Second Lieutenant Ernest Ralph Nutting

Ernest was a partner, with his brothers, in an umbrella manufacturing business. He had for many years been a member of All Saint's Church, Kings Heath and had a long association with the Church Lads Brigade Movement. He enlisted in 1st Birmingham Pals Battalion, but was killed in action two years later on the last day of the Somme campaign aged 37 years.

Figure 1 : Advertisement for William Nutting, walking sticks and canes, umbrella sticks manufacturer, 30th May 1870

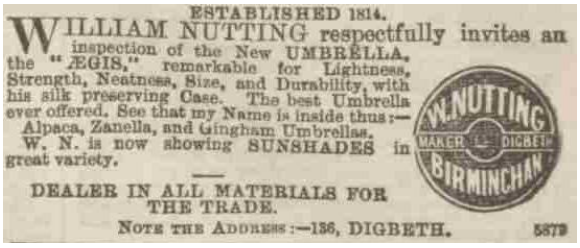


Figure 2: Five days later on 4th June 1870, a new advertisement, now emphasising the umbrella manufacturing side of the business.

Ernest's grandfather, Charles, was a manufacturer of walking sticks, canes and umbrellas in Digbeth,[i] a business established in 1814. Charles, a carpenter, married Phoebe Dodson, an umbrella maker, on 29th October 1837.[ii] They had four children. William, their only son, married Ellen Tabberner in 1866 and set up home in Belgrave Street (now part of Belgrave Road), Balsall Heath.[iii] By 1871, William had taken over his father's business, moving premises from No 135 to 137 Digbeth in 1875.[iv] Charles began a new venture next door at No 136, the manufacture of fishing tackle[v] (see map below).

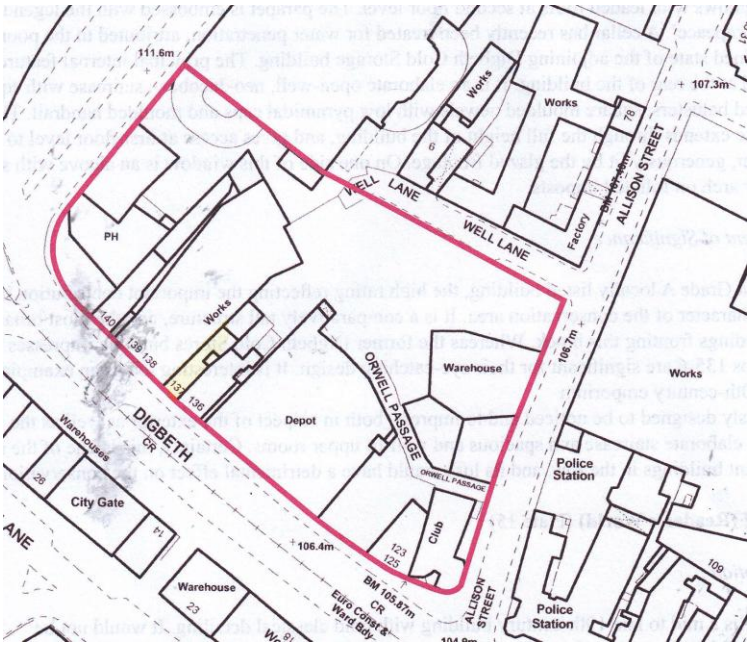


Figure 3: Map of Digbeth showing the location of 137 Digbeth (highlighted in yellow). No 136/135 was next door on the right

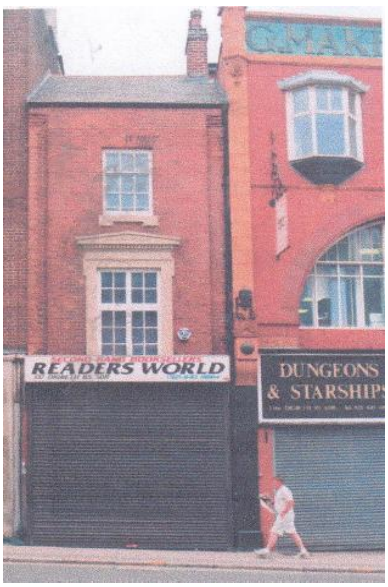


Figure 4: No 137 Digbeth (left) and No 136 (shown right). 135 is the right hand part of the double fronted building

Ernest was born on 18th September 1879 the seventh out of nine surviving children. [vi]Tragedy struck the family on 11th November 1886, when William died, aged only forty-six.[vii] The premises at 135, 136 and 137 Digbeth had been sold in June by auction shortly before his death.[viii] In the 1991 census, Ellen was with seven of her children in a Boarding House in Fore Street, Ilfracombe, Devon. George and Mary stopped behind with their brother Frederick at the family home at Hazlewood, 41 Prospect Road, Moseley. This may well have been a well deserved family holiday, following the death of her husband and the hard work that must have gone into the setting up the business in new premises. The business continued to flourish at the new site, Numbers 1 and 2 Smallbrook Street with Ellen at the helm and her sons forming a partnership in the firm.[ix] The manufacture of umbrellas continued, Frederick retiring in 1921, leaving George as sole proprietor. [x]

Ernest after leaving Camp Hill Boys School also became involved in the family firm bringing his 'electrical and mechanical engineering' skills into the business at its new site.[xi] In his leisure time Ernest became involved with the Old Edwardians and Church Lads Brigade Movement, where he taught drill and military routine.[xii] The Brigade was set up in the second half of the 19th century because many people, particularly influential Christians, were worried about the poor spiritual and physical development of young people after leaving school at thirteen years old.[xiii]

When war was declared, Ernest's experience in military drill proved most valuable to him when he enlisted for a three year Short Service Commission in the 14th Royal Warwickshire Regiment (1st Birmingham Pals) on 10th September 1914 as Private Nutting, No 815. Just over a month later, on 18th October, he was made a Sergeant. While training in Sutton Park, Ernest applied to join the Special Reserve of Officers in May of 1915. His application was successful and on 13th June 1915 he was commissioned as a probationary 2nd Lieutenant in the 3rd (Service) Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment.[xiv]

Ready for the 'Big Push' on 1st July 1916, Ernest was sent to France on the 10th May 1916 attached to the 10th Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment.[xv] The Battalion was part of the 57th Brigade, 19th (Western Division) in the Fifth Army. The Fifth Army was brought in to action under the command of General Gough to capture Beaumont Hamel and Serre after the failed attempts on 1st July. It became known as The Battle of the Ancre, (13th to 18th November). The attack was the largest since September and had a seven day preliminary bombardment twice as heavy as 1st July. Ernest's Battalion was heavily involved

in the battle, taking part in an attack on Desire Trench. At zero hour, on 18th November, after the usual preliminary bombardment, the battalion emerged from their trenches and shell holes in No Man's Land and advanced on the enemy. It was snowing and the consequential poor visibility made it difficult to see the way ahead. The assault force lost its way and ran into withering German machine gun fire. Heavy casualties were incurred and the surviving Major ordered a withdrawal. The War Diary reports that the action was a disaster with 4 officers killed, 7 wounded and three missing. In addition, a further 17 other ranks were killed, 121 wounded and 65 unaccounted for.[xvi]

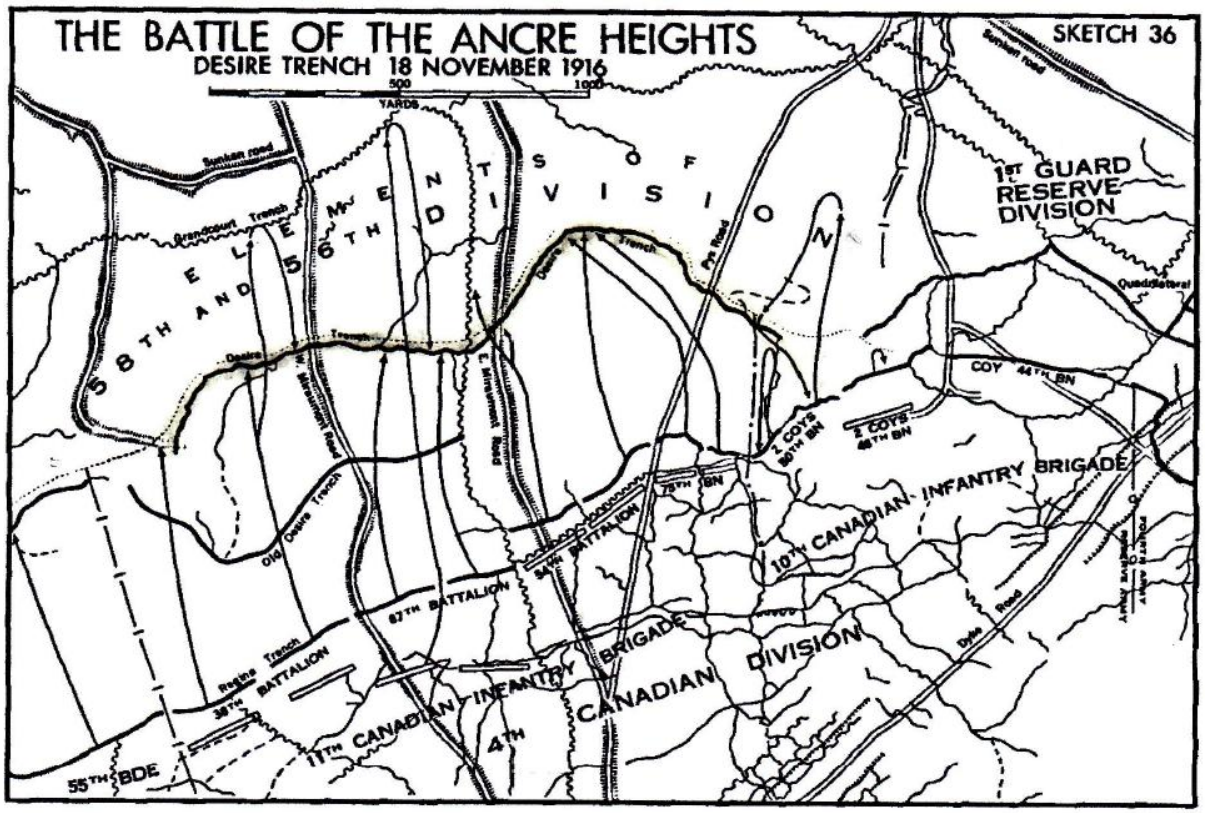


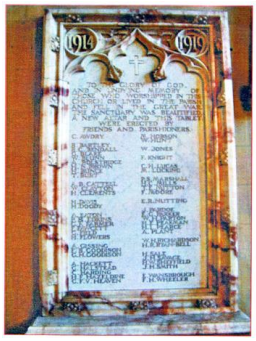
Figure 5 Map of Ancre Heights on 18th November 1916 showing the position of Desire Trench highlighted in yellow

Ernest was one of the fallen in the attack. His body was never recovered and is one of more than 72,000 names on the Thiepval memorial. The 18th November has become accepted as the last day of the Somme Campaign.

A memorial service was held for Ernest on Sunday 3rd December at the 9.45 am Choral Eucharist service held at All Saints Church, Kings Heath. The vicar, the Rev W J Clarke, said of him:

Ernest was one of the most capable officers in the Church Lads Brigade I have ever known. He was devoted to the lads of his company, and they to him and what was true here we knew would be equally true of him in this dreadful field of this grim war. Responding to the first call, his many capabilities stood in the way of his promotion and when that came, he was kept aside training others to face the ordeal whilst all the time I knew he was chafed at the enforced delay in facing it himself. He inspired love and confidence by his simple and sincere nobility of character. He hated war as so many a great soldier hated it. It sorely hurt his gentle and sweet spirit but his sense of duty and honour made him strong with something more than physical strength and courage.[xvii]

Ernest is also commemorated at St Agnes Church and St Mary's Church Moseley. He left the sum of £4572 15s 5d to be shared between his three sisters, Elizabeth Ellen, Mary Louise and Kate Evelyn Nutting.[xviii]



Left:
St Agnes Church WW1 memorial

Middle:
St Mary's Church memorial

Right:

Researched and written by Jim Hone and Edwina Rees
Moseley Society History Group

Endnotes

i 1871 census
Birmingham Daily Gazette, 30th May 1870

ii Birmingham History, Ian Purcell 25.2.2015
https://birminghamhistory.co.uk/forum/index.php?threads/thomas-odams-prodigal-son.44889/page-4

iii Birmingham History Forum: Belgrave Street
https://birminghamhistory.co.uk/forum/index.php?threads/belgrave-street-kings-norton.20686/

iv Birmingham Archaeology: Site Bounded by Digbeth, Allison Street, Well Lane and Park Street, Birmingham City Centre An Historic Environment Study 2005, 20-21
http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-502-1/dissemination/pdf/birmingh2-36452_1.pdf

v 1871 census

vi Officers Service Records after 1912, National Archives, WO 339/63178
1911 census

vii *Birmingham Daily Post*, 12th November 1886

viii *Birmingham Daily Post,* 9th June 1887

ix *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8th November 1916
London Gazette, 3rd January 1922, 91

x *The London Gazette*, 3rd January, Issue 32565, page 91
1922https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/32565/page/91/data.pdf

xi *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8th November 1916
1901 census

xii *Birmingham News,* 2nd December 1916

xiii Church Lads Brigade Movement
http://www.clcgb.org.uk/documents/historical- group/55-looking-back/file

xiv See vi

xv British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards
See vi

xvi War Diary of the 10th Royal Warwickshire Regiment WD 2085/3, pp 197-200

xvii *Birmingham News*, 9th December 1916

xviii See vi

Illustrations

Figure 1 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 30th May 1870

Figure 2 *Aris's Birmingham Gazette,* 4th June, 1870

Figure 3/4 Birmingham Archaeology: Site Bounded by Digbeth, Allison Street, Well Lane and Park Street, Birmingham City Centre An Historic Environment Study 2005, 20, 21, 29, 48
http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-502-1/dissemination/pdf/birmingh2-36452_1.pdf

Figure 5 The Great War: Vimy Ridge George Van Wyck Laughton, MC, sketch 36
http://laughton.ca/mirror/military/ww1/gvlaughton/nicholson/sketches/index.htm