

# Private Albert Sydney Woodroffe

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

Albert 's great-grandfather, John Woodroffe , was born in the winter of 1810 and baptised at St Martin's Church, Birmingham on New Year's Eve.<sup>i</sup> His parents were recorded as William and Mary Woodroffe. John became a pearl button maker. Because of the fragile disposition of the material the pearl button industry was only to be found in small workshops and these were manned by highly skilled workshop craftsmen.<sup>ii</sup> On 17<sup>th</sup> November 1831, John married Charlotte Hume at the Church of St Peter's and St Paul's in Aston.<sup>iii</sup>



Figure 1

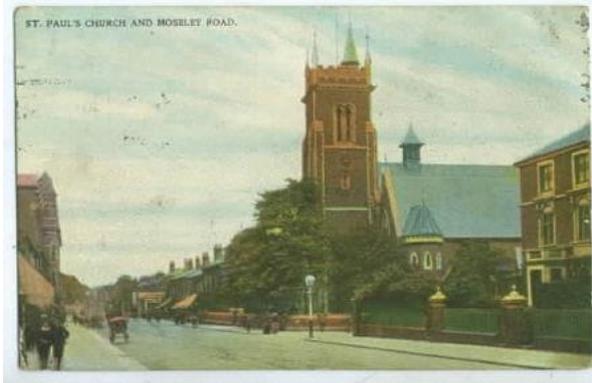
(First left)  
Shell stamped with button patterns

(Left)  
Mother of Pearl buttons from the James Luckock Collection at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Charlotte and John had two children. Thomas William was born 24<sup>th</sup> September 1832. At the time of his baptism at St Philip's Church (now Birmingham Cathedral) on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1833 the family lived at Hospital Street, Birmingham. Their second child, James John, was born 15<sup>th</sup> July 1835. James was also baptised at St Philip's Church but not until the 24<sup>th</sup> March 1845, when he would have been nine years old. The family address in 1845 was King Street, Hockley.<sup>iv</sup>

James became a pearl button maker like his father. On 12<sup>th</sup> October 1857, James married Emma, daughter of Joseph Bayliss, a fellow button maker at St Peter's and St Paul's Church, Aston.<sup>v</sup> James and Emma had ten children, six boys and four girls. James' last known address was 11 Clevedon Road, Balsall Heath. He died, a widower, in 1917.

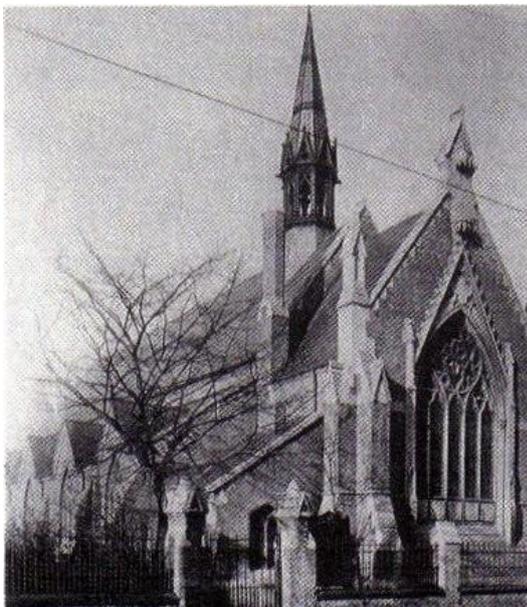
James and Emma's eighth child, Albert Frederick Woodroffe, was born on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1872.<sup>vi</sup> The 1891 census records the family living at 161 George Street West and Albert (junior), at the age of eighteen, a shop assistant in the wholesale wine and sprit trade.



**Figure 2: St Paul's Church, Balsall Heath**

On 5<sup>th</sup> September 1896, Albert (junior) married Florence Alice, the daughter of George Corns, a lamp maker, at St Paul's Church, Balsall Heath. Albert, at the time of his marriage, was a wine merchant and resident at 10 Regent Place, Ladywood, Birmingham.<sup>vii</sup>

By 1901, Albert was a 'beer seller (outdoor)' and was living on the premises of his beer shop at 167 Wilson Street, Aston Manor, Birmingham. The couple had two children recorded on the census for that year; Albert Sydney born in the summer of 1897 and Leonard, the following summer, in 1898. Two further children were born, Lilian Florence (Lily) on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1903 and Edna on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1905.<sup>viii</sup>



**Figure 3: The church of St Thomas in the Moors, Balsall Heath**

Tragedy struck the family when in the spring of 1909, Florence died, aged only 35 years old. Just over a year later, Albert married Florence's sister, Rosa Amelia Corns, aged 27 at the Parish Church of St Thomas in the Moors, Balsall Heath. It is likely from the matching address on the marriage certificate, 21 Oakfield Road, that Rosa was living at the family address to look after the children following the death of her sister. Interestingly, it was not until 'The Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act' of 1907 that a widower was allowed to marry his dead wife's sister. Albert is recorded as a 'wine merchant, manager' on the marriage certificate.

By 1911 the family were living at 167 St Paul's Road, Balsall Heath.



Albert's eldest son, Albert Sydney Woodroffe, was a former scholar at Tindal Street Council School and a chorister at St Mary's Church, Moseley.<sup>ix</sup> Prior to his enlistment in the 14<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwickshire Regiment as Private A S Woodroffe, No 14/1686 at the age of eighteen, Albert was employed at Lowry Brothers, Worcester Street, Birmingham.

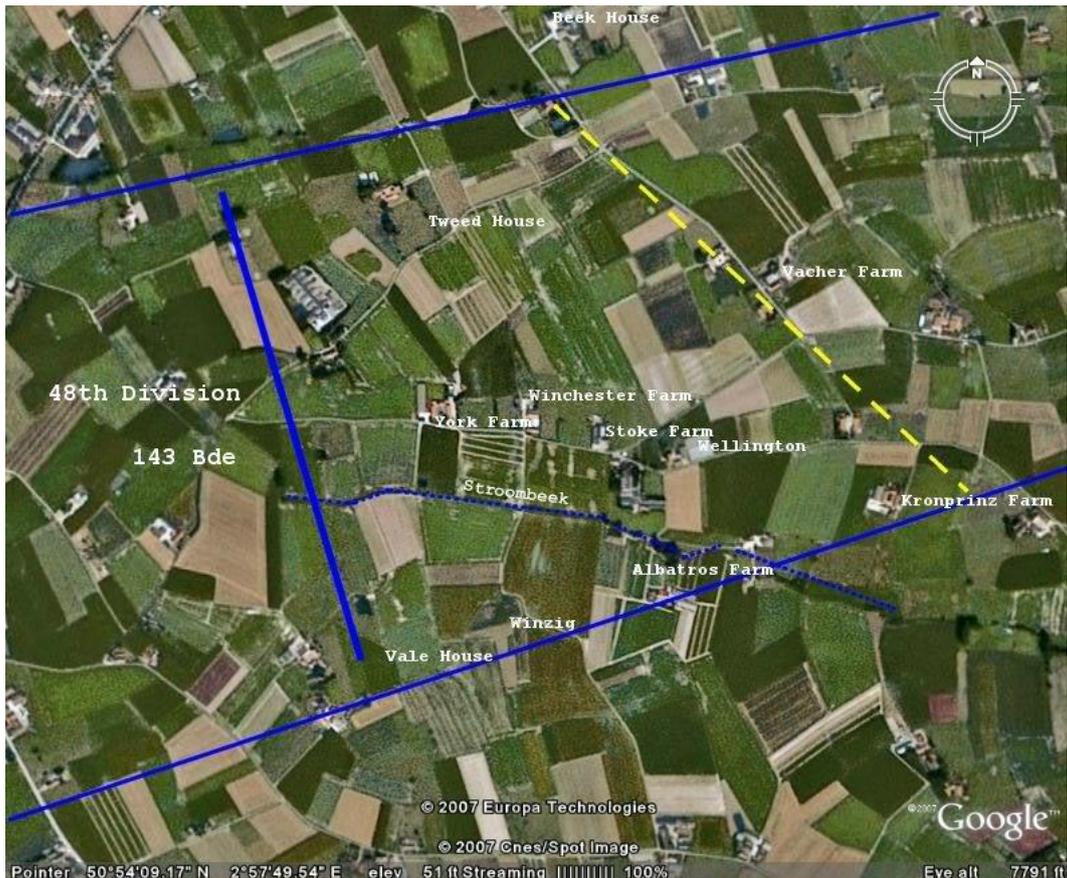
**Figure 4: Tindal Street Council School, opened in 1880**

Around his nineteenth birthday, in 1916, Albert was called up to serve in France and attached to the 1/5 Royal Warwickshire Regiment (1/5 Royal Warwicks). The Regiment was part of the 143rd Brigade of the 48th Division and engaged at the time of Albert's posting in various actions on the Western Front including the Battle of the Ancre Heights (1<sup>st</sup> October to 11<sup>th</sup> November 1916) and the Battle of the Ancre (13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> November 1916).

From February 1917, after surviving the harshest of winters, the Battalion took part in the Allied Spring Offensive, an operation intended to drive the German Army off the ridges and back eastwards. However the Germans had already planned to retreat to a newly constructed and formidable defensive system some miles back in their rear sector called the Hindenburg Line. By the end of March the 1/5 Royal Warwicks found themselves fighting against a German rear guard and by April, the Battalion advance had come to a halt at St Quentin and St Denis as the German army reached their new defensive positions.

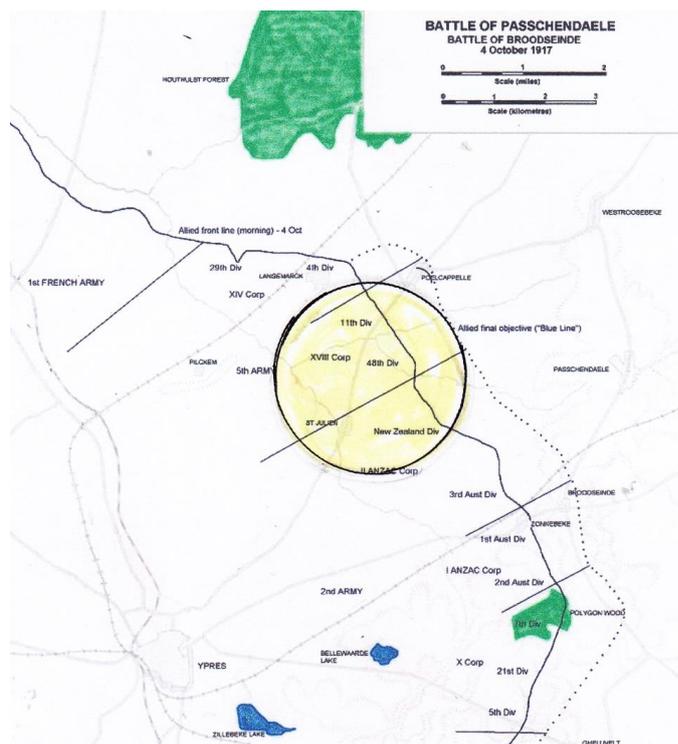
In July, the battalion relocated to Belgium in preparation for the Third Battle of Ypres now better known as Passchendaele.. At the opening of the Battle of Langemarck the 143rd Brigade was initially in divisional reserve but later took over the front line. The 1/5th Battalion took part in attacks on the block house at Hillock Farm and then, on the 22nd August 1917, captured the gun pits east of St Julien and west of the Langemarck-Zonnebeke road which subsequently fell to a counter attack. Finally on the 27th August Springfield Farm pillbox some 800 yards North East of St Julien was secured by the Brigade who were then relieved and retired to Poperinghe.

The Brigade was not in the Ypres Salient again until the attack against the Broodseinde Ridge on October 4th 1917. On the 2nd October 1917 the Battalion moved to Reigersburg Camp and received their Operation Orders for an attack two days later. The start line was about 1 mile East of St Julien. The 1/5 Royal Warwicks were to be on the right, the 1/6 in the centre, the 1/7 on the left, and the 1/8 in Reserve. The right boundary was Clifton House/Albatross Farm, the left 250 yards North of Stroppe Farm/Winchester Farm.<sup>x</sup>



**Figure 5: Map showing the position of the 1/5 Royal Warwicks (part of the 48<sup>th</sup> Division, 143 Brigade) on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1917.**

The battle of Broodseinde, on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1917, was the last of three successful 'bite and hold' battles launched by General Herbert Plumer during the middle phase of the third battle of Ypres. That battle had opened with an ambitious attempt to push the Germans back along a long stretch of their line. That effort had failed in the mud. Plumer's Second Army had then taken over from the Fifth Army. Plumer believed in making limited advances in attacks on shorter stretches of the line, stopping once a pre-determined point had been reached and digging in ready to repulse the inevitable German counterattack.



**Figure 6: Area of action of the 1/5 Royal Warwickshire Regiment highlighted in yellow.**

When the British bombardment began, it caught a number of German units out in the open preparing for their own attack. The British attack contained divisions from Britain, New Zealand and Australia. Approaching under a 'creeping barrage', the 1/5 Royal Warwicks were confronted by a lunar landscape of shell-craters, one touching another filled with water or with sludgy clay that 'could wrench the boots off your feet'. Despite many casualties due to enemy shelling, machine gun fire and the difficult uphill terrain, the British attack achieved its main objectives which then halted, to dig in.

As well as achieving all its objectives, the Battalion captured 150 prisoners, an anti-tank gun, and several machine-guns. Casualties included 3 officers killed in action, 1 died of wounds, 55 others ranks killed (of whom Private A S Woodroffe was one) and 6 died of wounds. The four Warwickshire Regiment battalions lost 12 officers killed and 15 wounded whilst 1 was missing; in 'Other Ranks' the casualty total was 765.

Although these attacks are normally described as small scale battles, the casualty figures demonstrate the real scale of the fighting. The Germans suffered 10,000 casualties. The Australians suffered 6,432 casualties, the New Zealanders 892. The battle was recorded as a "black day" in the official German history of war.

This series of three victories seems to have encouraged Haig to believe that a breakthrough was possible. Instead the dreadful rains that had plagued the first part of the Ypres offensive returned. 25mm of rain fell on the two days before the next planned attack (battle of Poelcapelle, 9 October 1917). Once again the British attack would bog down in the mud.<sup>xi</sup>

Albert's body was never found and he is one of nearly 35,000 names commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial, Belgium. His name is also commemorated on the Tindal Street School memorial and at St Mary's Church, Moseley.



**Figure 7: (Left) Tyne Cot memorial  
(Middle) St Mary's Church, Moseley WW1 memorial  
(Right) Tindal Street School WW1 memorial**

Just over a year after his son was killed, Albert senior enlisted in the RAF on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1918 as Private A F Woodroffe, Service No 308950. His attestation describes him as: 45 years old; an insurance agent; 5'5½" tall; with fair hair and blue eyes. His trade classification was 'driver (petrol)'. He served at home until demobilisation at Clipstone Camp, near Mansfield on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1920.

**Researched and written by Edwina Rees**

**Moseley Society History Group**

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## Endnotes

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- i Birmingham, Church of England Baptisms 1538-1812
- ii Birmingham Button Trade  
<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~billburgoyne/button%20trade.htm>
- iii England, Select Marriages 1538-1973  
1841 census
- iv Birmingham, England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813-1912
- v Birmingham, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1937
- vi British RAF Service Records 1912-1939 for Albert Frederick Woodroffe
- vii Birmingham, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1937
- viii See vi
- ix *Birmingham Mail*, 5.11.1917  
*Evening Despatch*, 7.11.1917
- x National Archives, War diary of 1/5 Royal Warwickshire Regiment , March 1915-October 1917, Ref WO 95/2755/1, pp 291 - 299
- xi The Battles of Broodseinde  
[http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles\\_broodseinde.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_broodseinde.html)

## Illustrations

- Figure 1 Pearl button manufacturing  
<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/405605510171157176>
- Figure 2 St Paul's Church, Balsall Heath  
<https://ahistoryofbirminghamchurches.jimdo.com/kings-norton-st-nicolas/st-paul-balsall-heath/>
- Figure 3 A history of Birmingham Churches  
<https://ahistoryofbirminghamchurches.jimdo.com/kings-norton-st-nicolas/st-thomas-in-the-moors-balsall-heath/>
- Figure 4 Tindal Street Council School  
<https://billdargue.jimdo.com/placenames-gazetteer-a-to-y/places-b/balsall-heath/>

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Figure 5 The Battle of Passchendaele  
<http://forum.irishmilitaryonline.com/showthread.php?11535-The-Battle-of-Passchendaele/page4>

Figure 6 The Battle of Broodseinde  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Broodseinde](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Broodseinde)

Figure 7 Tyne Cot Memorial  
<http://www.eerstewereldoorlog.info/belgi/de-westhoek/tyne-cot-cemetery/index.html>

Tindal Street School WW1 memorial with thanks to Tony Wooley