-2008
Probate Calendars for England & Wales 1858-1959

xix *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 25th November 1914

xx 2/6 War Diary, National Archives, Ref WO 95/3056, p 3

xxi *Birmingham Daily Post*, 4th August 1915

xxii 2/6 War Diary, National Archives, Ref WO 95/3056, pp 38-50

xxiii Commonwealth War Graves Commission
http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/34300/LAVENTIE%20MILITARY%20CEMETERY,%20LA%20GORGUE

xxiv See xxii, pp 50-51
Cumbria School
http://www.trinity.cumbria.sch.uk/warmemorials/thomas-sidney-wathes/

xxv *The Times*, 29th July 1916

xxvi Probate Calendar for England & Wales, 1917

xxvii National Archives: British Officers after 1913, Ref WO 374/72143

xxviii England & Wales deaths 1837-2007, 1921, Kings Norton, 3/4, 6D, 17

xxix Service Records of King Edwards School 1914-1919
British Army Medal Index

xxx British Army Medal Index

Illustrations

Figure 1 Holloway Head picture
https://mobile.twitter.com/gary_bucknall hOLLOWAY hEAD C 1870

Figure 2 Birmingham Daily Post 16th September1885

Figure 3 Birmingham daily Mail 10th February 1887

Figure 4 Carlisle School
http://www.myhometown-schools.co.uk/thephoto.aspx?photoid=1084

Figure 5 Wadham College, Old Frith's Series
http://www.papergreat.com/2013/08/old-friths-series-postcard-of-wadham.html

Figure 6 Birmingham Rotary Club Directory 1916. With thanks to Alison Wheatley, archivist, King Edward's School, Edgbaston, Birmingham

Figure 7 *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 25th July 1916

Figure 8 Ludgershall Station
http://www.wiltshireatwar.org.uk/story/how-military-camps-saved-some-wiltshire-villages-from-extinction/

Figure 7 *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 25th July 1916

Figure 9 Map of the Battle of Fromelles
https://oxfordshireandbuckinghamshirelightinfantry.wordpress.com/tag/laventie/

Figure 10 Carlisle School Memorial
http://www.trinity.cumbria.sch.uk/warmem/images/hireswarmem.jpg

Ploesteert Memorial
http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/88800/PLOEGSTEERT%20MEMORIAL

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