

## Private Harold Leslie Pearce

Prelude. The rapid advance by the Allied Armies in the first days of the Battle of Arras (6<sup>th</sup> April - 16<sup>th</sup> May 1917) was in some part due to the Germans falling back quickly to the more easily defended Hindenburg Line, eliminating two salients that had formed in the Battle of the Somme in 1916 from Arras to Saint Quentin and Saint Quentin to Noyon. The withdrawal was accompanied by very intense rear guard actions in the form of artillery, rifle and machine gun fire. This caused many casualties in the British ranks. The subsequent arrival of large numbers of reinforcements by the Germans enabled them to mount vigorous counter-attacks, starting on 14 April, which checked the British advance. The 61<sup>st</sup> Division had, as a consequence, to 'dig in' around St Quentin as a stalemate was reached.

Harold can trace his family origins back to his great-grand parents, Elizabeth and James Pearce from Darby Hend (later known as Darby End) Dudley. James was a joiner by trade.<sup>i</sup>

James' son, William was born in Darby End, Dudley in 1840.<sup>ii</sup> On 5<sup>th</sup> July 1860,, William married Jane Hooper, at the Parish Church of St Martin's, Birmingham. At the time of the marriage William was an office clerk and lived in Great Hampton Street, Birmingham.<sup>iii</sup>



**Figure 1: The Parish Church of St Martin's Church as it looked in 1811. The church was demolished and rebuilt in 1873**

Jane's father, Edward John Hooper, was a brass founder. On 27<sup>th</sup> February 1825 he married Ann Smith at St Martin's Parish Church, Birmingham.<sup>iv</sup> By 1851 Edward Hooper had died. Jane, now widowed, was making a living as a green

grocer. She secured some additional income by taking in a lodger at her home in Brass House Lane, Harborne.<sup>v</sup> On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1857, Ann, remarried at St Martin's Church, Birmingham. Her second husband was Thomas Bowdler.

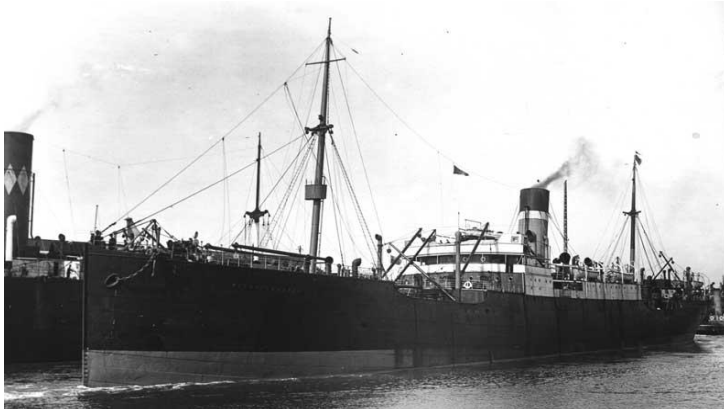
After their marriage, William and Jane moved away from the town centre to High Street West, Harborne (Birmingham was not a city until 1889). The 1861 census records William as a 'clerk at a nut and bolt works'. By the next census the couple had three children: Henry Hooper Bowdler Pearce (born 1861), Ann Elizabeth Pearce (born 1865) and James Pearce (born 1866). By 1881 Jane's mother, Ann, was also living with them having been widowed for the second time, together with William and Jane's four children (another daughter, Lillian Jane Pearce, had been born in 1874). Sarah Anne Rowlands is listed as a general domestic servant for the family.

William, by 1891, had become the manager at his works and James, a copper plate engraver. A year later, James married Rosa Fanny Port, a teacher, in the spring of 1892.<sup>vi</sup> The couple moved to Highbridge Road, Wylde Green, Sutton Coldfield where they remained for many years. In the 1901 census James and Rosa are recorded as having three children, Harold Leslie Pearce (born February 1893), Linda Nellie Pearce (born 1896) and Dora Mabel Pearce (born 1898). A year later another son, Ralph was born.<sup>vii</sup> Harold, known as Leslie by the family, was educated at King Edward VI Aston Grammar School for Boys.<sup>viii</sup>



**Figure 2: The rear of the old building of King Edward VI Aston Grammar School**

Fifteen months after the declaration of war on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, Leslie enlisted in the Territorial Force of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment for 'the duration of war with the colours'. His attestation papers are dated 8<sup>th</sup> December 1915 and record the place of enlistment as Curzon Hall, Birmingham and the family address as 72, Anderton Park Road, Moseley, Birmingham. Private H L Pearce, No 4827 was mobilised two days later. The descriptive report records that he was 22 years and 10 months old, a clerk, 5' 9" tall, had a 37" chest and no distinctive marks.<sup>ix</sup>



**Figure 3: SS City of Benares**



**Figure 4: SS Princess Clementine**

After a period of training, Leslie was appointed as a Lance-Corporal in the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment, No 303414. His training had qualified him as a Lewis gunner.<sup>x</sup> On 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1916, Leslie embarked from Southampton with his battalion for France.

Twenty-three officers and 855 OR's travelled on the P S Princess Clementine and 9 officers and 132 OR's on the SS City of Benares, along with 17 four-wheeled wagons, 4 two-wheeled wagons, 64 horses and 8 cycles, arriving at Le Havre at 7am the following day.<sup>xi</sup>

The 2/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion formed part of the 182<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 61<sup>st</sup> (2<sup>nd</sup> South Midland) Division<sup>xii</sup> which took part in several actions in the Battle of the Somme. As a consequence the battalion sustained heavy casualties. It was during this time that Leslie started to experience problems with his eye sight and on 20<sup>th</sup> August he was diagnosed with myopia (short-sightedness) which would have badly affected his ability to see long distance objects clearly and, as a Lewis gunner, a necessary prerequisite to shoot accurately. At his own request Leslie reverted to the rank of private on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1916.<sup>xiii</sup>

After a cold and miserable winter, the British Army prepared for a spring offensive. The 61st was one of the Divisions employed in the cautious pursuit of the enemy, when the Germans commenced a deep withdrawal from the area of the Somme

The Battle of Arras began on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1917. The first two days were a tactical success securing the heights of Vimy Ridge. This rapid advance forced the Germans to fall back quickly to their second formidable second line of defence, the Hindenburg Line but not without very intense artillery, rifle and machine gun fire from their rear guard that protected their flank as they withdrew. This caused many casualties in the British ranks.

The subsequent arrival of large numbers of reinforcements by the Germans enabled them to mount vigorous counter-attacks and from 14 April, the British advance was checked.

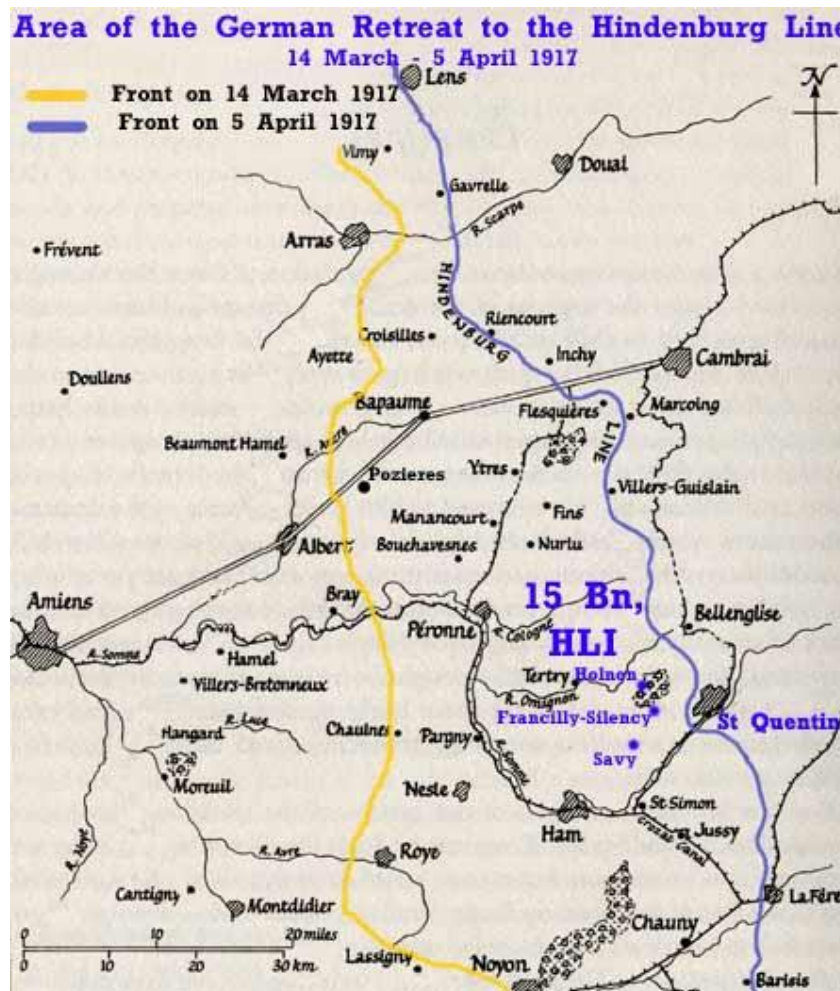


Figure 5: Map showing the Hindenburg Line in blue in April 1917. The 15<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry (HLI) were relieved by the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Warwicks on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1917

On 16<sup>th</sup> April the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwickshire Regiment were at Vaux. Two days later, on 18<sup>th</sup> April, advance orders were received by the battalion for the relief of the 15<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry (HLI). Following this, an inspection of the frontline was carried out on 19<sup>th</sup> April by the Company Commanders, Signalling Officer and the RSM, The final Battalion orders for the relief of the 15<sup>th</sup> HLI were received the next day, Friday 20<sup>th</sup> April. Later that day at 7.45 pm an advance party of an officer, four NCO's and a signaller and runner, left the base and proceeded to the frontline. The rest of the battalion set off the following day, 21<sup>st</sup> April, at 7.30 pm, after picking up supplies of water, cold rations and ammunition. The route they were to take to the four outposts they were to relieve was along the Etreillers to Savy Road as far as the SE corner of Savy Wood, then north along the railway, before turning east across country to the Battalion HQ. By 1.20 am on the 22<sup>nd</sup> the relief was complete.<sup>xiv</sup>

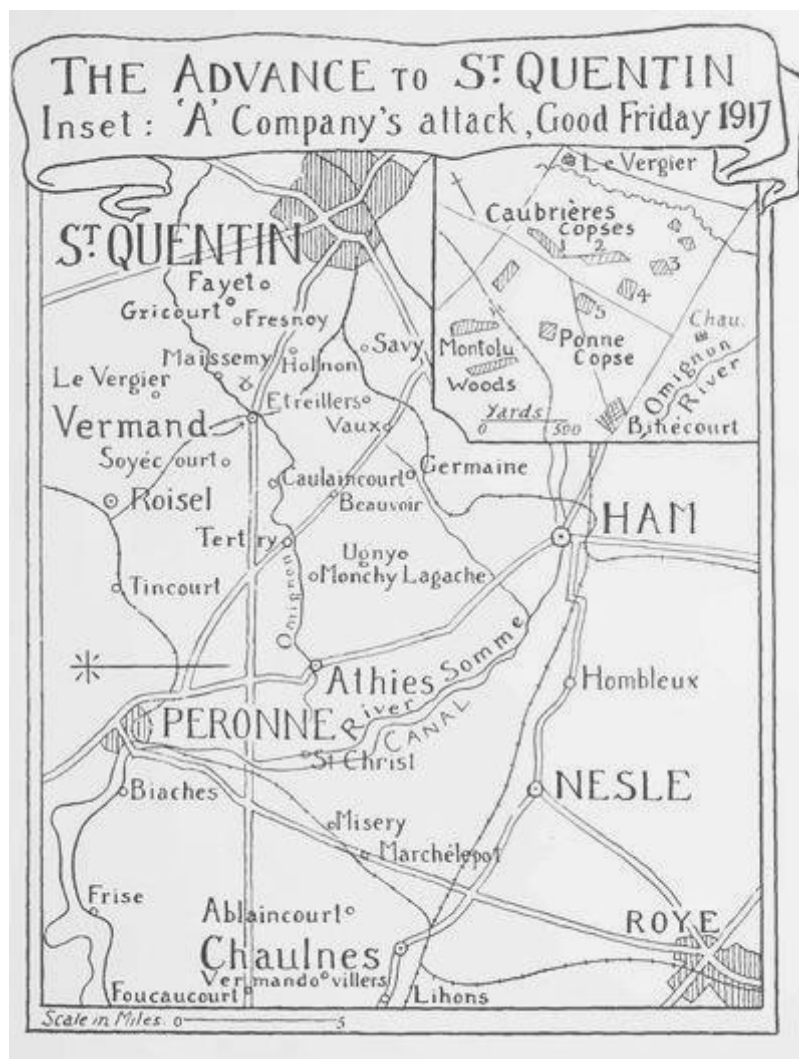


Figure 6: Map showing the position of Vaux, Savy and Etreillers relative to St Quentin

The British Army then had to 'dig in' on the outskirts of St Quentin with the Cathedral tower within view. In a book called 'The 2/4<sup>th</sup> Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry', there is a passage that relates to the probable intelligence that the Germans would have likely gathered using the spire as a look out:

*Never was the sense of being spied on more justified than near St. Quentin, whose tall cathedral raised itself higher than all the roofs of the town and higher, too, than the ridges surrounding it for many miles.*

*On April 20, 1917, a German observer from the cathedral belfry could have seen the divisional relief which brought the 61st Division back to the line. All day small parties were moving in the forward zone, while further back larger ones crossed and re-crossed the ridge 'twixt Holnon and Fayet, and in rear again, along the road through Savy to Germaine, columns of Infantry in fours followed by horses, vehicles, and smoking cooker chimneys, were passing one another, some coming, others going back. Those coming made a left-handed turn at Savy, hugged the line of single railway as far as a crucifix at a cross-roads, and were then lost to distinct view amid the abject ruins of Holnon. Those going were the 32nd Division, whose march carried them out of the cathedral's eye or observation by German balloons.<sup>xv</sup>*



**Figure 7: A sketch view across a flat landscape with a tree in the centre foreground, looking towards the buildings of St Quentin on 21<sup>st</sup> April**

The relief of the HLI was not achieved without casualties. One officer was wounded (shell shock), one 'other rank' was killed and 4 others were wounded. The 'other rank' killed was Leslie, most likely from a direct hit from an enemy shell.<sup>xvi</sup> His body was not found and his name appears on the Thiepval memorial. Leslie is also commemorated on the WW1 memorial in St Mary's Church, Moseley (he was erroneously recorded as having died in 1915), Birmingham Hall of Memory and King Edward VI Aston School for Boys.



**Figure 8:**

**(Top left and above) King Edward VI Aston School for Boys memorial with Leslie's name picked out**

**(Above top) Thiepval memorial**

**(Left) St Mary's Church, Moseley WW1 memorial**

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

## Permission to copy subject to acknowledgement

The Moseley Society History Group carries out its own research and publishes the results on its website and in booklets, posters and written reports. It also responds to individual enquiries as far as it is able. The History Group grants permission to quote from any of its published research material and any responses to individual enquiries for non-commercial and educational purposes, but only on condition that the History Group is acknowledged as the source of the information used, together with the author where specified, and on the understanding that the History Group cannot guarantee or accept liability for the accuracy of its material. Use for commercial purposes is not permitted unless terms have previously been agreed with the History Group.

### Endnotes

- 
- i Birmingham, England, Church of England, Marriages and Banns, 1754-1937 for 1857
  - ii 1841 census for Dudley
  - iii Birmingham, England, Church of England, Marriages and Banns, 1754-1937 for 1860
  - iv 1841 census for Dudley  
England Marriages 1538-1973
  - v 1851 census
  - vi England & Wales marriages 1837-2005, Birmingham, 2/4, 6D, 70  
1891 census
  - vii 1901/ 1911 census  
England & Wales births 1837-2006
  - viii From the king Edward VI Aston School WW1 memorial list of Ruth Livermore
  - ix Attestation of Harold Leslie Pearce for Short Service
  - x See ix
  - xi The National Archives, Kew, War Diary of the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwickshire Regiment, Ref WO 95/3057/1, p 28  
Attestation records
  - xii The Long, Long Trail  
<https://www.google.co.uk/#q=2/8th+Royal+Warwicks++1916>
  - xiii Casualty Form – Active Service for L/Cpl H L Pearce



---

xiv See xi, p 197

xv Rose, Captain G K, MC. 1920. *The Story of the 2/4<sup>th</sup> Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*. B H Blackwell, Oxford

xvi See xi, pp 197 -205

## Illustrations

Figure 1 St Martin's Church 1811  
<http://www.lerwill-life.org.uk/history/homebrum.htm>

Figure 2 King Edward VI Aston Grammar School  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King\\_Edward\\_VI\\_Aston\\_School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Edward_VI_Aston_School)

Figure 3 *SS City of Benares*  
<http://www.benjidog.co.uk/allen/Images/ImagesE/ELLER019.jpg>

Figure 4 *PS Princess Clementine*  
Invision zone  
<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/198366-princess-clementina-southampton-to-le-harve-1916/>

Figure 5 Map of German retreat to the Hindenburg Line 1917  
[http://www.kinnethmont.co.uk/1914-1918\\_files/chas-gray.htm](http://www.kinnethmont.co.uk/1914-1918_files/chas-gray.htm)

Figure 6 Advance to St Quentin  
<https://oxfordshireandbuckinghamshirlightinfantry.wordpress.com/tag/25th-gloucestershire-regiment/>

Figure 7 Sketch of St Quentin by Captain Geoffrey K Rose MC  
<https://oxfordshireandbuckinghamshirlightinfantry.wordpress.com/tag/25th-gloucestershire-regiment/>

Figure 8 King Edward VI Grammar School for Boys WW1 memorial  
<https://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/223898>