

PRIVATE ROBERT FREDERIC BLISS

Robert Frederic Bliss died 100 years ago this month on 24th April 1915. He is commemorated on the War Memorial and the Roll of Honour in St Mary's Church.



Robert was born into a family of shopkeepers and before the war would have been familiar to many Moseley folk as the young man at the greengrocers on Victoria Parade, where Subway and the Village Carpet Store are today.

Robert's father and grandfather were both from Birmingham. The 1881 census lists his grandfather Robert Bliss, fruiterer of Worcester Street, living with wife Selina and 9 children. Robert Enoch Bliss, their eldest son was an 18 year old commercial traveller lodging in the comparative peace of Greenhill Rd, Moseley. In 1882 he married Alice Augusta Cove 19, a draper's assistant from Peckham and they lived near her recently widowed mother.

In 1883 Robert Enoch's father died at 88 Moseley Rd. He was only 45 and had fathered 12 children. He had just started a new business at 4 Colmore Row and left a sizeable estate of £3,602.

The young couple faced some tough decisions: Alice was pregnant with their first child Florence who was born in Peckham early in 1884. They moved to Birmingham to run the business at Colmore Row. A traumatic period ensued with the birth of two more girls and the death of one culminating in July 1887 with Robert Enoch declared bankrupt. He was 25 and Alice Augusta just 24, was pregnant again.

In October 1887 their only son Robert Frederic was born in West Ashford Kent. In 1890 a 5th child Gertrude Dorothy was born but tragically 5 year old Leah died. By the 1891 census the family had moved to 173 Hagley Rd in time for the baptism of Louisa Augusta.

In 1892 Robert Enoch was discharged from bankruptcy. The family returned to south London to make a fresh start at a fruit shop in Anerley Rd, Dulwich. Robert Frederic age 8 was admitted to school in London in 1896 and Alice gave birth to two more girls, but by the 1901 census they are back in Birmingham.

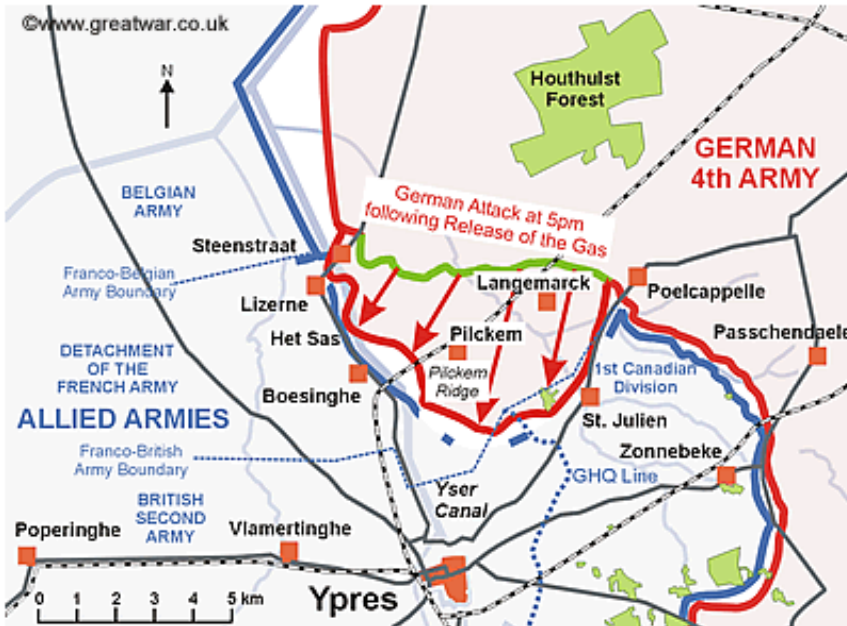
Robert Enoch was now planning their final move to the prestigious new shopping development at Victoria Parade Moseley. By 1903 he had taken possession of numbers 109 and 111 Alcester Rdⁱ; a double fronted fruiterers with generous accommodation above and rear views over the recently established Moseley Park & Pool. 16 year old Robert Frederick was learning the trade for the business he expected to inherit.

The 1911 Census shows that Robert senior was employing his wife, Robert and two daughters, Louise and Marjorie in the busy shop. The eldest



daughter Florence had married a fruiterer, Joseph Lovell; she was working in their shop in Islington Row along with her sister Dorothy. By 1912 Robert Frederic now 24 had flown the nest to live over the road at 5 Moseley Village.

Britain declared war on Germany on 4th August 1914 Three weeks later, Robert Frederic Bliss, salesman, enlisted in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry in London. He was 26, 5' 10" and 9st 9 lbs. After reporting to the Bodmin Depot he went to Aldershot for basic infantry training and was posted to the 2nd Battalion DCLI. Private Bliss, No. 10818 arrived in France on 1st April 1915 and joined his Battalion on the Western Front near Ypres in Belgium.



The Battle of Gravenstafel Ridge: 22nd April, 17.00 hours to midnight: Ref iii

the gap from 17.00 hours in some numbers, dusk, apprehension about the effect of the gas and lack of reserves prevented the Germans from exploiting the attack. The reserves of every British division in the Ypres Salient were ordered to move up towards the front line to drive the Germans out of the captured French and colonial trenches.ⁱⁱ

At 3pm on 23rd April a hastily assembled counter-attack force of eleven battalions including the 2nd DCLI was ordered to attack forty two German battalions. The attack caught the Germans by surprise. By 7pm the line had been re-established but casualties were high. The Battalion lost a total of 278 men killed or wounded whose sacrifice had snatched victory from defeat at one of the most critical moments of the war.ⁱⁱⁱ

Robert Frederic was one of those injured and died of his wounds the following day, 24th April 1915 and is buried at Poperinghe Old Military Cemetery in Belgium.^{iv}

Although a French spy had warned the Allies that the Germans were manufacturing poison gas, the 1899 Hague Declaration and the 1907 Hague Convention had declared that its use would constitute a war crime, and it was therefore thought highly unlikely that it would be deployed in the field. Germany justified its actions by stating that the Hague Convention did not cover the release of gases from cylinders. The Germans also stated that France had broken the Convention first, in August 1914, by using 26mm gas grenades.

On 22nd April the unprotected French troops holding the Gravenstafel Ridge near Ypres suffered the first use of poison gas. Simultaneously the Germans put down a heavy artillery barrage behind which their leading troops wearing protective gear, advanced. Within minutes, a four and a half mile stretch of the front line had opened up due to the death of over 6000 French and colonial troops, primarily from asphyxiation and subsequent tissue damage to the lungs as the denser than air gas quickly filled the trenches. Although the German troops started to enter



Poperinghe Old Cemetery, Belgium Ref iv

Another casualty of gas warfare was Clara, the wife of Fritz Haber, the pioneer who had developed the large-scale manufacture of chlorine for use as a weapon of war. On the night of 1st May 1915, soon after her husband's return to their home in Berlin, Clara, also a scientist, took his army pistol into their garden at Dahelm and shot herself. A family friend revealed that she had "despaired over the horrible consequences of gas warfare, for which she'd seen the preparations, along with the tests on animals." Within hours of the discovery of her body, Haber had boarded a train to the Eastern Front to superintend the deployment of poison gas against Russian troops. He did not attend his wife's funeral. In 1918 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry.^v

The original article on Robert Frederic Bliss was written by Stephanie Silk and appeared in the April edition 2015 of the Moseley B13 Magazine.

With thanks to B13 Research Platoon: Gillian Cattell, Ruth Livermore, Edwina Rees, Des Jennings and Rob Brown.

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Endnotes

ⁱ *Kelly's Directory* 1907

ⁱⁱⁱ Cornwall's Regimental Museum
__enquiries@cornwalls-regimentalmuseum.org

ⁱⁱⁱ The Great War 1914-1918. *Summary of the Battle of Gravenstafel Ridge: 22nd April, 5pm to midnight*
22 April 1915: 17.00 - 24.00
<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/battles/second-ypres-1915/gravenstafel-ridge/gravenstafel-summary.htm>

^{iv} Commonwealth War Graves Commission
<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx?cpage=1>

^v Preston, Diane. (2015). *A Higher Form of Killing: Six Weeks in WW1 That Forever Changed the Nature of War*. Bloomsbury Press. London. pp 70-107