

Private Leslie Edwin Smith

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 offensive at Arras, due in the spring of 1917, continued, the British attempted to keep German attention on the Somme. In February 1917 the 7th Royal West Kent Regiment found themselves back in the trenches they had attacked the previous November near Grandcourt and the river Ancre.

Leslie's grandfather, Henry Alexander Smith, was a British subject born in Cape Town around 1840. Sometime between 1866 and 1868, Henry, his wife Ann (originally from Mansfield, Nottingham), and their infant daughter Susannah returned to England where they set up home at 9 Bennett Street, Chiswick, Middlesex. By 1881 the family had moved to 18 Clarence Villas, Chiswick. Henry is described in the census as a 'coach builder and painter'. The couple had eight children over seventeen years, including twins. Their eldest son Henry William, was a brass moulder.

In the 1891 census, Henry (junior) was in Birmingham where he lodged with the John and Harriett Randle and their family at 14 Willows Road, Moseley. In the summer of 1893 Henry married their eldest daughter, Harriett, a needle case worker.

Henry (Harry) joined forces with his brother-in-law, Edwin Randle (Ted), to form the company Randle and Smith which was situated in Rea Street Birmingham.

The firm made moulds for chocolate making firms and both the firm and the directors prospered greatly.¹



Figure 1: Chocolate moulds manufactured by Randle and Smith

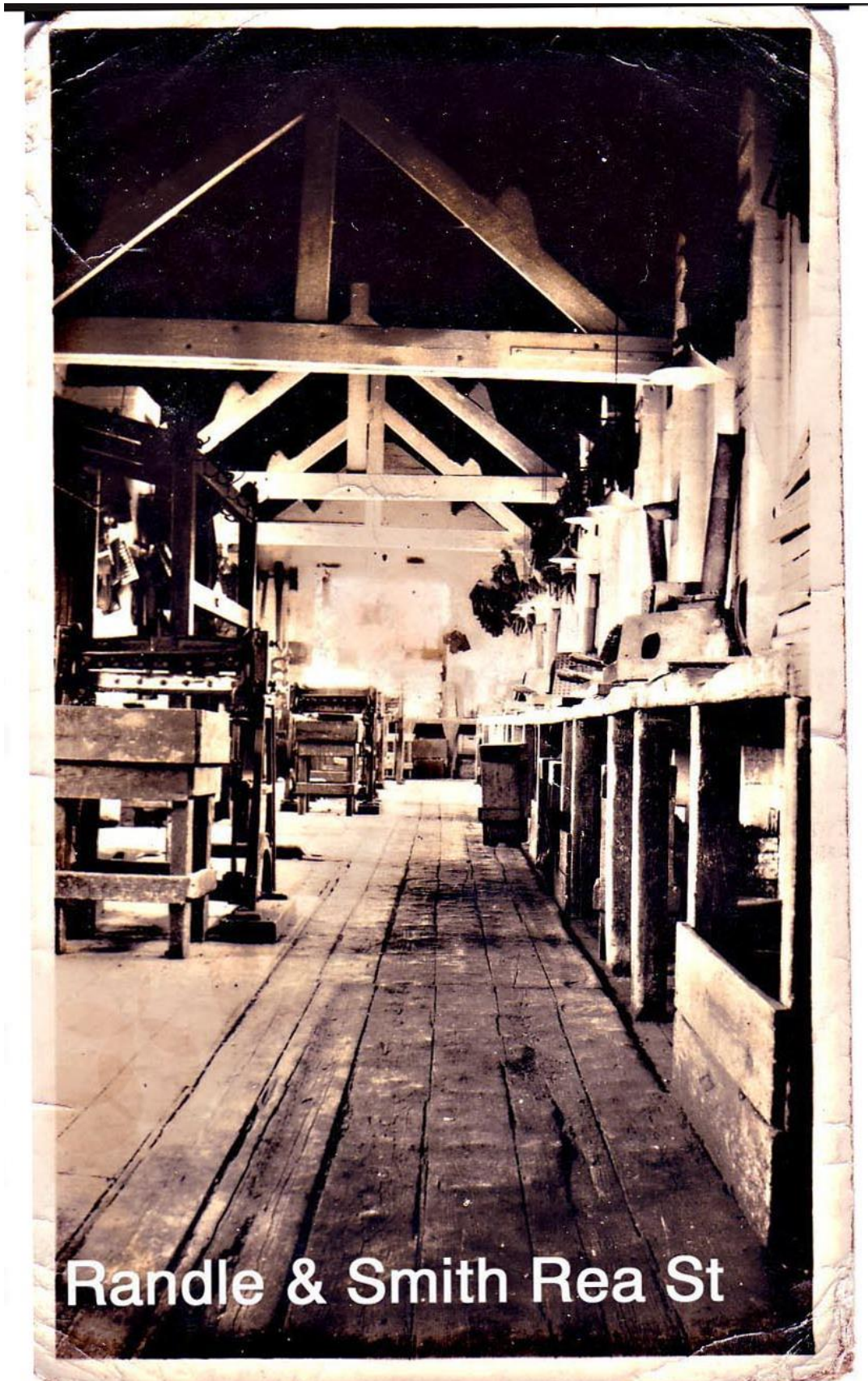


Figure 2: Randle and Smith workshop in Rea Street

By 1901, Harriet and Harry had two children, Leslie Edwin born on 27th March, 1897ⁱⁱ and Harold Henry William born in the latter part of 1900. They lived at 6 Hallam Street, Balsall Heath Birmingham. A daughter, Dora, was born in 1907.



Leslie started his early education at Tindall Street Council Elementary School.

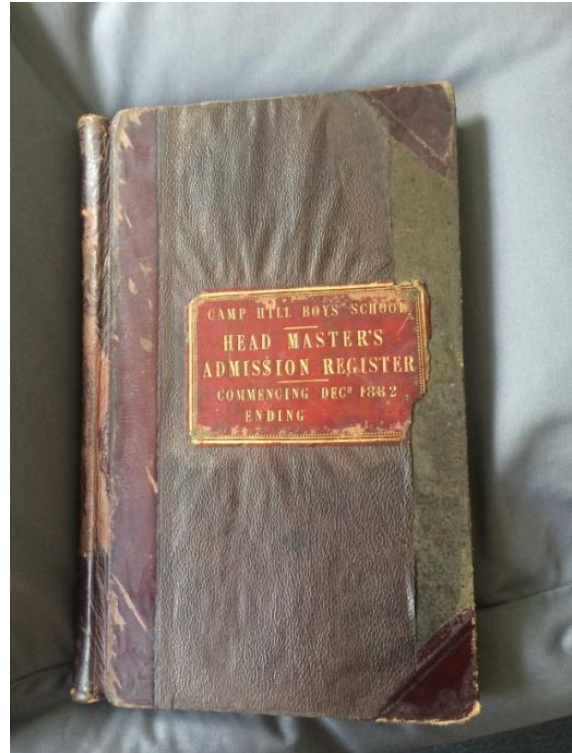
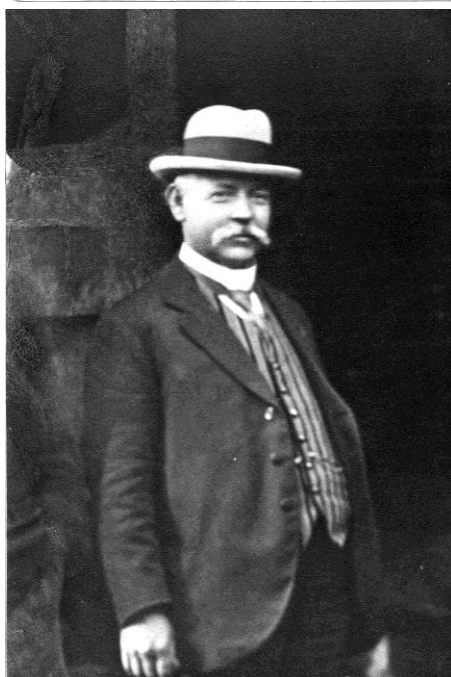


Figure 3

Top left: Harriett and Harry with Leslie

Above right. Camp Hill Boys School Admission Register

Left: Edwin (Ted) Randle



On 13th September 1910, at the age of thirteen Leslie transferred to Camp Hill School for Boys, now the Bordesley Centre.ⁱⁱⁱ The family address recorded on Leslie's school records was 84 Cannon Hill Road, a terraced house in Balsall Heath Birmingham. Camp Hill School was

originally opened in 1883 at Camp Hill on the Stratford Road, Bordesley, Birmingham before moving to its present site in Vicarage Road, Kings Heath in 1956 because the original site proved to be too small for a growing school.^{iv}



Figure 4: A photograph of Camp Hill School Boys School taken in 1933 by William A Clarke, before its move to the present site in Kings Heath



Figure 5: Ted Randle with his wife Ada at Tenbury Road

By 1911, Ted Randle and Harry Smith had bought large houses to reflect their newly won status. Ted lived at 'Warren Gate', No 1, Tenbury Road, Moseley and Harry at 'Taunton House', 81 Reddings Road, Moseley, Birmingham. Harry and Harriett employed a general domestic servant, Emma Sadler.

On 18th March 1913, Leslie left school and continued his further education at the Civil Service College.^v



Figure 6

Above left: Harriet Smith, Leslie's mother

Above right: John Randle, peeling shallots in the back garden of 81 Reddings Road, Moseley



Left: Leslie's uncle John and his wife Charlotte on a visit to the family home in Reddings Road

When war was declared on 4th August 1914, Leslie was too young to enlist. The earliest date he could have enrolled in the Royal East Kent Regiment (the 'Buffs') as Private L E Smith, No 4177 was his eighteenth birthday in 1915, if regulations had been followed. When Leslie was called up for service with the colours, sometime after his nineteenth birthday in 1916, he was posted to the 7th Battalion of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment in France, and given a new Regimental Number G/24650.^{vi}



Figure 7: Private L E Smith

In 1916, the Royal West Kent Regiment was part of the 18th Division of the 5th Army and in action on the Somme in the Battle of Albert capturing their objectives near Montauban. The regiment also took part in the Battle of Bazentine Ridge, the Battle of Thiepval Ridge and the Battle of the Ancre Heights, where they played a part in the capture of the Schwarben Redoubt and Regina Trench^{vii}. The regiment's last action for 1916 was the Battle of Ancre.

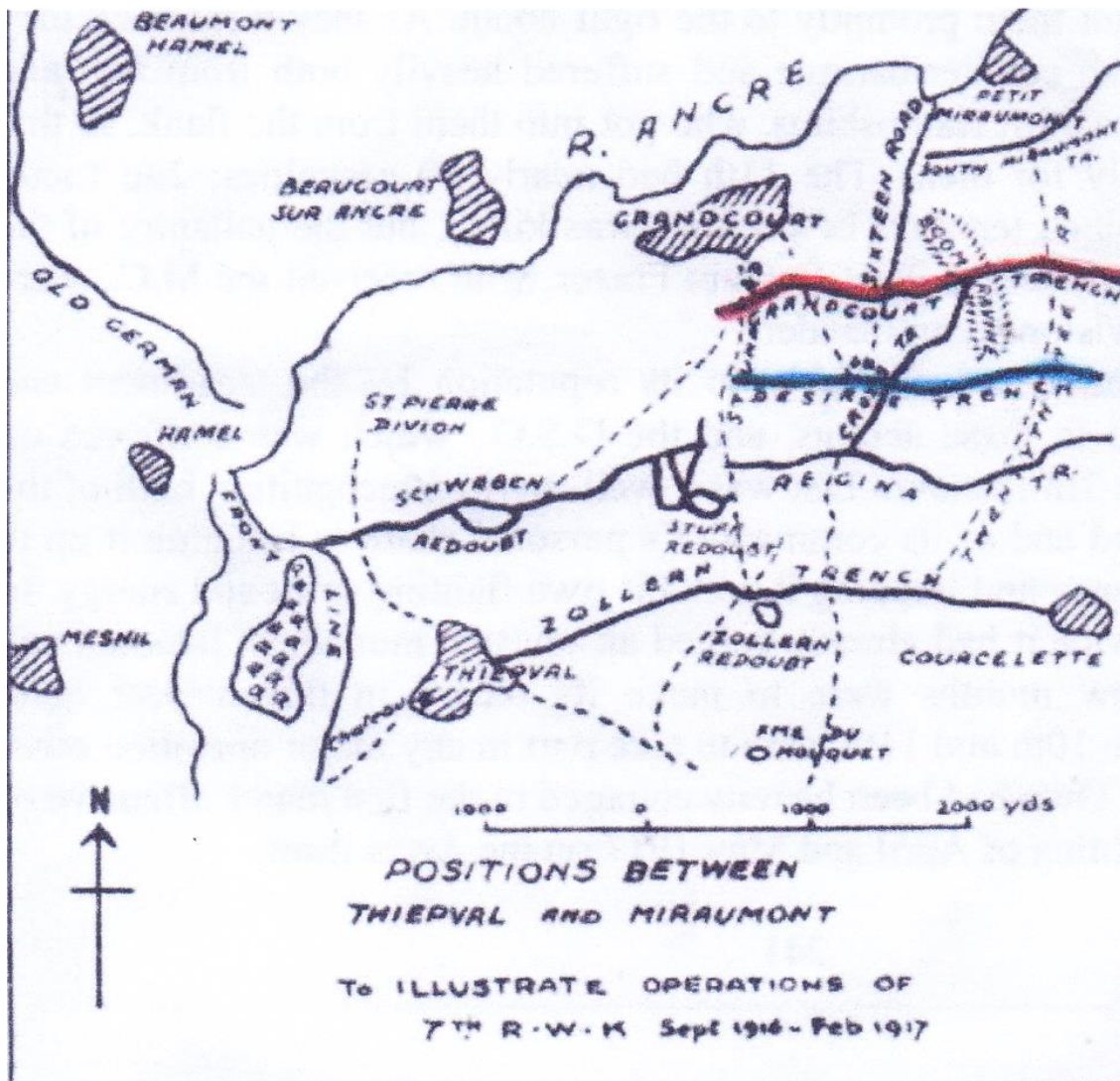


Figure 8: Map showing the operational positions of the Royal West Kent Regiment in early February 1917.

The 7th Battalion, Royal West Kent Regiment enjoyed two months of rest after the long spell of fighting and after arriving in the Abbeville neighbourhood at the end of November 1916 it did not return to the front line until the middle of February 1917.

When the Battalion returned to the front line, it found itself holding part of Desire Trench, but somewhat to the left of the line it had attacked on November 18th 1916. Part of Grandicourt Trench was in the hands of the British but the continuation of the trench eastwards was still in the German hands. An attack to capture it was launched in the early hours of 14th February 1917 in two waves. At first it seemed to go well but in the darkness, direction was lost and the attackers achieved only the left of their objective. The right platoon had run into uncut wire in front of the eastern German stronghold and the attack was held up and caused deplorable heavy casualties. Between 19th and 23rd February, when the battalion was next in the front line, they found the enemy beginning to retire from the salient, the preliminary to the general retreat three weeks later out of the salient from Ancre to Arras.

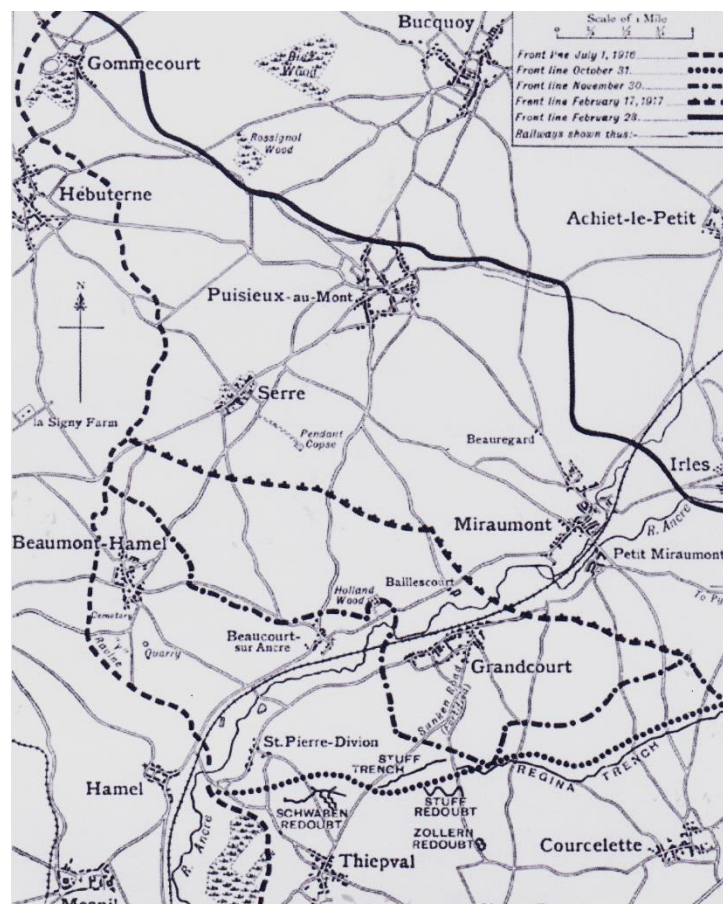


Figure 9: The dot-dash line shows the British front line on November 1916. The two lines above show the push through Grandicourt, Serre and Miraumont to the new front line (shown by a thick black line) by 28th February 1917

Leslie died of wounds on 20th February 1917. The war diary for the 7th Battalion Royal Kent Regiment for the 20th February 1917 simply states 'Battalion in front line'. There is no mention of casualties.^{viii} Leslie's death from wounds could have been from an unlucky sniper shot or a shell fragment from the German artillery on the day or possibly from injuries received in action in a major attack on 14th February. The Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension where Leslie is buried was the site of the Casualty Clearing Station at the time of his death. He was just 19 years old, just over a month off his twentieth birthday.



Figure 10
Top left: Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension

Above Left: Camp Hill Boys School Memorial

Above right: St Mary's Church, Moseley WW1 memorial

Left: Leslie's grave with his photograph left by his first cousin once removed, Martin Randle

**Researched and written by Edwina Rees
 Moseley Society History Group with thanks
 to Martin Randle**

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Endnotes

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- i Martin Randle, first cousin once removed to Leslie
 - ii Leslie's Army Record registers Derby as his place of birth. The England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837-1915 records this to be Kings Norton (Ref 1897, 2/4, 6c, 405). The 1901 and 1911 census both state Birmingham as his place of birth
 - iii *Birmingham Mail*, 7th March 1917
 - iv Bordesley Centre
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bordesley_Centre.jpg
 - v Alistair John Bulloch. Smith (LE) family tree on Ancestry
 - vi Soldiers who died in the Great War
<http://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=gbm%2fwwisd%2f0346155>
Leslie's Army Medal index card shows he was only eligible for the British War Medal and the Victory Medal so his service was with Kitchener's New Army in 1916
 - vii The War Time Memory Project: : 7th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment
<http://www.wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar/allied/battalion.php?=7432>
 - viii Atkinson, C D. 2003 *The Queens Own Royal West Kent Regiment 1914-1919*, Naval and Military Press Ltd, East Sussex, pp 233-234
National Archives. War diaries of the 7th Royal West Kent Regiment. Ref W095/2049/2

Illustrations

Figure 1 Randle and Smith chocolate moulds on ebay

Figure 2 Randle and Smith workshop, Rea Street. Contributed by Martin Randle

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- Figure 3 Camp Hill School Register, see iv.
Photograph of Ted and Harriett, Harry and Leslie from the archive of Martin Randle
- Figure 4 William A Clark's 1933 photograph of Camp Hill School.
<http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/gallerybordesley>
- Figure 5 Ted and Ada Randle from the archive of Martin Randle
- Figure 6 Randle family photographs from Martin Randle and Ancestry public members site, Ref John Randle34
- Figure 7 Photograph of Private L E Smith from the archives of Martin Randle
- Figure 8 Map of 7th West Kent Regiment, September 1916 to February 1917, see viii, p 242
- Figure 9 The Long, Long Trail. campaign and battle maps
- Figure 10 Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension
<http://cpgw.org.uk>
Camp Hill School memorial from the records of Ruth Livermore
Leslie's grave at Derancourt from the archives of Martin Randle