

# Captain Roger James Cholmeley MC – a true hero

## Early Life

Roger James Cholmeley was born in Swaby Lincolnshire, on 4th January 1872. His family were distant relations of the Cholmeley family of Easton Hall. He was the second son of the Revd James Cholmeley, Rector of St. Nicholas Church, Swaby, Lincolnshire. He left Lincolnshire to be educated at St. Edward's School, Oxford, from 1885 to 1890 and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge where he studied Classics. He won the Chancellor's prize for a Latin poem called "The Stone Age" and became President of the Owlets Club. Apparently he was a very good rower. He was awarded a B.A. in 1890.



(Above) St. Edward's School, Oxford



(Left) Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

He married Lillian Mary Lamb, also the daughter of a clergyman, Revd T D Lamb, in 1896. She was born in Wimbledon and Cholmeley and his new wife settled there, although they were married in Headington in Oxfordshire. They had one daughter, Katherine Elizabeth, who was born in Wimbledon on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1903.

## Early Military Career

Cholmeley began his distinguished military career as a part time soldier in the 2<sup>nd</sup> East Surrey Yeomanry. In peacetime he always seems to have been involved in part time, voluntary military service in both Britain and South Africa. His first taste of overseas service was in South Africa, during the Second Boer War. He served as a Trooper in the Imperial Yeomanry (Number 13660) from 13th March 1900 to 29<sup>th</sup> June 1901. The Imperial Yeomanry were raised by the Government to meet the desperate need for mounted infantry to fight the Boers. They were formed from volunteers from the home Yeomanry Regiments who were willing to serve overseas. We know little about Cholmeley's service in the Boer War, apart from the fact that he later received the Queen's South Africa medal with clasps for



the Cape Colony and Orange Free State.

The dates of his service indicate that he was amongst the first volunteer groups to go to South Africa, who signed up for twelve months service. There were twenty battalions, each with three or four companies. Some of these were made up of volunteers from London or the Home Counties but there was no company who came specifically from Surrey. Some of the 10,000 or volunteers saw action in skirmishes with the Boers. Many did not and there were many complaints about the drudgery of constant patrolling with poor rations and little shelter. Casualties from sickness were much higher than those from enemy action.

Cholmeley returned to Britain and was received a commission as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Merchant Taylors School Cadet Corps on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1902, attached to 1<sup>st</sup> London Volunteer Rifle Corps. His commission was then transferred to the 4<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Battalion, the East Surrey Regiment but he remained with the Rifles. He was promoted to Lieutenant on 21st January 1905. He was seconded, still as a volunteer, to the Cape Colonial Forces on 24th October 1905, showing that he was certainly on the way to South Africa. Clearly his experiences in the Imperial Yeomanry had not put him off seeking a post in the colony.

## Teaching Career



Rhodes University College, Grahamstown,



Scotch College Melbourne

He taught Philosophy and Classics at Manchester Grammar School in 1895 and then moved to the City of London School in 1898. After the Boer War he settled in South Africa, becoming Professor of Latin at Rhodes University College, Grahamstown. We do know the exact date he moved to that country. Later he moved to Australia, being on the passenger manifest of the German ship *Friedrich der Grosse*, which sailed from Bremerhaven to Freemantle, Western Australia in January 1909. Presumably he already had a post at Scotch College Melbourne, a private school for boys, established by the Presbyterian Church. He became Senior Classics Master. Their records show he taught there from 1909 to 1910 and he was active in the Cadet Force, particularly the School Signalling Corps. A short biography is included on the school's World War One commemorative website. He moved to the newly formed Queensland University, in 1911, where he both taught Greek and was the Librarian. His name is on their memorial and there are brief biographical details in the university's on line Roll of Honour. The Fryer Library hold a number of digitised photos of Cholmeley. His wife and daughter are not mentioned on the manifest nor are they mentioned on the

1913 Australian census. At that point Cholmeley was living in Fortitude valley near Brisbane. However, it is difficult to imagine him living apart from his wife and child for five years. He

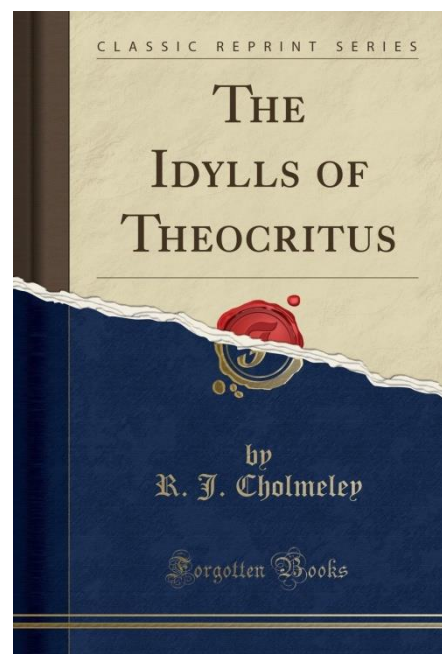
wrote a number of books including *The Idylls of Theocritus* in 1901, which was described by one learned critic as being “full of sound scholarship”.



(Above) Cholmeley at the University of Queensland

(Top right) Cholmeley taken in Brisbane

(Bottom right) *The Idylls of Theocritus* by R J Cholmeley



## Military Career

When the First World War broke out in 1914 he volunteered for the Australian Army but was rejected due to his age (42!). Determined to serve in the war he returned to Britain on the ship *Medina* in August 1915. He joined the 13<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion, the Cheshire Regiment. Technically this was not a “Pals” battalion. However it was raised by Lord Leverhulme from amongst his workers at Port Sunlight in September 1914. One thousand volunteered almost immediately, to be joined at Chester by another two hundred men from Wallesey, raised by Gershom Stewart M.P. The 13<sup>th</sup> were known as the Wirral Battalion. On completing their training in various parts of the U.K., they joined the 25<sup>th</sup> Division at Aldershot and then landed in France in September 1915. The Division fought on the Western Front throughout the rest of the war, apart from a period of refit and reorganisation in June 1918, suffering 48,300 casualties, including over 13,000 dead. The division fought at Armientieres (1915), Vimy Ridge and the Somme (1916), Third Ypres (1917), the German Spring Offensive and the Asine (1918). The 13<sup>th</sup> Cheshires were part of the 74<sup>th</sup> Brigade which included, when Cholmeley was serving, the 11<sup>th</sup> Btn, the Lancashire Fusiliers, the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Battalions, the



Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, the Worcester Regiment and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, the Royal Irish Rifles. Six V.C.'s were awarded to members of the Division.

Cholmeley had joined the battalion in August 1915, receiving a temporary commission on the 9<sup>th</sup> of that month. Due to his age he could, no doubt, have secured some administrative posting. He was determined to see action. He became the 74th Brigade's Intelligence Officer. He amused his comrades by reading the likes of Homer, Herodotus and Caesar in the trenches. His role as Intelligence Officer did not mean that he remained behind the lines. Cholmeley quickly developed a reputation for bravery and a willingness to expose himself to danger. He clearly believed the best way to gather intelligence was to be in the thick of the fighting.

## Armientieres

The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion first served in the trenches near Armientieres in France and then Le Bizet and Le Touquet in Belgium (not the one in France). At some points, the enemy trenches were only forty metres away from the British lines. The trenches were prone to flooding, requiring a lot of work to keep the water at bay. Cholmeley was praised in the war diary for his good work leading a drainage party on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1915. He was wounded six days later. According to the war diary he was wounded in the thigh, presumably from a bullet or shell splinter. He was found, by one of his contemporaries, in hospital in great pain, possibly in Oxford, reading Plato's *Republic*.

## Vimy Ridge



**British wounded receiving treatment in Zouave Valley in 1916**

Many know the name Vimy Ridge due to the successful Canadian attack in the Spring of 1917. Until that success, both the British and French armies had launched many unsuccessful attacks on this vital piece of high ground. Recovered from his wounds he returned to the battalion, where he was once again wounded in fighting at Zouave Valley on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1916. On the Western Front both sides dug mines under the enemy's trenches and then blew them up. They would then try to seize the resulting crater, either as a part of a trench raid or full offensive. The Germans blew up a mine under the Cheshire's trench and then seized the resulting crater. Cholmeley participated in the successful counter attack in which the crater was recaptured and the Germans driven off. Once again he was wounded, along with 12 other men.

## The Somme

Although it was not involved in the first day of the battle of the Somme, the 13<sup>th</sup> Cheshires suffered heavy casualties in the fighting for such well known villages as La Boisselle, Beaumont Hamel and Thiepval. It was involved in an attack on Ovillers, on 7<sup>th</sup> July, when it suffered heavy casualties – 18 Officers and 243 other ranks. It is likely that Cholmeley missed

this attack as he was recovering from his wounds. He may not have been involved in any of the fighting on the Somme.

## Ypres

In November 1916 the battalion moved to the Ypres Salient and Cholmeley, having recovered from his wounds, was mentioned in the war diary on 3<sup>rd</sup> December for his part in leading a trench raid. The following year the battalion was involved in the attack on Messines Ridge. This was a well planned attack, following the detonation of many mines under the German trenches. The ridge was captured but the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion again suffered heavy casualties - 31 officers and men killed and 136 wounded.

The battalion continued to fight in the Salient in the many battles called Third Ypres. It was involved in a five day battle for Bellewarde Ridge and Westhoek Ridge in August 1917, suffering a total of 372 casualties. Cholmeley was awarded the Military Cross in September 1917 whilst serving at Ploegsteert Wood, near Ypres. The citation said "For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty as Brigade Intelligence Officer. He spent five weeks in the front line previous to our attack, studying the enemy's system and acquiring information, which afterwards proved most useful. His keenness in volunteering for every raid or patrol and his fearlessness and untiring energy in collecting information for his brigade have earned the unanimous appreciation and admiration of all commanding officers in his brigade." He was promoted to temporary Captain on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1917.



**Ploegsteert Wood where Cholmeley won his M.C.**

## Returning Home

In February 1918 the British army was suffering a shortage of manpower. To address this a number of divisions were reorganised with some battalions being disbanded, with officers and men being transferred to others.

The 13th Cheshires were one of the battalions disbanded and many officers and soldiers, including Cholmeley, were transferred to the 11<sup>th</sup> Btn. This battalion was disbanded before the end of the war. He was given a six month tour of duty back in Britain on 14<sup>th</sup> February, thus missing the German Spring Offensive and the subsequent battles which led to the final Allied victory. Perhaps the army were taking notice of his age. He was 46. He was transferred to the General List on 21st January 1919.

## Russia

Even though the war was over Cholmeley was determined to serve his country further. British forces were still fighting in many parts of the world despite the Armistice with Germany. British forces were sent to different parts of Russia supporting the White Russian forces fighting the Bolsheviks (the Reds). The Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War was very complex and resulted in over six hundred British deaths. Early in his life he had learnt some Russian, so Cholmeley clearly had an interest in the country. The Bolsheviks were famously anti-religious. Perhaps Cholmeley's religious beliefs led him to once again volunteer. He served in Northern Russia. Little is known about his service there. It is likely that he served in a composite battalion made up of soldiers from other regiments as no battalions of the Cheshires served in Northern Russia.



Map showing the area in Russia occupied by Allied troops in 1919. Archangel is the northern area shown in green

## His Death

He died on August 16<sup>th</sup> 1919. He was washed overboard serving on a White Russian ship (SS Azod) on Lake Onega. He was trying to secure some machine guns, kept on deck, during a violent storm. His body was never recovered. His widow, Lillian, died in Bath on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1942 aged 74. He left almost £250 in accrued pay and over £1000 still in Australia.

**CHOLMELEY** Lillian Mary of Emberton House 36 Bathwick-street Bath widow died 21 March 1942 Probate Bristol 5 May to Katharine Isabella Cholmeley spinster. Effects £2525 3s. 10d.

Lake Onega in northern Russia



There was a Royal Naval Board of Enquiry into his death. A number of the British soldiers and sailors serving on the Azod made statements. They were unanimous in their praise of Cholmeley. Their view is best summed up by the statement of his commanding officer Brig. Gen. G.D. Price, Commanding 237 Brigade, who said "Captain Cholmeley's death is greatly to be deplored. His zeal and energy were an example to all ranks. In him the service has lost a



most capable and gallant officer." His obituary, in the Scotch Collegian, said that "his keenness in Cadet affairs, particularly in the School Signalling Corps, will be still fresh in the memories of boys of his time" and "inside a frail body he had the heart of a great man and fear was unknown to him".

He was entitled to the 1914-15 Star, the Victory Medal and the British War Medal as well as his M.C. and it is possible that his family received these in 1923.

## Memorials and the Moseley Connection

Cholmeley's name appears on the memorial at St. Anne's church. His connection with Birmingham and Moseley is somewhat tenuous. In fact it took a lot of research to find it. His brother, Robert Arthur Cholmeley a schoolteacher, lived at 47 Strensham Road in the 1920's. It is likely, therefore, that he worshipped at St. Anne's and asked for his brother to be named on the memorial when it was being planned. It may be that Roger Cholmeley never actually visited Birmingham!

As well as the St. Anne's memorial (below, bottom left), Cholmeley's name appears on the CWGC Memorial in Archangel in Russia (top left), the Queensland University memorial (top right), the St. Giles Church, Oxford memorial (bottom left) and others.





His name also appears on the Cholmeley family memorial in St Andrew and St Mary's Church in Stoke Rochford. Seven members of the family died in the war. The inscription on it reads: "To the Glory of God and in memory of those His Servants members of the Cholmeley family whose bodies now rest in peace on the battlefields of France and Flanders; **Sir Montague Aubrey Rowley Cholmeley** Bart, Capt. Grenadier Guards, 28, Festubert 24th December 1914, **Hugh Ralph Cholmeley**, 2nd Lt. Royal Field Artillery, 24, Ypres 14th June 1915, **Hugh Valentine Cholmeley**, 2nd Lt. Grenadier Guards, 28, Ypres 7th April 1916, **Harry Lewin Cholmeley**, Lt. The Border Regt, 23, Beaumont Hamel, 1st July 1916, **Eric Randolph Cholmeley**, Lt. The Prince of Wales' Own West Yorkshire Regt, 21, La Boiselle 1st July 1916, **Humphrey Jasper Cholmeley**, Pte, The Queens Royal West Surrey Regt, 18, High Wood 15th July 1916, **Roger James Cholmeley** M.C., Capt. The Cheshire Regiment, 47, The Murmansk Front, 19th August 1919".

Written and researched by Ian Binnie

(with grateful acknowledgement to Geoff Crump at the Cheshire Military museum)



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