

Private John William Husbands

The British Fifth Army attacks on the Somme front stopped over the winter of 1916. They were reduced to surviving the rain, snow, fog, mud fields, waterlogged trenches and shell-holes. As preparations for the spring offensive at Arras began, the 1/4th Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment prepared to capture the village of Gommecourt. The attacks commenced in January and February, in the Ancre Valley against exhausted German troops holding poor defensive positions left from the fighting in 1916.



Figure 1: All Saints Church, Gainsborough

John can trace his family origins to Lincolnshire, where his great-great grandfather Joseph Husbands lived. On 24th May 1849, Joseph's son, William, a 'spirit merchant', married Lucy Parker at St James Church, Louth, Lincolnshire.ⁱ Grandfather, William Henry Husbands, was born on 1st April 1853 and baptised at All Saints Church Gainsborough, the first of three sons.ⁱⁱ

By 1871, William Henry had left school and become a 'merchant's clerk'. Later that year his father died and was buried at Holy Trinity Church, Gainsborough 13th September. He was only 51 years old.ⁱⁱⁱ

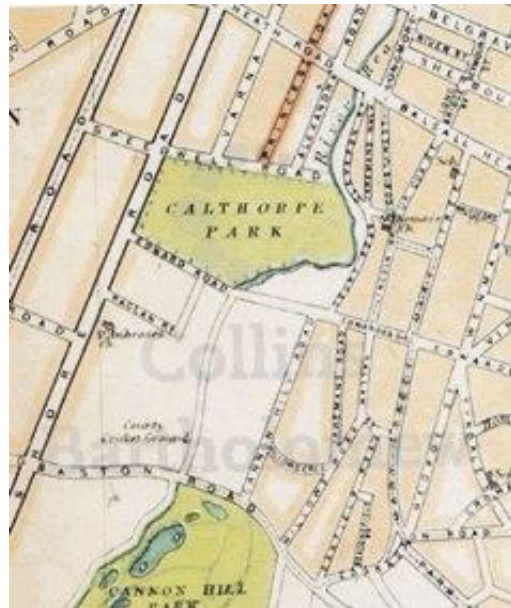
Six years later, at the age of 23, William married Theresa Pearson in Sheffield on 23rd February 1877.^{iv} In the 1881 census William is recorded at his mother's home in Back Street, Gainsborough with his two brothers, Joseph, a machinist making precision parts in an engine shop, and James, an assistant master of a National School. Where William's wife, Theresa, and their son George born a few months earlier, were on the census day is not known.

By 1891 William and Theresa had five children. John William, their second child, was born on 9th December 1877 and baptised six weeks later at the Cathedral Church of St Peters and St James, Sheffield.^v Their address was given as 21 Trent Street, Gainsborough. At the age of six years, John attended Gainsborough Trinity School.^{vi}

On leaving school, John became a journalist/reporter and in 1901 he is listed as such in Burton upon Trent, Staffordshire census.



**Figure 2: Above The Kings Arms Tavern, Dewsbury, now demolished to make way for the M1
Right : Highlighted, Princess Road, Edgbaston**



In 1902, at the age of 24, John married, Edith Healas, whose father Joseph ran the Kings Arms Tavern on the Dewsbury Road near Leeds. John's address at the time of his marriage was 53 Princess Road, Edgbaston (see map above)^{vii}. Shortly after their marriage John and Edith set up home together in Birmingham. In 1904, John joined the staff of the Birmingham Daily Mail. He was a versatile journalist specialising in dramatic criticism. After the death of Mr T Edgar Pemberton, John took over the weekly article 'Flashes from the Footlights'. In 1907 he became a member of the Birmingham Branch of the National Union of Journalists. He was also a member of the Newspaper Press Fund.^{viii}

In the 1911 census, John and Edith had moved to 44 Cambridge Road, Moseley. They had two children, Irene, born in August 1903 but baptised in Dewsbury, and Joseph Harry Lincoln, born at the end of 1904 in Dewsbury.^{ix} The family employed the services of a general domestic servant, Mary Ann Berrington.

When war was declared in August 1914, John joined the Leicestershire Yeomanry as a Territorial Reservist, No7510. With the need for more men to serve at the front, John heeded the call of Lord Kitchener in 1916 and signed up for active service joining the 1/4 Leicestershire Regiment as Private J W Husbands, No 202898.^x

The 1/4th Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment formed part of the 138th Brigade, 46th (North Midland) Division from 12th May 1915. They were part of the disastrous diversionary attack on Gommecourt on the 1st day of the Battle of the Somme under the leadership of Major-General the Honourable E. J.

Montagu-Stuart-Wortley, which led General Haig to accuse the 46th Division of having a 'lack of offensive spirit'.^{xi}

The 4th Leicester Regiment overwintered in billets in Souastre (about 23 km SW of Arras) in between time in dug-outs in Hannescamps and Crawlboys Lane, near the Battalion HQ at Fonquevillers. The terrible weather had made the trenches knee deep in water and liquid mud in most places and in spite of continuous pumping and drainage their condition did not improve any more than the weather. As a result the Battalions were relieved every four days instead of six.

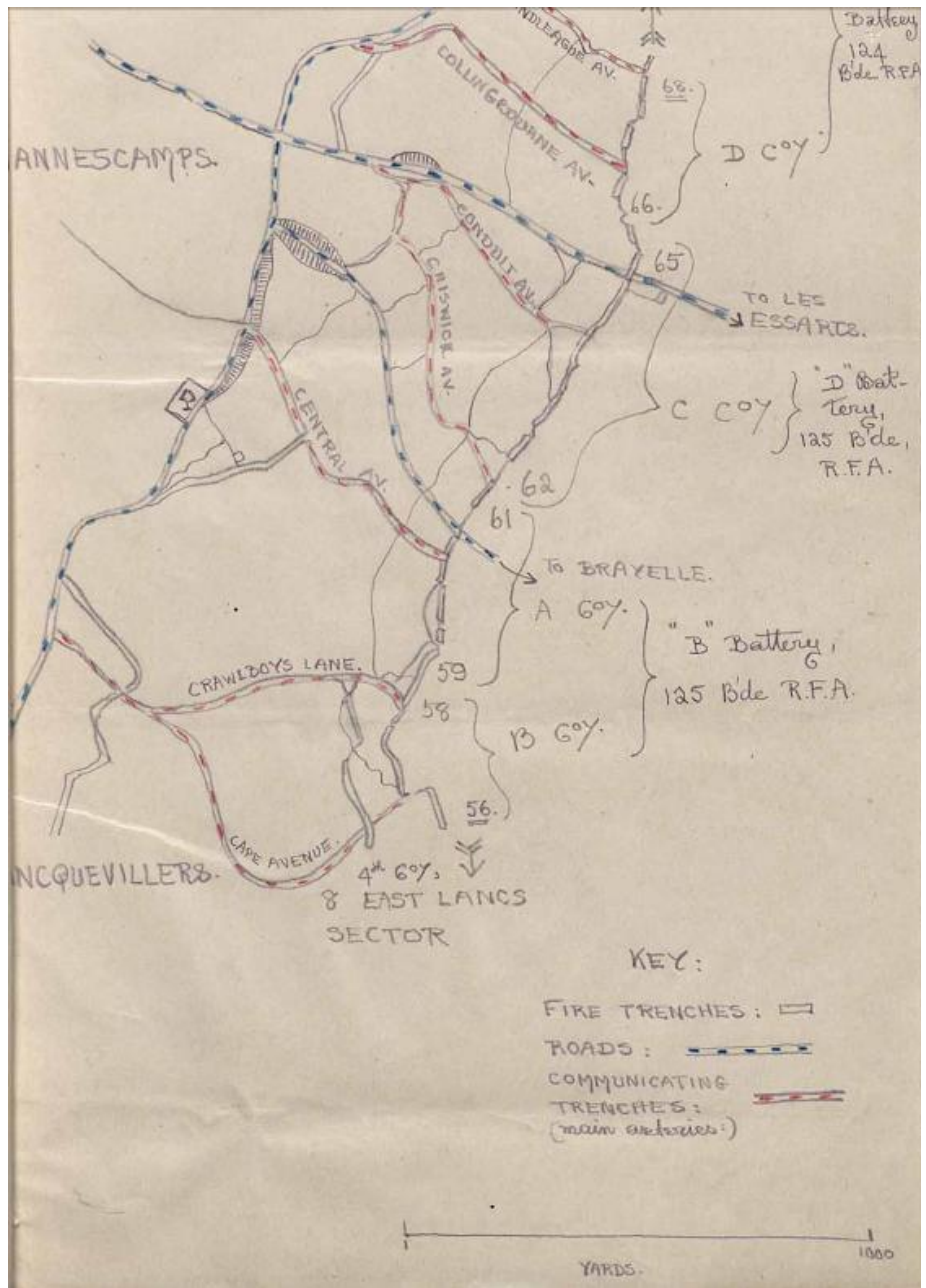


Figure 3: Map showing the trenches at Hannescamps and Crawlboys Lane near Fonquevillers



Figure 5: Postcard of Hannescamps 1914-15

On the 18th February, after a pleasant stay in some 'excellent' billets at Grenas and a ten day period of training, orders were received to return to the trenches at Hannescamps. The sector was a quiet one as a rule, as rifle fire was practically absent in some places, the enemy front line position being nearly 1000 yards away, but on 21st February, from 3 am to 4 am, a very heavy bombardment by enemy artillery with shells of all calibres on the right sector was carried out. Material damage was considerable but just one man was wounded by a shell.^{xii} The unlucky casualty was John. He was taken to Warlincourt Casualty Clearing Station, but sadly died there 11 days later on 4th March 1917. John was 39 years old when he died.^{xiii}

Ironically, on 27 February, a two-man patrol of the 18th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry, 93rd Brigade, 31st Division went through Gommecourt Park and found the village deserted. The Germans had withdrawn to positions SW of Gommecourt.^{xiv}



Figure 4: Warlincourt Halte British Cemetery near Saulty, Pas de Calais



**St Mary's Church WW1
memorial**

When news reached home of John's death, his colleagues wrote of him:

He was popular amongst his colleagues by reason of his public spirit and camaraderie. He was endowed with a facile and clever pen and ranked high as a descriptive writer.^{xv}

John is also commemorated at St Mary's Church, Moseley and on the Roll of Honour in Birmingham's Hall of Memory.

At the time of his death Edith and her two children were living at 95 Church Road in Moseley.^{xvi}

Researched and written by Edwina Rees

Moseley Society History Group

Endnotes

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- i Lincolnshire marriages index
Lucy Parker was resident at Faldingworth at the time of her marriage as was William according to the 1841 census
 - ii Lincolnshire baptisms
1871 census
 - iii National Burial Index
 - iv English marriages 1538-1973
 - v Yorkshire baptisms
 - vi National School Admission Registers and log book, 1870-1914
 - vii Marriage certificate of John William Husbands to Edith Healas
 - viii *Birmingham Daily Post*, 9th March 1917
Data base of Journalists
https://www.scope-database.com/list/atoz_journalist/h

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- ix Huddersfield baptisms
England & Wales births, 1837-2006, 1904, Dewsbury, 4/4, 9B, 603
- x *Birmingham Daily Post*, 9th March 1917
GRO Deaths Army other ranks 1914-1921
Soldiers who died in the Great War 1914-1919
- xi MacDonald, Alan 2008. A Lack of Offensive Spirit?: The 46th (North Midland) Division at Gommecourt, 1st July 1916
- xii *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 9th March 1917
- xiii Sandall, T E, 1922. *History of the 5th Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment*. B Blackwell, Oxford. pp 100-104
National Archives. WarDiaries of the 1/4th Leicestershire Regiment. Ref WO95/2690/1
- xiv The Gommecourt Salient
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_on_the_Gommecourt_Salient
- xv *Birmingham Mail* 8th March 1917
- xvi Commonwealth War Graves Commission

Illustrations

- Figure 1 All Saints Church, Gainsborough
http://graville.com/gainsborough_all_saints_a_magnif.htm
- Figure 2 The Kings Arms Tavern
http://www.closedpubs.co.uk/yorkshire/leeds_ls11_kingsarms3.html
- Figure 3 Map showing Princess Road, Edgbaston
<https://mapseeker.co.uk/geneology/?id=114>
- Figure 4 Trenches at Hannescamps
<https://www.loyalregiment.com/trenches-at-hannescamps/>
- Figure 5 Hannescamps
<https://www.loyalregiment.com/photo-hannescamps-during-ww1/>