

## “Dora & Jack ... A Moseley Tale of Love”

For the last three and a half years, the Moseley Society History Group has been researching how the First World War affected Moseley and its residents. Many individual soldiers' records and lives have been discovered and reported. In particular, we have looked at those brave men who gave their lives “For King & Country.” We originally sought to research those men remembered on Moseley's various memorials around the area, but, in addition, we have also identified many others with a Moseley connection who are not mentioned on memorials.

This story involves one of these “unrecognised” soldiers whose life could be described as being in the best “Boys Own” tradition. His link to Moseley was that he met, courted and eventually married the beautiful young daughter of a local entrepreneur and gentleman. The story involves death and sadness, but it also underlines duty, devotion and hope for the future.

The main characters of this story are John Henry Stephen Dimmer (Jack) and Gladys Dora May Bayley-Parker (Dora). How, when and where they met are not known..

Jack was born on October 9<sup>th</sup> 1883 in Lambeth, the son of an ex-Navy man. He was educated at Rutlish Secondary School, Merton, Surrey where it was reported that he showed “military tendencies”. He joined the Boys' Brigade and eventually initiated a BB company in Wimbledon.



**Figure 1: Rutlish Secondary School Merton, Surrey**

After leaving school, he started work in the Civil Engineering Department of Morden Council, Surrey. But this was but a short interlude for in 1902, Jack joined the Army as a Private in the King's Rifle Regiment and was soon sent to serve in South Africa.

Dora was born in the summer of 1895 to William Parker and his second wife Mary. William was something of an entrepreneur and apparently, made a great deal of money from his activity in "soaps and soda". This was just as well as he had fathered ten children in total! The family maintained a very large home in Oakland Road, Moseley and William, as time progressed, began to describe himself as a "Gentleman". In line with this, Dora adopted a hyphen in her name and thus became a Bayley-Parker (Bailey being William's second name).

We do not know much of Dora's childhood and early adulthood other than she had become well-known in the Moseley area for doing a great deal of nursing and visiting in military hospitals. It is possible that this was where Dora and Jack first met but we cannot be sure.

Initially, Jack was a Regular soldier involved in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Boer War. He was obviously an exceptional soldier whose talents and abilities were recognised and rewarded. Promotions followed regularly in recognition of his fine service in areas of tracking, mapping and signalling. His service was predominantly in Africa where he was seconded to various units. Eventually he was recommended for a Commission by some well-known and influential figures such as General Lyttleton and Sir Ian Hamilton. This was duly granted in January 1908 and thereafter he was attached to a number of different units doing "special work" in Africa. This could very well have been Intelligence work on behalf of the Foreign Office. Certainly, though, there is evidence of his being with the West African Regiment.

**King's Royal Rifles (60th).—Capt. Johnstone, 3rd Batn., adjutant of the 9th Batn. County of London Regiment, and 2nd Lieut. (local Lieutenant) Dimmer, now serving with the West African Regiment, have been elected Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society.**

Figure 2: Newspaper reference to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Dimmer, West African Regiment, 1908

He was still based in Africa in early 1914 and came back to England on extended leave in early summer that year. So it was that he was still here when the political situation that developed after the Sarajevo assassination exploded into war. Rather than return to Africa, Jack returned to his parent regiment, the King's Royal Rifle Corps, but this time as an officer! The KRRC were amongst the very first units mobilised for war and they formed part of the

original British Expeditionary Force (BEF) that landed in Le Havre and Rouen around August 14<sup>th</sup> 1914.

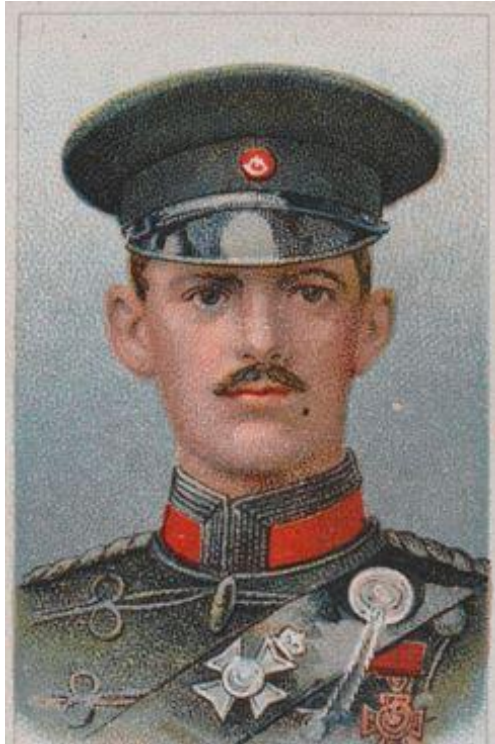


Figure 3: Lt J H S Dimmer



Figure 4: A shell wrecks a machine gun Lt J H S Dimmer was firing when attacked by the Prussian Guard

The BEF was composed of the bulk of the British Army's professional trained soldiers. They faced the daunting task of facing a formidable enemy who had an overwhelming superiority in numbers, training and weapons. The Germans also had their well-documented Schlieffen Plan which laid out their strategy, long prepared, to overcome their main threat – France. Jack and his contemporaries were destined to become involved in desperate fighting in a number of well known engagements including at Mons and the retreat, the Aisne and at Ypres, where Jack first made his name.

On 13<sup>th</sup> November, Jack and his battalion (2KRRC) found themselves holding a line near Klein Zillebeke in Belgium during what became known as the First Battle of Ypres. Jack was in charge of a machine gun unit when the battalion was suddenly attacked by the Prussian Guard and a crushing artillery barrage. Before long, there was only one gun left in operation. Jack then took over firing at the approaching enemy. A shell burst nearby causing severe wounds to his face and neck, but he remained at his post until his gun was finally put out of action. The enemy was repulsed and Jack survived despite being wounded five times. In the words of his Commanding Officer, Jack's action not only "saved the Regiment but also the line itself." Interestingly, the official War Diary entry for that day simply reports that Lt Dimmer was among the wounded. Nevertheless, that action by Jack won him the Victoria Cross and a lot of national recognition as one of the first recipients of our highest military decoration.





**Figure 5: Painting of Lt J H S Dimmer repairing a machine gun, while exposed to fire**



**Figure 6: (Left) Victoria Cross (Right) Military Cross**

Subsequently, Jack in a letter to his mother mentioned nothing of his actions but reassured her that he was “a bit knocked about but generally not too bad”. Shortly after that, he was promoted to Captain whilst convalescing in England. At the turn of the year, in that year's New Years Honours List, a new award was instituted. The Military

Cross (MC) for officers and warrant officers below the rank of Captain. (The equivalent award Military Medal for other ranks was not introduced until March 1916!)

The initial batch of 100 names included Jack in their number. His action at Zillebeke also featured in the press which often printed artists' impressions of famous incidents. These were inevitably rather fanciful, romantic pieces far removed from the grim reality of men fighting for their lives in desperate situations.



The London Gazette in early in 1915 records his appointment as Brigade Major, attached to the HQ unit of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion. This was a Staff appointment as it was obviously felt that Jack was a candidate for high command. There is little record of his service there but by April 1915, he had moved on to the 4<sup>th</sup> Reserve Infantry Brigade (Rifles) based at Westcliffe-on-Sea. This was basically a training unit that was charged with training the various “Pals” regiments. Jack's service would have made him very suitable for this work, but probably he would have preferred to have been in an active unit.

However, the circumstances of war would give Jack what he may have wanted. In November 1915, he was returned to his parent Regiment (KRRC) and went with their 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment to Salonika to support the Serbian Army in the fight against the Bulgarians. This campaign was something of a sideshow to the Western front, as the Allied expedition was late arriving and the Bulgarians had already been routed by the

Serbian. The British force together with French forces were more or less a policing force with little fighting taking place initially. However, in 1916 there was more action as the Bulgarians recovered and the KRRC was involved in the capture of Karajakoi and the capture of Yenikoi. Jack is recorded as being attached to the Royal Flying Corps whilst in Salonika but we have few details of his activities there. Probably, he assisted in liaison between the RFC and the Army.

The Army in Salonika suffered many losses during the campaign which lasted until the 1918 Armistice. However the majority of these losses were due to illness and disease. Unfortunately, Jack was one of them. On October 11<sup>th</sup> 1916, he was admitted to hospital with suspected severe jaundice, and the following day was assigned to a sick convoy to Casualty Clearing Station 31 in Egypt.

Following a spell of convalescence, Jack returned to England and was seconded to the Machine Gun Corps as a Staff Officer in December 1916. We then lose sight of him as his service continued with the MGC until October 1917 when he is promoted to Lt. Colonel and seconded to command the 2/4 Princess Charlotte of Wales' Regiment (aka The Royal Berkshire Regiment). At this time, they were serving in a "quiet zone", as compared to the Flanders area where the Third Battle of Ypres was raging.

Returning to Dora, we only know that she was very active locally in Moseley, nursing the sick and visiting local hospitals. Perhaps she and Jack met after his VC award, when he was very much in the public's and Society's eye. What is known is that they became engaged and set the date for their wedding three times!



Figure 4: Announcement of Dora and Jack's engagement in a society newspaper

On each occasion, however, Jack was recalled for duty in France and Salonika. However, at their fourth attempt the wedding took place on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1918. They were married at St Mary's Church, Moseley by Canon Hopton, the then Archdeacon of Birmingham. The event was of great interest both locally and nationally, and was widely reported in the Press. The couple had no honeymoon and Jack returned to France on the following Tuesday. Almost certainly, Dora never saw Jack again !



Figure 5: A photograph and a newspaper picture of the marriage of Jack and Dora

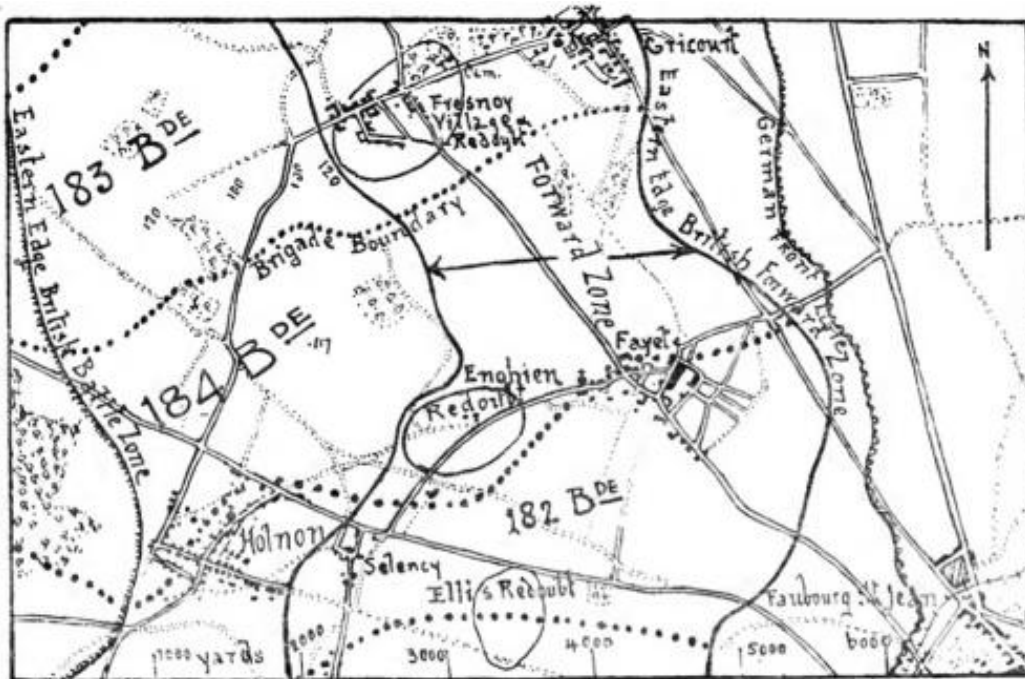


Back in France, the war dragged on. Passchendaele was taken by the Canadians and for a time, the attritional slaughter on the Western Front relented a little whilst the opposing forces recovered and regrouped after the Third Battle of Ypres. It soon became apparent that the Germans were building up for a major offensive. The Russian Revolution of November 1917 and the subsequent release of German forces on the Eastern Front meant that enormous numbers of experienced troops could be deployed against an Allied Army still licking its wounds after the last major battle.

So it was then that Jack's regiment found itself in a relatively quiet part of the Front with the 2/4 Royal Berkshire Regiment, part of the 184<sup>th</sup> Brigade. There were still small actions with consequent, but "normal" losses. Patrols were being sent out to try and glean intelligence of German activity. In other words, normal line duty. The High Command were certain that a German attack was imminent, but did not know where it would strike. The relevant War Diaries show the depth of detailed orders that were being drawn up to try and prepare for any possibility.

What the High Command did not know was that the enemy had introduced a new attack strategy which had never been attempted before. The Allies were to be the target of what was really a forerunner of the "Blitzkrieg" attack used to such effect in the Second World War.

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, the Germans launched their Spring Offensive (aka Operation Michael or the Kaiser's Battle) from the Hindenburg Line, in the very area where Jack and his Regiment were stationed at Marteville, near St Quentin. Initially, they were held in reserve but as the enemy offensive made terrific inroads, aided by the element of surprise and effective artillery fire, the Berkshires were pushed forward in order to attempt a counter-attack.



**Figure 6: Map showing the position of the 2/4 Berkshire Regiment, 184<sup>th</sup> Brigade near St Quentin on 21st March 1918**

One can only imagine the feelings of these men as they faced thousands of battle-hardened troops, outnumbered, outgunned and almost overrun. Two companies of the Regiment were sent forward. Jack as Officer Commanding was mounted on his faithful charger leading his men on with the same gallantry and disregard for his own personal safety that marked his whole military career. The operation was heroic, but inevitably disastrous. The attackers were slaughtered and there were few survivors. An eye witness reported that Jack refused to dismount his horse and was seen to be shot in the head a few yards from the enemy line and died immediately.

Jack is buried at Vadencourt British Cemetery in Maissemy. He is remembered in many places (but not Moseley!) These include Kingston Vale Memorial, Wimbledon, the Regimental Memorial in Winchester Cathedral and a memorial paving stone for VC holders in Silver Jubilee Gardens, Southbank, London. He also has a road named after him , Jack Dimmer Close in SW16.

This is a sad story, but one of so many similar ones from that time. Jack died a gallant death, which left his very young wife of a few weeks with nothing more than memories of a lengthy courtship and a very short marriage.

They say that time is a great healer, and that life must go on. It was particularly true for Dora but that is a different story!

If anybody would like to find out more about Dora (and Jack) please contact the Moseley Society History Group, email [moseleyhistory@gmail.com](mailto:moseleyhistory@gmail.com)



**Figure 7: (Left) Kings Royal Rifle Corps memorial at Winchester Cathedral, (contributed by Peter Trimming)**

**(Middle) Jack's tombstone at Vadencourt Cemetery**

**(Right) Commemorative paving stone in Jubilee Gardens, South Bank, London**

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