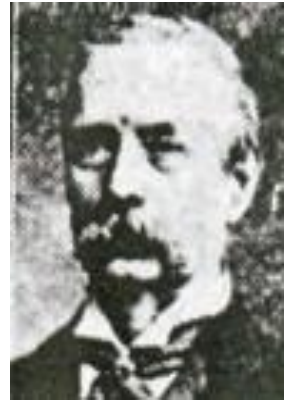


# Captain Edmund William Beech

## Birmingham's First WW1 Casualty

Edmund William Beech was born in 1875, the eldest of seven children. At the time of the 1881 census, the family were living in 'Llanberis Villa' on the Alcester Road, King's Norton (now Moseley). His father George was an accountant and stock broker by profession but also a prominent Freemason, a Justice of the Peace and a long time secretary of the Birmingham Dog Show. In 1859, Tennyson wrote a poem called 'Riflemen Form' which voiced a national enthusiasm for the formation of a local Volunteer movement. In that same year George Beech answered the call and enrolled himself in the Birmingham Rifle Corps at the Town Hall. Eight years later he was appointed commander, with the rank of Captain<sup>i</sup>. Edmund's mother, Florence, was the daughter of Charles Dollman, a wine and spirits merchant<sup>ii</sup>.



George Beech JP

Edmund attended King Edward's School, New Street, from 1887 to 1879<sup>iii</sup>. He was also sent to France and Germany to be educated. Like his father, Edmund became a chartered accountant<sup>iv</sup>. From the many insolvency notices published in the *London Gazette* from 1900, it appears that he specialized in the liquidation of companies from his office in Temple Street, Birmingham.

In the summer of 1899, Edmund married Mabel Powell<sup>v</sup> and by 1901 they were living at 'Dunleary', Melville Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham with their newly born son George, a general nurse and a domestic servant<sup>vi</sup>. As a dog lover, and with a reputation of being one of the best judges of dogs in the country, Edmund took over the secretaryship of the Birmingham Dog Show on the retirement of his father from this post in 1901. In 1911, Edmund stood as the Conservative candidate for the St Bartholomew Ward in the local municipal election, but was unsuccessful and from then on devoted his leisure time to his military duties<sup>vii</sup>. At this period the family were living in Peterbrook Road, Solihull Lodge, Shirley, Warwickshire<sup>viii</sup>.



The Drill Hall, Smethwick



The Sergeant Instructor's House, Smethwick

Edmund's military duties were with the 1<sup>st</sup> Volunteer Battalion of the South Staffordshire Regiment<sup>ix</sup>. The *London Gazette* for 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1907 confirms his appointment to the rank of Second Lieutenant and just over a year later, on 31<sup>st</sup> July, 1908, to Lieutenant.

On its formation in 1908, Lieutenant Edmund Beech transferred to the 1<sup>st</sup> North Midland Field Company, Royal Engineers<sup>x</sup>. Its head quarters were at the Drill Hall, Smethwick (now the Harry

Mitchell Leisure Centre) in Nineveh Road, on the border with Handsworth. The Sergeant Instructor's House stood separately in the grounds<sup>xi</sup>. Edmund was promoted to Captain from 1<sup>st</sup> June 1912<sup>xii</sup>.



Captain Edmund William Beech. This photograph has been kindly provided by Bardess Di (Ref xviii)

After the declaration of war on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, Edmund was called up for duty. A week later, on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> August 1914, he was engaged in the collection of horses and vehicles for service with the army. In a field adjoining Smethwick Drill Hall, Edmund had been inspecting some horses and wagons suitable for the war effort when he noticed a restive horse attached to a baggage wagon. If it had bolted it would have caused injury to the men standing nearby. As Edmund was thoroughly accustomed to horses, he attempted to restrain it. He was dragged some distance, before his spur unluckily caught in the bar of another wagon, causing him to fall. The wheels of the wagon to which the runaway horse was attached passed over him and Edmund sustained serious injuries to the head and body. He was taken to the Central Hospital in Birmingham where his brother George saw him before he became unconscious. He died there, several hours later, at about half-past-four in the afternoon<sup>xiii</sup>. At the Coroner's inquest, held at the Victoria Law Courts in

Birmingham, on 12<sup>th</sup> August, medical testimony was given to the jury that the base of Edmund's skull had been fractured. A verdict of 'Accidental death' was returned and sympathy was expressed with the family<sup>xiv</sup>. Edmund left a wife and three children<sup>xv</sup>. The family were living at the White House in Tanworth-in-Arden at the time of his death<sup>xvi</sup>.



Captain Edmund Beech is recorded as Birmingham's first WW1 casualty, and is buried at Brandwood End Cemetery, King's Heath, Birmingham.

(The 1<sup>st</sup> (North Midland) Field Company embarked at Southampton for Le Havre, on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1915 as part of the 28<sup>th</sup> Division of the British Expeditionary Force. It was the first complete Territorial Division to take part in a theatre of war. The first few months were spent in the Ypres salient)<sup>xvii</sup>

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## Endnotes

- i Birmingham Gazette, Monday, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1916
- ii Birmingham Daily Mail, Monday 19<sup>th</sup> June 1916
- iii Service Record of King Edwards School (1914-1919)
- iv Birmingham Daily Post, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1914
- v England & Wales marriages 1837-2008: 1899, Kings Norton, third quarter, volume 6c, page 818
- vi 1901 census
- vii See iv
- viii 1911 census
- ix The London Gazette: July 2, 1907, 4525
- x The London Gazette: July 31, 1908, 5639
- xi Smethwick. 1<sup>st</sup> North Field Company, Royal Engineers  
<http://www.drillhalls.org/CountyImages/Staffordshire/Staffordshire%20details.txt>  
<http://www.drillhalls.org/Counties/Staffordshire/TownSmethwick.htm>
- xii The London Gazette, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1912, 7688
- xiii Birmingham Daily Mail, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1914
- xiv Birmingham Gazette, Thursday, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1914
- xv Birmingham Daily Post, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1914
- xvi 1911 census
- xvii The Long, Long Trail. The British Army of 1914-1918: The 46th (North Midland) Division in 1914-1918  
<http://www.1914-1918.net/46div.htm>
- xviii Birmingham Facebook. 12.3.15: Birmingham 1914 - 1919 shared The British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front 1914-1918's photo.  
[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=417960601719036&id=338437793004651](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=417960601719036&id=338437793004651)