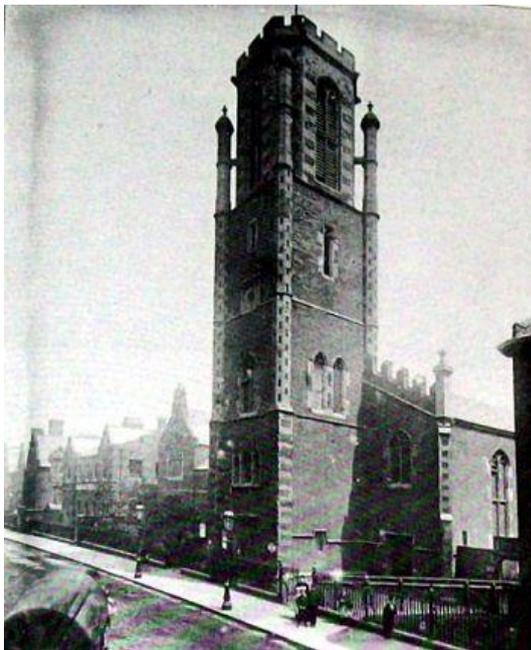


## Lance-Corporal Sydney Vernon Pickering

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 1/4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion Middlesex Regiment prepared to capture the village of Bihucourt in early March 1917. The attacks commenced in January in the Ancre Valley against exhausted German troops holding poor defensive positions left from the fighting in 1916.

The Pickering family can trace their origins back to James Pickering and his wife Jane, both born, c1801, in Staffordshire. In the 1841 census James, a 'tallow chandler' is living with his family of five sons and a daughter in Upper Green, Newcastle under Lyme. James' eldest son John was born on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1820 at Etruria<sup>i</sup> and baptised at St Giles Church, Newcastle under Lyme on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1820.<sup>ii</sup> John, like his father, became a tallow chandler.<sup>iii</sup>



**Figure 1: Bishop Ryder's Church, Gosta Green, Birmingham**

On 30<sup>th</sup> August 1846, John married Frances Williams, daughter of Edward Williams a basket maker at Bishop Ryder's Church, Gem Street, Gosta Green, Birmingham (now demolished to make way for building Aston University). John's address given on the marriage certificate was 1, Nelson Street South.

By 1851, John and Frances and their five children (Mary, their first child is not recorded in the 1851 census but reappears in the 1861 census) are living at 24a, Fordrough Street, Birmingham. John is now a 'master chandler, employer and manufacturer'.

At some point John must have gone into partnership with Charles Brown, a fellow tallow chandler, because in June of 1853, the partnership was dissolved.<sup>iv</sup> John's business is recorded in White's Directory for 1855 at 47 Edgbaston Street and in 1858 and 1858 he is advertising for 'a dip maker to whom liberal wages will be given'.<sup>v</sup>

In the 1861 census, John and Frances with their six children are living at 80 Pershore Street, Birmingham with the business address next door at No 79.<sup>vi</sup> John took an interest in local politics at this time as he was appointed as 'a



**Figure 2: John Pickering, Sydney's grandfather**

gentleman overseer of the poor of the parish of Birmingham'.<sup>vii</sup> He was elected in 1866 to represent St Martin's Ward in the Town Council. He promised that 'as a trader in the vicinity of St Martin's Ward he would do his best to leave Smithfield Market undisturbed and to do his best to influence the best interests of the ratepayer in the Town Council'.<sup>viii</sup> John also served as President of the Liberal Association of St Martin's Ward.<sup>ix</sup>

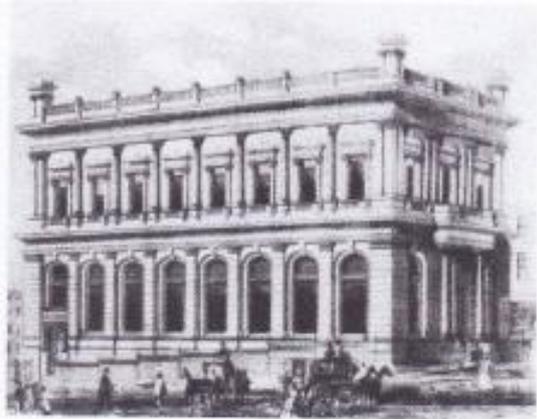
By 1871, the family had moved to Park Hill (No 114<sup>x</sup>) with their eight children and the services of Hannah Rushton, a general domestic servant. Two years later a fire occurred at John's work premises in Pershore Street, resulting in the destruction of a great quantity of candles tallow and other material. Two horses and a pony were also killed in the conflagration.<sup>xi</sup>

By 1881, John moved to 'Glenlyn', (No 128<sup>xii</sup>), Park Hill in Moseley. Three years later, in 1894, John retired from the family business, John Pickering & Sons, soap and candle manufacturers, dissolving the partnership with his sons John, Henry and Frederick. A year later, on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1895, John's wife, Frances, died. John remained at Glenlyn until his death on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1900. He left an estate valued at £12,737 8s 4d, worth around £1,515,703 in today's money.<sup>xiii</sup>

Frederick Pickering, born in the summer of 1854,<sup>xiv</sup> was John's third son. When he left school he joined the family business commencing as a tallow chandler. On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1879 he married Annie Maria Greensall, the daughter of George Greensall, a hotel proprietor, at St Bartholomew's Church, Edgbaston. In 1881, the couple are recorded in the census at 1 Princess Road, a road off Calthorpe Park, in Edgbaston with their first child Frank Hubert Pickering, a seven month old baby, and a domestic servant Sarah Moses.

By 1891, Frederick, by then a 'soap and candle manufacturer' moved to the 'Ferns', Greenhill Road, Moseley with Annie, Frank and his younger brother Frederick, born in 1883. On the 6<sup>th</sup> May 1891, tragedy struck when Annie died, aged only 35 years old, leaving Frederick alone with the two boys aged only 10 and 8 years old respectively. Early the following year, in 1892, Frederick

remarried. His second wife was Emily Collins. Their first child John Howard was born in the spring of 1893 and Sydney Vernon in the summer of 1894. The 1901 census records the family living at Ravenscar, Chantry Road, Moseley.



*Midland's head office at New Street, Birmingham, designed by Edward Holmes in 1867. The building was the bank's main office until the amalgamation with the Central Bank of London in 1891.*

Sydney entered Solihull School in 1907. The school and the 1911 census record Sydney's address as 37 Chantry Road. In 1910, Sydney left school having passed his Oxford local examinations and joined the London City and Midland Bank in New Street, Birmingham.<sup>xv</sup>

When war was declared, new 'Pals' Divisions were formed. Sydney joined the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, the Bankers' Battalion, in January 1916 as a Private, No

23311.<sup>xvi</sup> While at school, Sydney had been a member of the Officers Training Corps.<sup>xvii</sup> The Banker's Battalion was formed in July 1915 and was launched on the initiative of the Lord Mayor of London. It was raised from men working in the City's banks and insurance offices. Sydney transferred to the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion Duke of Cambridge's Own Middlesex Regiment as Lance-Corporal S V Pickering, No G/40004 and in August 1916 he was posted to France to join his regiment.<sup>xviii</sup>



The Middlesex Regiment was part of the 54<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 18<sup>th</sup> Eastern Division. Sydney arrived just as the regiment were leaving the Somme, no doubt to make up the numbers lost in battle. The Battalion returned to the Somme on 26<sup>th</sup> September and took part in the successful attack on Thiepval, but it cost the lives of over 430 men. The Battalion later fought at Regina Trench and spent the winter of 1916/17 on the Somme.<sup>xix</sup>

**Figure 3: Lance-Corporal Sydney Pickering**

Over the winter, the Battalion had to endure rain, snow, fog, mud fields, and waterlogged trenches and shell-holes. As preparations for the spring offensive at Arras due in spring of 1917 continued, the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion Middlesex Regiment prepared for a new initiative to take out the salient formed north of Bapaume at the end of the fighting in 1916.



Figure 4: Men, animals and supplies in snow covered valley, winter 1916/17

As part of the 54<sup>th</sup> Brigade, on the 13<sup>th</sup> March the 12<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Battalion occupied the Loupart line, a line which ran from Essarts to Bucquoy, west of Achiet le Petit, Loupart Wood, south of Grévillers, west of Bapaume, Le Transloy to Saily Saillisel, which roughly corresponds to the black line shown in the map below, the Allied front line on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1917.

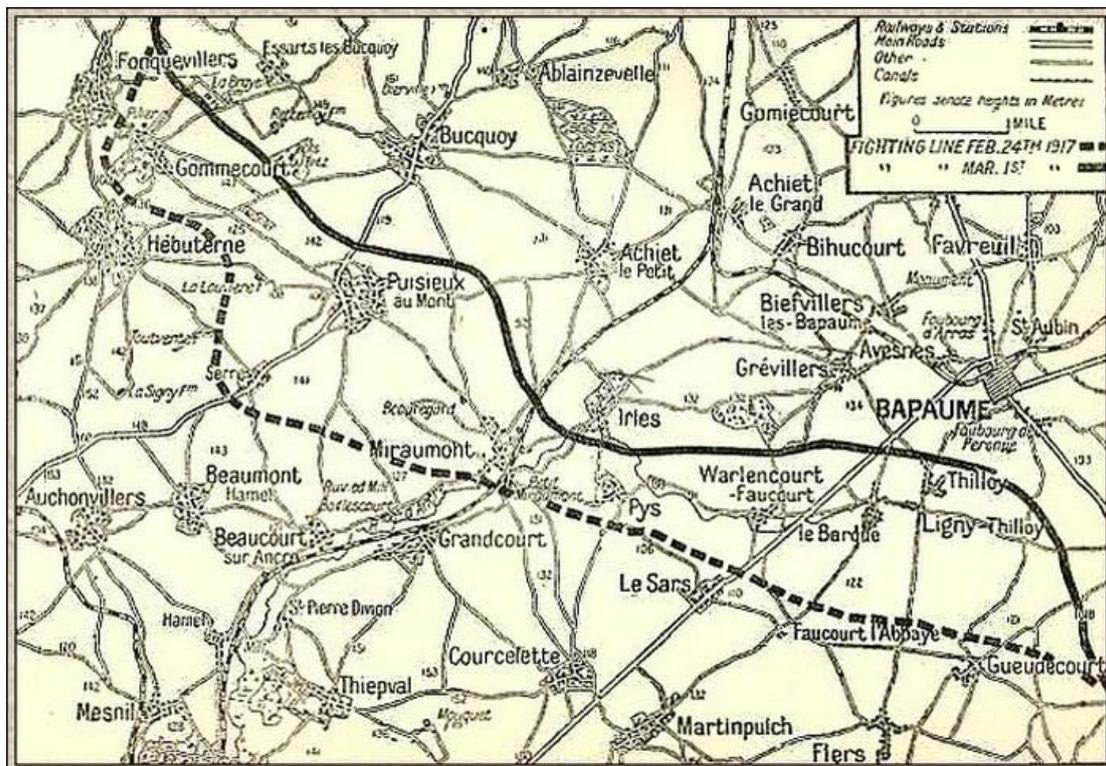
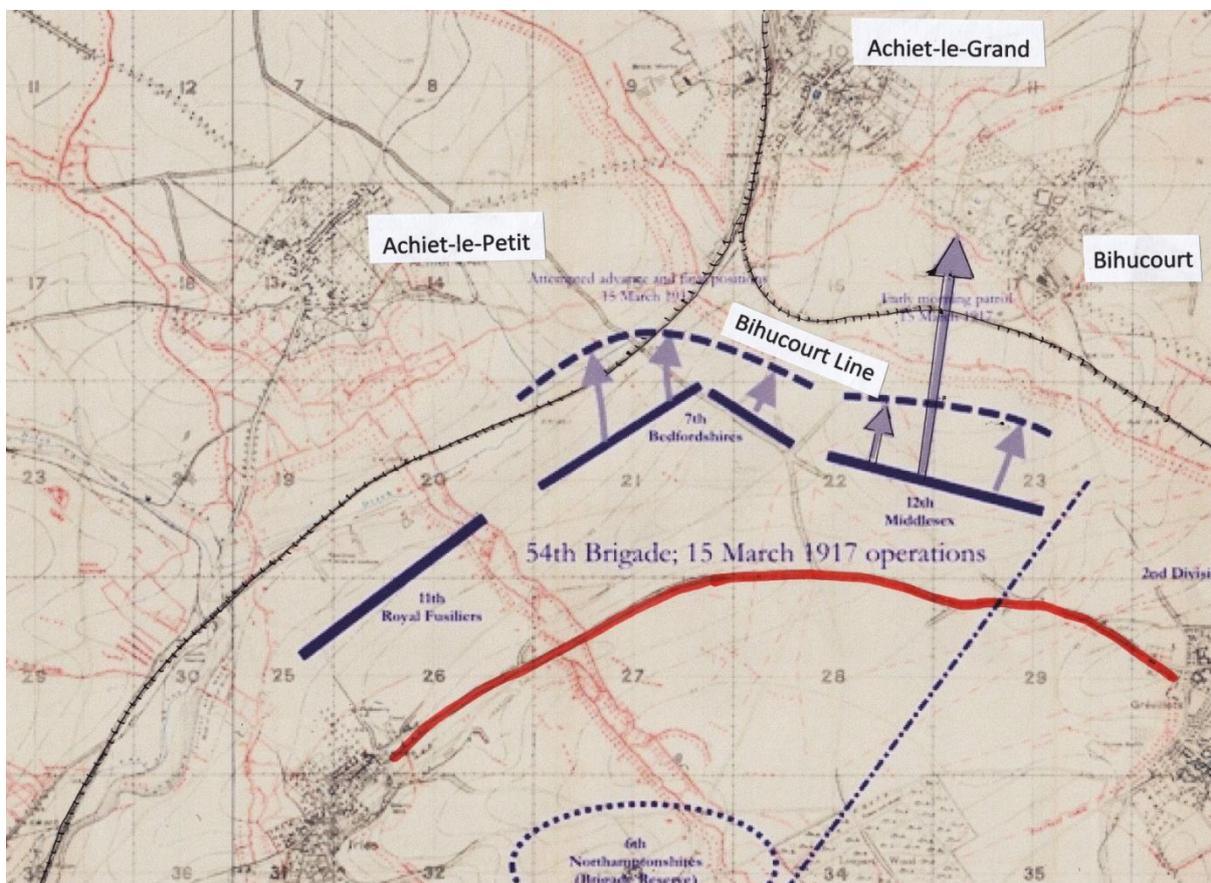


Figure 5: Map showing the relative positions of Essarts, Bucquoy, Achiet-le-Petit, Achiet-le-Grand, Bihucourt, Irlès and Grévillers

On 14<sup>th</sup> March 1917, the Germans still occupied Achiet-le-Petit and were still in strength at Bihucourt and Achiet-le-Grand (see Figures 5 and 6 to locate these places). In a short skirmish in that direction on the 14<sup>th</sup> March, the Bedfordshire Regiment on the left flank of the Middlesex Regiment won some higher ground and were as a consequence able to see the Germans assembling in considerable numbers SW of Achiet-le-Grand near the railway junction. This formed a rare target for the British artillery. The war diary for the 12<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment for the same day reports that 'A' and 'C' Coys took up positions in the front line trenches. The Germans were defending the Irles - Grévillers road (the orange line in Figure 6). 'B' Coy was in support 300 yards in the rear in gun pits and 'D' Coy were in reserve. The gun pits were shelled considerably during the day and also the area in front by the Germans.

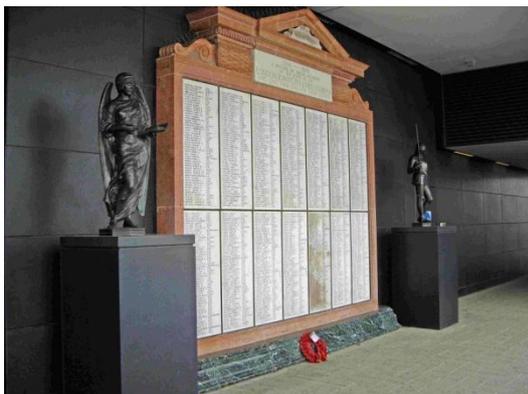


**Figure 6: Map showing the position of the 12<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1917. The orange line is the Irles (left end) to Grévillers (right end) road**

On 15<sup>th</sup> March attempts were made by the 12<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment to reach Bihucourt Trench, but they were found to be still occupied by the Germans. How and where exactly Sydney was 'killed in action' is not known, but it was likely to have been in the Bihucourt trench raid. Sydney was buried at Adanac Military Cemetery. The casualty list for the Middlesex Regiment in the cemetery

records zero deaths on the 14<sup>th</sup> March, seven including Sydney's on 15<sup>th</sup> and none the following day, 16<sup>th</sup> March.<sup>xx</sup> Ironically, the Middlesex Regiment took Bihucourt two days later on the 17<sup>th</sup> March and found the village had been abandoned by the retreating Germans.<sup>xxi</sup>

Sydney is also commemorated on the Roll of Honour in Birmingham's Hall of Memory and Solihull School. Unfortunately, the memorial board for the school has been lost. He is also commemorated on the WW1 memorial at St Mary's Church, Moseley and the London City and Midland Bank memorial located on the north side of 8 Canada Square, London, E14 5HQ within a protected walkway near the east entrance at Upper Bank Street



**Figure 7:**

**Top left. The London City and Midland Bank WW1 Memorial**

**Above. St Mary's Church, Moseley**

**Left. Adanac Military Cemetery**

**Researched and written by Edwina Rees  
Moseley Society History Group**

## Footnotes

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- i Caroline and Martin Davis's families, p 30  
<http://archive.freerangephotography.co.uk/MDg3-o/index.htm>
- ii Staffordshire Baptisms
- iii Staffordshire Baptisms  
1841 census
- iv *Birmingham Journal*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1853
- v *White's Directory of Birmingham for 1855*  
*Birmingham Journal*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1858  
*Birmingham Daily Post*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 1859
- vi 1861 census  
*Kelly's Business Directory for Birmingham, 1872*
- vii *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1863  
*Birmingham Daily Post*, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 1869
- viii *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1866
- ix *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1874
- x Chantry Road and Park Hill Residents Association  
<http://craph.org.uk/about/>
- xi *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1873
- xii See x
- xiii Probate Calender for 1900  
Historical inflation calculator  
<http://inflation.stephenmorley.org/>
- xiv England & Wales births, Kings Norton, 1854, 3/4, 6 c, 364
- xv Midland Bankers for a 150 years  
[http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_414009\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_414009_en.pdf)
- xvi Soldiers who died in the First World War 1914-1919
- xvii Loynton, John, 2010. *Solihull School During the First World War, 1914-19*
- xviii *Birmingham Daily Mail* 13<sup>th</sup> April 1917

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- xix The Middlesex Regiment on the Somme  
<https://somme1916.wordpress.com/2015/12/16/middlesex-regiment-on-the-somme/>
- xx Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- xxi National Archives, War diary of the 12<sup>th</sup> Middlesex regiment, Ref WO 95/2044/1

## Illustrations

- Figure 1 Birmingham Forum: Bishop Ryder's Church, Gosta Green, Gem Street 1838-1960  
<http://www.birminghamforum.co.uk/index.php?topic=2050.2343>  
The church was demolished in 1960. Gem Street also no longer exists, but the church was located in the middle of the modern Aston University campus.
- Figure 2 John Pickering, see i
- Figure 3 *Birmingham News*, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1917
- Figure 4 *Mametz, Western Front: men, animals and supplies in snow covered valley* 1916-17 by Frank Crozier (1883–1948), Australian official war artist.
- Figure 5 Doyle, Arthur. 1919. *The British Campaign in France and Flanders*. Volume IV, 1917. Hodder & Staughton, London  
<http://freeread.com.au/@rglibrary/ArthurConanDoyle/History/H244-TheGreatWar.html>
- Figure 6 The Bedfordshire Regiment in the Great War  
<http://bedfordregiment.org.uk/7thbn/christophercoxvc.html>
- Figure 7 The London City and Midland Bank memorial  
<https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=cr&GRid=54618017&CRid=2358133&>  
Adanac Military Cemetery  
<http://www.ww1cemeteries.com/ww1frenchcemeteries/adanac.htm>