

Private William Clement Ward

"I died in hell (They called it Passchendaele)" by Siegfried Sassoon

The Ward family were originally from Preston on the Weald Moors near Telford, Shropshire. William Clement Ward's paternal grandparents were William (born 1833) and Mary Ward (née Smith). They were married in Church Eaton, Staffordshire in 1854. At the time of their marriage, William was an agricultural labourer and Mary a domestic servant in High Onn near Church Eaton. William went on to become a groom and coachman. The couple's first child was William George born around 1854, followed by twins, Mary Elizabeth and Clement John in 1856. Their last child, Alfred Henry, was born two years later in 1858.

William and Mary died tragically young, he from peritonitis and typhus in 1869 and she from smallpox two years later in 1871 while resident in Wolverhampton. William, Mary, Clement and Alfred, were aged seventeen, fifteen and thirteen years old respectively when they were orphaned. The 1881 census recorded the children in various locations as being 'in service'.ⁱ

The eldest son, William George Ward became an 'indoor domestic servant' at Fradswell Hall in Staffordshire. In 1881, the hall was owned by Joseph Dimmock, Esquire, gentleman and widower. He lived there with his two unmarried sisters. One of the other six domestic staff was Emily Blisset, the upper house maid whom William married that same year on 20th July at St Mary's Church, Kempsey, Worcestershire.ⁱⁱ

FRADSWELL HALL.

TO BE LET, with immediate possession, and for a term or from year to year, as may be agreed on, **FRADSWELL HALL**, with the stables, coach-houses, cow-house, yards, gardens, pleasure grounds, cottages, and land, late the residence of John Smith, Esquire, deceased. The house contains on the ground floor dining, drawing, and breakfast rooms and library, with the usual domestic offices, and the bedroom accommodation is ample for a large family. The premises (inclusive of site of buildings) contain about twenty-five acres, and are well adapted for the residence of a country gentleman. Fradswell Hall is 3½ miles from the Weston Station and four from the Leigh Station of the North Staffordshire Railway, 6 miles from Stone, and 7½ from Stafford.—To view, apply at the Hall; and for further particulars to Mr. ROBERT CLEMISON, Estate Agent, Endon Bank, near Stoke-upon-Trent.

Figure 1: 1865 description of Fradswell Hall



Figure 2: The early 19th century walled kitchen gardens at Fradswell Hall

After their marriage, the couple moved to Banbury, Oxfordshire, where William had taken up the position of butler. William and Emily's first two children, Agnes Mary and Fanny Cecilia were baptised in the Parish of Banbury on 4th November 1882 and 28th September 1884 respectively.ⁱⁱⁱ By early 1886 the family had returned to Kempsey where a third child William Clement Ward was born and later baptised at St Mary's church on 12th May.^{iv} Around this time William had become a Police Constable in Birmingham, probably in 1886 as he was retired in 1911 after serving for 25 years. Their fourth child, Alfred George was born in Aston, Birmingham in early 1888 but baptised in Kempsey on 29th June.^v

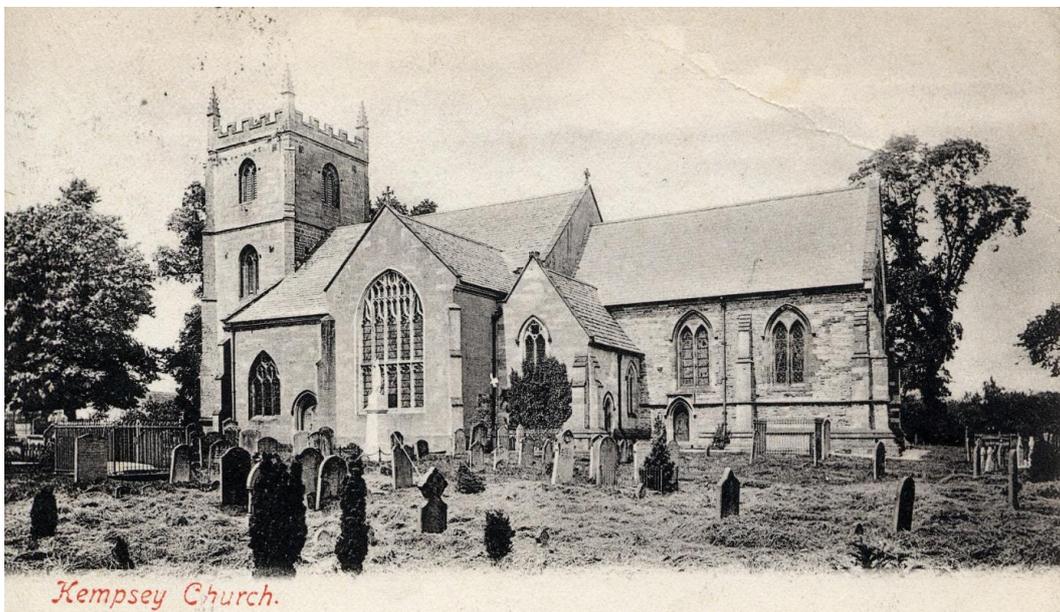


Figure 3: St Mary's Church, Kempsey Church c1904

In 1891, William and Emily were recorded as living at Court 1, Erasmus Road, off the Stratford Road, Sparkbrook, although their four children were staying with Emily's mother and two sisters at Napleton, Kemsley.

Ten years later in the next census. the family was residing at 399 Bolton Road, Small Heath. Agnes and Fanny were training to be teachers, their eldest brother, William, was an apprentice ironmonger and Alfred a scholar.

In 1908 William Clement Ward married Elizabeth, daughter of Henry Gough a silversmith, on Boxing Day, at Christ Church in Sparkbrook.^{vi} The 1911 census gives their address as 23 Dearman Road, Sparkbrook Birmingham. On 28th September 1913, a son, William Reginald was born. The marriage was not a happy one and the couple went through a Judicial Separation which resulted in Elizabeth and her son being awarded an allowance of 12s 6d a week, about £50 in today's money.^{vii}

Figure 4: Military Service Act Poster, 2nd March 1916

When war was declared on 4th August 1914, William quite understandably, with a family to support, did not enlist in a campaign that was 'going to be over by Christmas'. However, by 1916 the need to make up numbers after the appalling losses suffered in the early months of the war changed everything. The Military Service Act of 2nd March 1916, required men from 18 to 41 years old to be called up for service in the army unless they were married or excepted. Four months later, a second Act was passed that extended liability for military service to married men. As a result William was called up on 4th July, medically examined and passed as 'fit'. At the time of his enrolment he was 30 years old, 5' 5½" tall, weighed 112 lbs and described as 'slight'. William was living with his parents at 121 Victoria Parade, Moseley, while his wife and son resided at 17 St Johns Road, Sparkhill, Birmingham.^{viii}

Three days later, on 7th July, Private William Clement Ward, No 4981, was posted to the 2/7 Durham Light Infantry. After basic training, William's Battalion was sent to Andover on 29th November 1916 and then Colchester from 3rd March 1917 to prepare them for the realities of trench warfare. He was then posted to the 35th Infantry Base Depot, a holding camp in Étapes, France and on 21st June 1917 he embarked from Folkestone for Boulogne.^{ix}

Three weeks later, on 11th July 1917, William was transferred to the 9th Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment and allotted a new Regimental Number 204315. William joined his battalion in the field at Fromental. He was attached to the 13th Platoon, D Coy. His arrival is noted in the Regimental War diary for the 9th Battalion which notes on 12th July that:

A draft of 46 OR's joined the battalion from the base.^x

The diary for 19th July makes reference to a new deadly gas concoction being used by the Germans:

The CO took each company in gas helmet drill for practise against the new composition lately used by the German shells. This consisted mainly of mustard gas which deadens the sense of smell in the nose, and so hinders the perception of the gas.^{xi}

The Battalion's training was in preparation for an Allied assault that was to be launched on 31st July 1917, now known as Passchendaele (3rd Battle of Ypres). General Haig, following a warning that the German blockade would soon cripple the British war effort wanted to reach the Belgian coast to destroy the German submarine bases. There was also the possibility of a Russian withdrawal from the war that threatened redeployment of German soldiers from the Eastern Front.

The first stage in the British plan was a preparatory attack on the German positions south of Ypres at Messines Ridge. The Germans on the ridge had observation over Ypres and unless it was captured, observed enfilade artillery-fire could be fired against a British attack from the salient further north

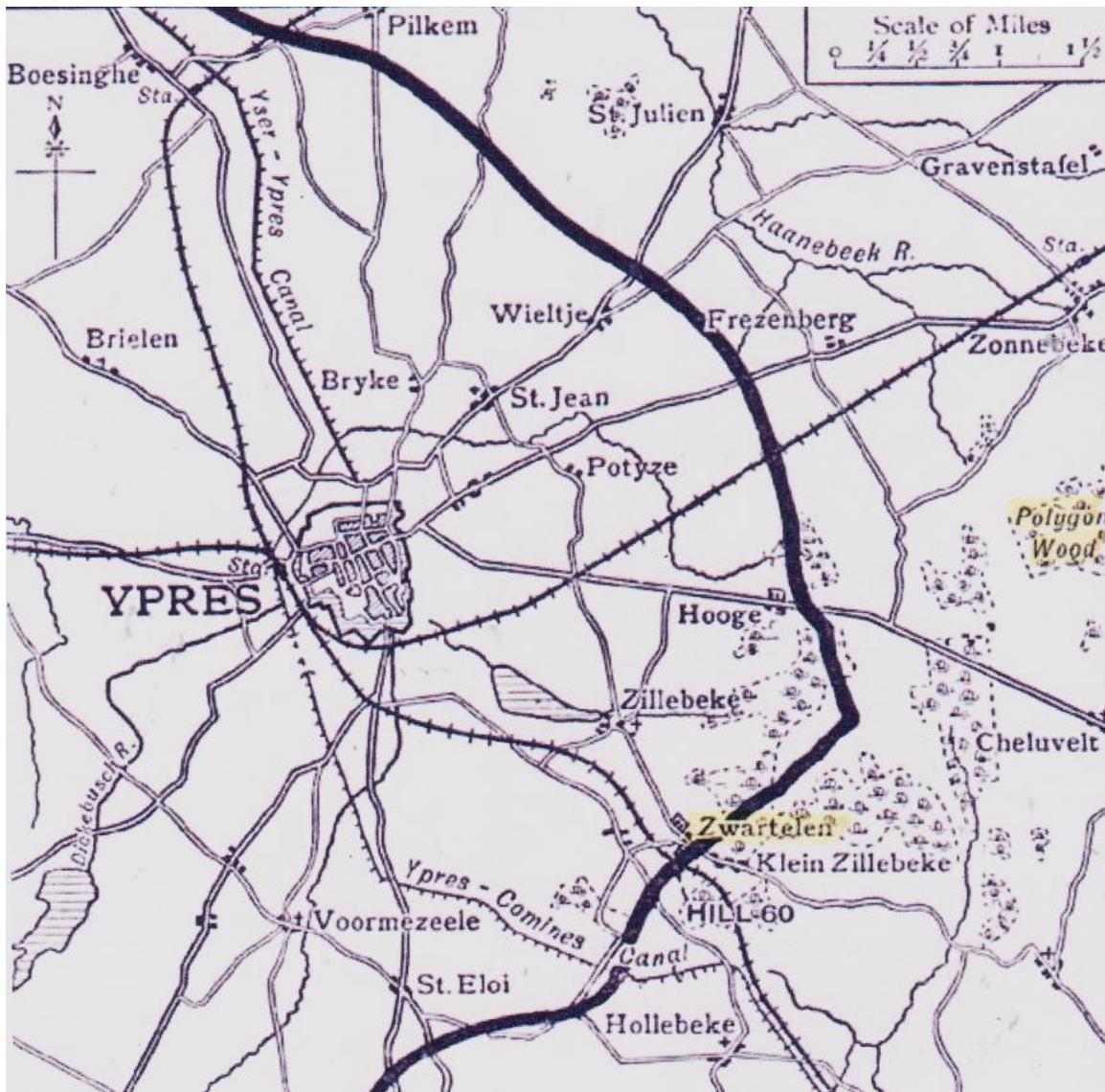


Figure 5: Map showing the British Front Line on the Ypres Salient on 31st July 1917 and the position of Zwaartelen and Polygon Wood

The 9th East Surrey Regiment formed part of the 71st Brigade of the 24th Division. Just before the battle, the Battalion marched to Micmac camp on 21st July, where D Coy took over the reserve line near the old German front line near the village of Zwaartelen. The following day D Coy moved up to the front line. Enemy shelling was 'consistent and sharp all day from the direction of Polygon Wood'. The Battalion was relieved on the night of 24/24th July having sustained 19 casualties over three days.^{xii}

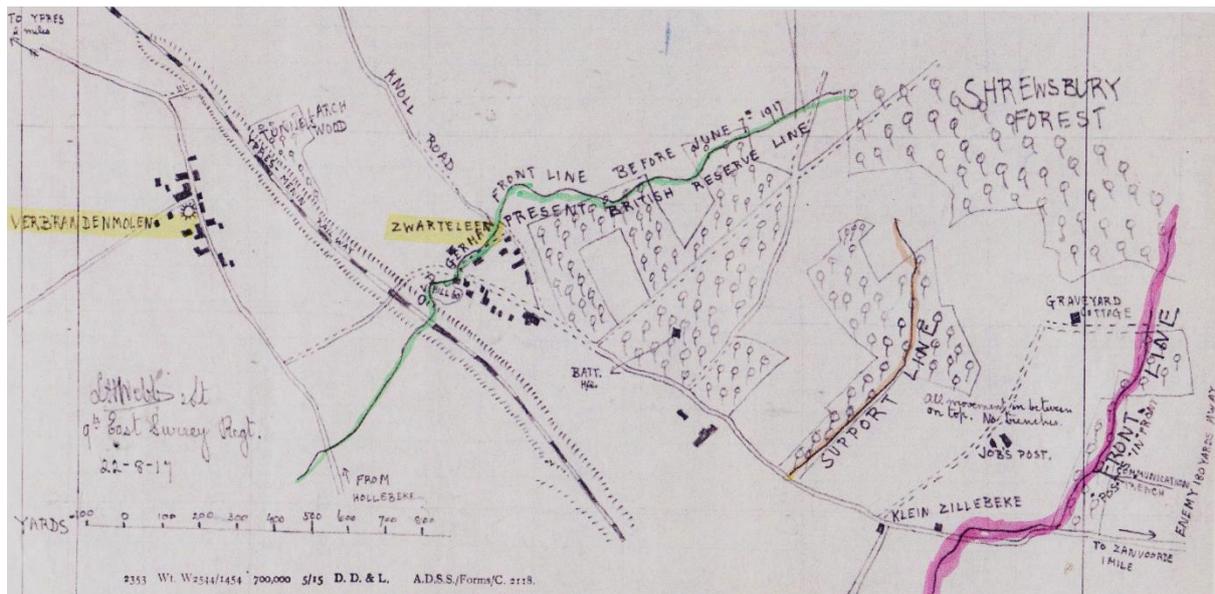


Figure 6: Position of the East Surrey Regiment at the start of the 3rd Battle of Ypres. Highlighted in yellow are Verbranden Molen and Zwarteleen

After a week of rest and further training at their billets at Dickebusch Camp, the Battalion returned to the front line on 2nd August to relieve one of the Brigade units worn out by the advance on 31st July. The war diary records that:

All Companies rested till 5 pm. D Coy moved through Verbranden Molen, across the Ypres-Menin railway, through the ruins of Zwarteleen and took over the front line on the north. It must be realised that the weather conditions were very bad just now. Heavy rain had been falling for three days, no communication trench could be used – for they were more than waist deep in water and liquid mud. Consequently all movement had to take place overland and the dark night and the obstacles in the way made progress slow. The Battalion remained in the front line for five days.^{xiii}

William was posted as 'wounded' in the war diary for 2nd August but as 'wounded and missing' in later official papers. He was not officially posted as 'killed in action' by the War Office until 21st December 1917.^{xiv}



THE MENIN GATE. YPRES.
UNVEILED AND DEDICATED BY FIELD-MARSHAL LORD PLUMER GCB GCMG GCVO GBE
JULY 24TH 1927

William's body was never found and his name appears on the Menin Gate memorial for the missing along with 54,000 others. Over the month of August the 9th East Surrey Regiment sustained over 190 casualties.

Figure 7: Menin Gate, Ypres

Although William's estranged wife had seen a notice on 26th August reporting William missing, the news came out of the blue for his mother. On 26th September she wrote a desperate letter requesting information about her son.

To the Officer in charge of Records

Can you give me any information about my son. He was reported by the War Office as wounded on 2nd August 1917 and his wife was notified. Of this we knew nothing. It was only last week that indirectly we heard this distressing news, consequently much valuable time has been lost... His last letter to us was dated 28th July....the War Office have reported 'no later intelligence'. Wounded and missing 2nd August. Missing is so vague. Can you give any information about the nature of his wounds, whether by shell or otherwise? Is it probable that he may have been taken prisoner. If known to be wounded would he not be taken up by the Red Cross? If able, he would certainly have written to this address, his home...

His estranged wife, Elizabeth, also wrote a letter on 17th October. She is also asking for information of her husband saying she had heard nothing since she saw a notice dated 26th August reporting that he was wounded. She goes on to say:

Now I have just been told that his people have secured the news that he was killed on the 2nd August and would be glad if you could kindly tell me this is true. I am sorry to say we were a separated couple, chiefly through his people, but if there were any of his belongings found I should like to have them for our son. I am hoping that he may have left a letter for me.

Elizabeth was granted a pension for herself and one child of 18s 9d per week (about £75 in today's money) from 1st April 1918. She applied for a commemorative plaque and scroll but it was William's mother who sent away for and received his British War and Victory Medals.^{xv}

In the 1939 Register, Elizabeth is recorded as a shop keeper (bread and confectionery) with her son William, a motor driver (private hire) and living at 17 St Johns Road, Sparkhill. Living with her was her widowed mother, aged 84. They were assisted by a domestic servant, also a widow called Annie Warman.



William is also commemorated on the WW1 memorial at St Mary's Church, Moseley (picture left) as well as the Hall of Memory in Birmingham city centre.

Written and researched by Edwina Rees
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Endnotes

- i Information provided by Kathryn Ward, great-great niece to William Ward (1833-1869)
- ii England Marriages 1538-1973
- iii Oxfordshire, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1915 for Agnes Mary Ward and Fanny Cecilia
- iv England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915
England & Wales, Christening Index, 1530-1980
- v England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index 1837-1915 England & Wales, Select Births and Christenings, 1538 1975 for 29th June 1888
- vi Birmingham, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1937
- vii Service Records
- viii See vii
- ix See vii
- x National Archives, War Diary 9th East Surrey Regiment, Ref WO 95/2215/1, p 211
- xi See x, p 213
- xii See x, p 213-215
- xiii See x, p 226-227
- xiv Service Records
- xv Service Records

Illustrations

- Figure 1 *The Staffordshire Advertiser*, 8th March 1865
- Figure 2 Staffordshire Past Track, Fradswell Hall 1998, Staffordshire Record Office
- Figure 3 St Peter's Church, Kempsey Church
<https://www.worcesteranddudleyhistoricchurches.org.uk/index.php?page=kempsey>
- Figure 4 Military Service Act Poster
<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/28449>

Figure 5 Passchendaele Map

<http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~dccfarr/3rd%20Ypres.htm>

Figure 6 National Archives, War Diary 9th East Surrey Regiment, Ref WO 95/2215/1, p 241

Figure 7 Menin Gate, Ypres

http://www.menenpoorthuis.be/meningate-house-ypres_history.asp?taal=uk