

Private John Jennings Belsey

John Jennings Belsey was born in early 1881 to John, a 'solicitors managing clerk' and Mary Helen Belsey (nee Jennings).ⁱ The couple had married three years earlier in 1878.ⁱⁱ Their first child, Laura Priscilla, was born the previous year. The family address in 1881 was Ellesmere Cottage, Kings Norton.

Tragedy struck the family when in 1886 John died, leaving Mary a widow at 33 years old with two young children to bring up alone.ⁱⁱⁱ Fortunately Mary's sister Laura who had recently married John Headon Boocock^{iv}, an insurance district manager, took the family in.^v Over the next few years, Laura had six children, five of whom survived to adulthood.^{vi} The need for a larger family home is reflected in the family moving three times over the next twenty years. The last two homes were in Moseley, the first 'Brockenhurst' in Anderton Park Road and the second 81, Church Road.^{vii}



Figure 1: (above) J B Brooks, manufacturer of bicycle and motorcycle saddles c1914

Figure 2: (below) Brooks Ltd today at its premises in Smethwick. Ref See xiii



On leaving school, John was engaged as a 'clerk in a cycle works'.^{viii} By 1911 he has progressed to 'secretary to an Engineering Works' at Messrs Bagnall and Sons, Stafford. The company had extensive ironworks and collieries in South Staffordshire, producing iron known as IB Crown brand.^{ix} Although John had been well established in Stafford and had a large circle of friends there^x, he returned to Birmingham to work as an advertising manager for J B Brooks by 1914.^{xi} The company had premises in Great Charles Street, Birmingham and were manufacturers of cycle and motorcycle saddles, leather goods, motor car trunks and other accessories, employing 600 to 700 people.^{xii} It still produces world renowned cycle saddles at its factory in Smethwick.^{xiii}

Early in 1916, John relinquished his work as a manager^{xiv} to join the 26th Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment).^{xv} It was known as the 'Banker's Regiment' as it was raised from volunteers who were mainly bank clerks and accountants.^{xvi}

The regiment proceeded to France on the 4th of May 1916, concentrating between Hazebrouck and Bailleul before moving to the Somme. On arrival, they



Figure 3: Post card of Becordel 1914-1915

were billeted at Becordel (2 miles east of Albert) as part of the 124th Brigade, 41st Division.^{xvii} This was in preparation for action for the 'Battle of Flers-Courcelette' (15th-22nd September) and the 'Battle of the Transloy Ridge' on the Somme (7th-20th October). John was killed sometime between the 4th and 10th October.^{xviii} This places him in action in the battle for the Transloy Ridge.

The following, is an account, based on the regimental war diary, that describes the events from the 2nd to the 10th October.

Recovering from heavy losses in the Battle of Flers-Courcelette where there had been 103 casualties, the battalion had been in reserve since the 18th September, but with another battle looming, they were marched in very heavy rain and on very muddy roads to Pommiers Redoubt, near Montauban on 2nd October. The next day they marched out of camp to Thistle Dump starting out at 2pm and arriving three hours later. Tea was served before they proceeded to Flers Trench. Here they remained for the next two days, subjected to fairly heavy shelling, while they dug and improved the front line trenches over a distance of 3000 yards (1.7 miles).

From the 5th to 7th October, the battalion divided into four companies, lettered A to D, and occupied Gird, Gird Support and New trenches while under intermittent shell fire but, fortunately, with few casualties. On the 7th October, at 1.45pm, a fresh attack on Bayonet Trench, part of the German front line, commenced with four waves moving forward, at 50 yards distance, and at a rate of 50 yards per minute under the cover of a creeping barrage. Unfortunately the barrage had fallen short of the German trenches and before long the battalion were subjected to enfilading machine gun fire from the

enemy. The line held and despite all the officers being casualties, to the credit of the NCO's, the objective was reached.

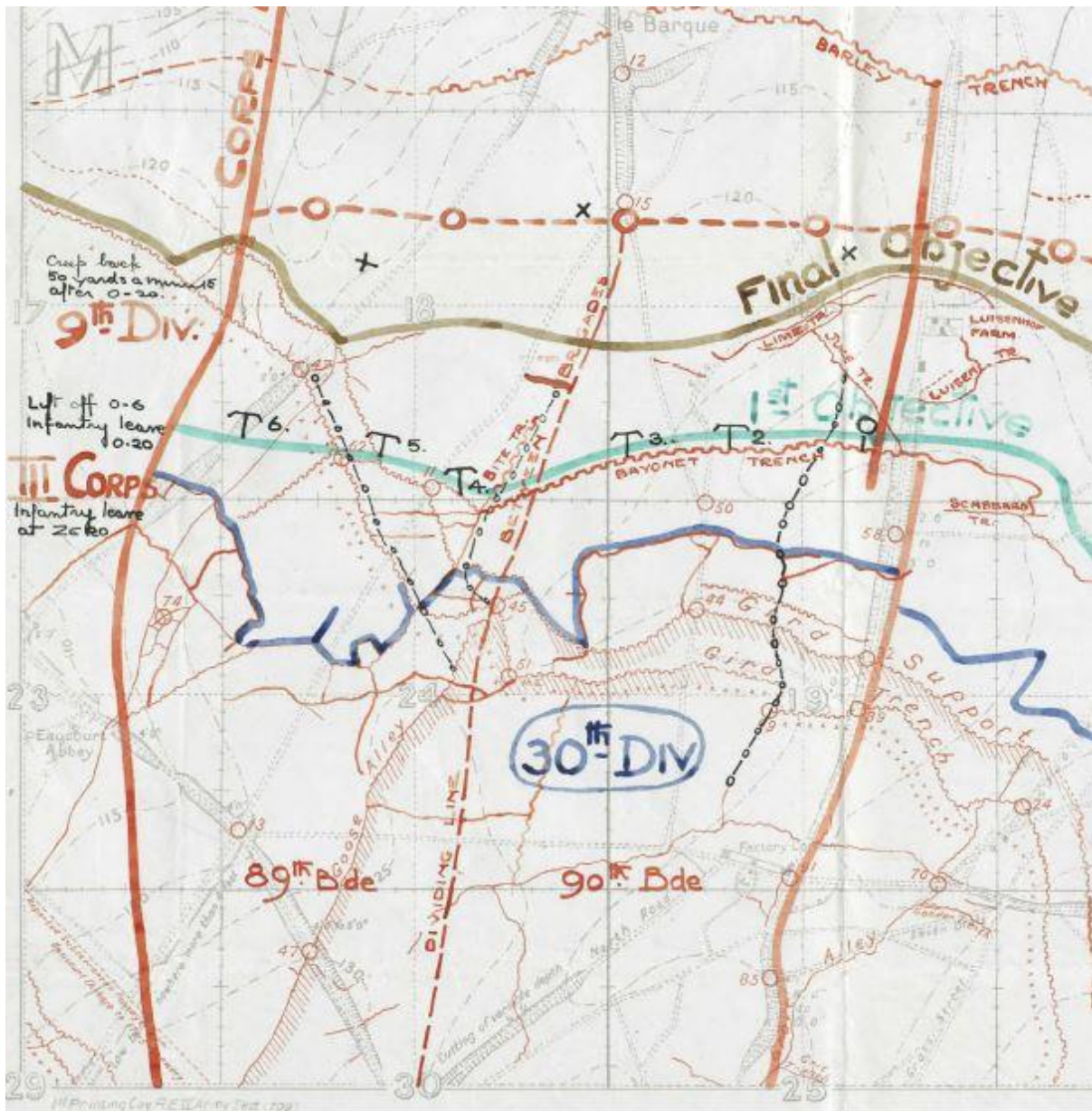


Figure 4: Trench map showing the position of Gird and Gird Support. Factory Trench is along the blue line above Gird Support Trench. Bayonet Trench on the German front line is shown in green and the final objective in brown

During the course of the next day a new communication trench was dug and despite snipers being active there was no sign of a counter attack. At 6pm the battalion was relieved and they moved back to Factory Trench where they experienced increased enemy shelling. Casualties fortunately were slight. The battalion stayed in their relief trenches before returning to bivouacs at Caterpillar Woods on the 9th and then finally to base camp at Becordel. The 10th October would have been first opportunity after the battle to conduct a

roll call and it would have been then that the full extent of the casualties would have become apparent. Of the 229 casualties recorded, 38 were killed, 2 died of wounds, 17 were missing and 171 were wounded. John was one of those killed, most likely during the action on 7th and 8th October, but we will never know for sure. He is buried in the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) Cemetery in Flers, near Montauban.^{xix} His name is also commemorated on the WW1 memorial at St Mary's church, Moseley. John was 35 years of age and coincidentally, and sadly, the same age as his father when he died some thirty years before.



(Above) The AIF cemetery, near Flers, France



(Right) WW1 memorial at St Mary's Church, Moseley

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Footnotes

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- i England and Wales births 1837-2006, 1881, Kings Norton, 1st quarter, Volume 6C, page 479
 - ii England and Wales marriages 1837-2008, 1878, Gloucester, 1st quarter, volume 6A, page 408
 - iii England and Wales deaths 1837-2007, 1886, Kings Norton, 1st quarter,, volume 6C, page 317
 - iv England and Wales marriages 1837-2008, 1885, Kings Norton, 3rd quarter, volume 6C, page 637

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- v 1891 census
- vi 1911 census
- vii 1901,1911 census
- viii 1901 census
- ix Bagnalls and Sons
http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/William_Bagnall
Birmingham Daily Post, 13th June 1917
- x *Birmingham Daily Post*, 13th June 1917
- xi See x
- xii Grace's Guide
<https://www.google.co.uk/#q=J+B+Brooks%2C+Birmingham>
- xiii Brooks, saddle makers since 1866
<http://www.birminghampost.co.uk/business/manufacturing/birmingham-day-2014-brooks-england-6771351>
- xiv See ix
- xv Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-1919
<http://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=gbm%2fwwisd%2f0022420>
- xvi Royal Fusiliers 26rh (Bankers) Regiment
<http://www.wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar/allied/battalion.php?pid=6913>
- xvii Order of the Battle of the Somme
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_of_battle_for_the_Battle_of_the_Somme
- xviii Commonwealth War Graves Commission
- xix National Archives Regimental War Diaries, WO 95/2644/1, pp 46-60

Illustrations

- Figure 1 & 2 J B Brooks advertisement from Grace's Guide, see xii
Birmingham Post, 4th March 20014
- Figure 3 Post card of Becordel, ebay
- Figure 4 17th Manchester Regiment on the Somme
<https://17thmanchesters.wordpress.com/flers/>