

Private Harold Freeman Wood



Figure 1: (Above left) Japanned tin tea tray, black lacquer and gilt made in Birmingham
(Above right) The Japanese lacquer tree *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*

Harold's father, Robert Wood was born around 1853. He was an ornamental japanner by trade. Japanning is a type of finish that originated as a European imitation of an Asian lacquer technique that used the dried sap of the *Toxicodendron vernicifluum* tree. As the dried sap was unavailable in Europe, varnishes that had a resin base, similar to shellac were used which were applied in heat-dried layers and then polished, to give a smooth glossy finish. Experienced workers were in demand and well paid. Japanning was not a very safe operation. The risk of fire in the process of japanning must always have been great. We do not know for sure the effect the smoke and fumes had on workers, but Robert died in 1894, aged only forty-one.ⁱ

Little is known about Robert's early life, other than he was born in Worcester, and that, by the spring of 1881, he had relocated to Birmingham where he married Phoebe Alice Haywood, from Bilston, Staffordshire.ⁱⁱ They started married life at 14 Bordesley Park Road, Bordesley, Birmingham, where their first two children Laura and Nellie were born in 1881 and 1882. They were baptised together at Holy Trinity Church, Bordesley on 26th October 1882.ⁱⁱⁱ

By 1884 Robert and Phoebe had moved to 87 Wenman Street, Balsall Heath, Birmingham, where two further children, Hetty and Bertram Allen Wood were born.^{iv} By the time twins, Jessica and Howard arrived on 6th April 1888 the family had moved again and were resident at 10 Islington Terrace, Balsall Heath. Their last child, Harold Freeman Wood, was born there on 9th September 1889. The twins and Harold were baptised together at St Thomas in the Moors, Balsall Heath on 18th September 1889.^v

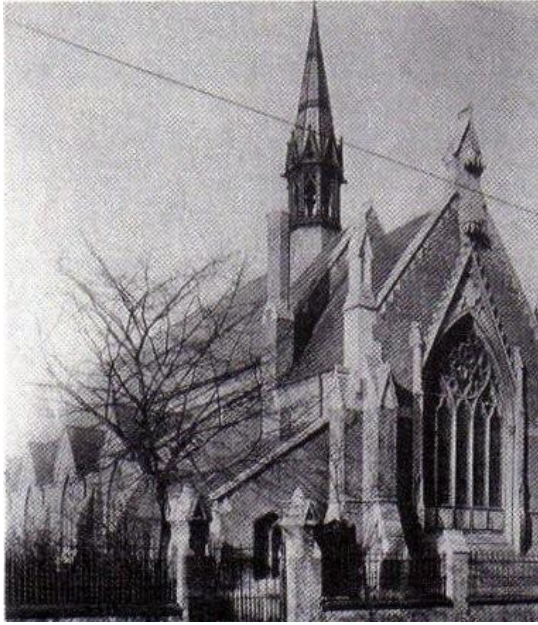


Figure 2

**(Above left) St Thomas in the Moors Church, Balsall Heath, demolished around 1970
(Above right) 12 and 14 Tudor Road, Moseley**

When Robert died in 1894, Phoebe was left with seven children between the ages of four and twelve to bring up on her own. She moved to a two bedroom terraced house at 14 Tudor Road, Moseley, Birmingham and took in lodgers to see the family through this difficult time.

The 1901 census recorded four of her children in employment: Laura and Nellie as shop assistants in a china shop, Hetty as a photographer's assistant and Bertram as an apprentice to a grocer. The census also recorded two boarders staying at the family home.



By 1911, Phoebe had moved the family to a six roomed house at 22 Woodville Road, Kings Heath, Birmingham. Her daughter, Jessie, had married in 1909 and left home. Her youngest son, Harold was a librarian by occupation.

Figure 3: Terraced houses in Woodville Road, Kings Heath

Harold did not immediately enlist when war was declared on 3rd August 1914. He joined the 15th Royal Warwickshire Regiment (15th RWR) two years later in 1916 as a private, No 1690.^{vi} His enlistment would have been as a result of the Military Service Act that was passed in January 1916. This imposed conscription on all single men aged between 18 and 41.

When Harold went to France is not known exactly but was likely to have been with the 15th RWR based in Festubert since late 1916 in preparation for the Allied Spring Offensive the following year, starting with the Battle of Arras. The 15th RWR was part of 14th Brigade, 5th Division. On 7th September 1917, the battalion was moved out of line for a rest period before being sent to Flanders where they were in action in Third Battle of Ypres.

In late January 1918, the 15th RWR was sent to Italy and took up positions on the River Piave. They were recalled to France at the end of March to bolster Allied numbers following the start of the German Spring Offensive commencing with Operation Michael.

On 4th August the battalion were rested for two weeks before being sent to the Somme region.

The 27th September 1918 saw a sequence of Allied attacks along the Western Front in order to push the German army back to the Hindenburg Line.

In preparation for the action the battalion moved to the vicinity of Ytres on 13th September 1918 where they relieved the 1st New Zealand Wellington battalion in the Front Line trenches. Surveillance patrols were sent out who located the Germans still manning their Front Line trenches, Smut and Snap.

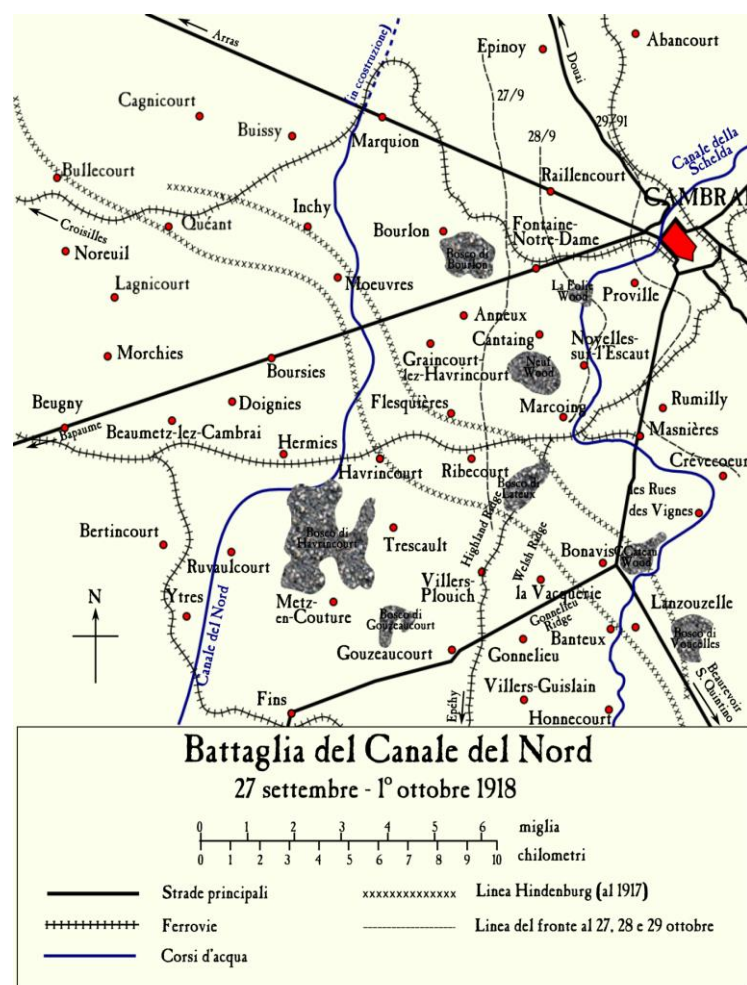


Figure 4: Battle of Canal due Nord 27th September to 1st October 1918 showing the location of Ytres and Canal du Nord

From 20th to 25th September the battalion returned to billets near Ytres and were in training to prepare them for the attack on the Canal du Nord on 27th September.

On the day of the attack, 27th September, the 15th RWR gained its objective but was forced to retire after coming under heavy German artillery fire. On 28th September patrols reported that the Germans still held Smuts trench but were withdrawing. As a result 'D' Coy by 11 am had been able to take over part of Smut trench which they held until relieved. The 29th September was reported as quiet except for a gas shell bombardment near the Battalion HQ which caused thirty casualties including the Commanding Officer, his Adjutant and the Regimental Sergeant Major.^{vii}

Casualties were heavy over the three days of fighting. Three officers and thirty other ranks were killed and five officers and ninety other ranks wounded together with twenty-nine men reported missing.^{viii}

Harold was injured in one of these attacks, most likely from the results of the action on 27th September due to German artillery action. He died from his wounds on Sunday 29th September. He was buried at the Casualty Clearing Station based at Grévillers, 3kms west of Bapaume, now called Grévillers British Cemetery. Harold had just turned twenty-nine when he died.

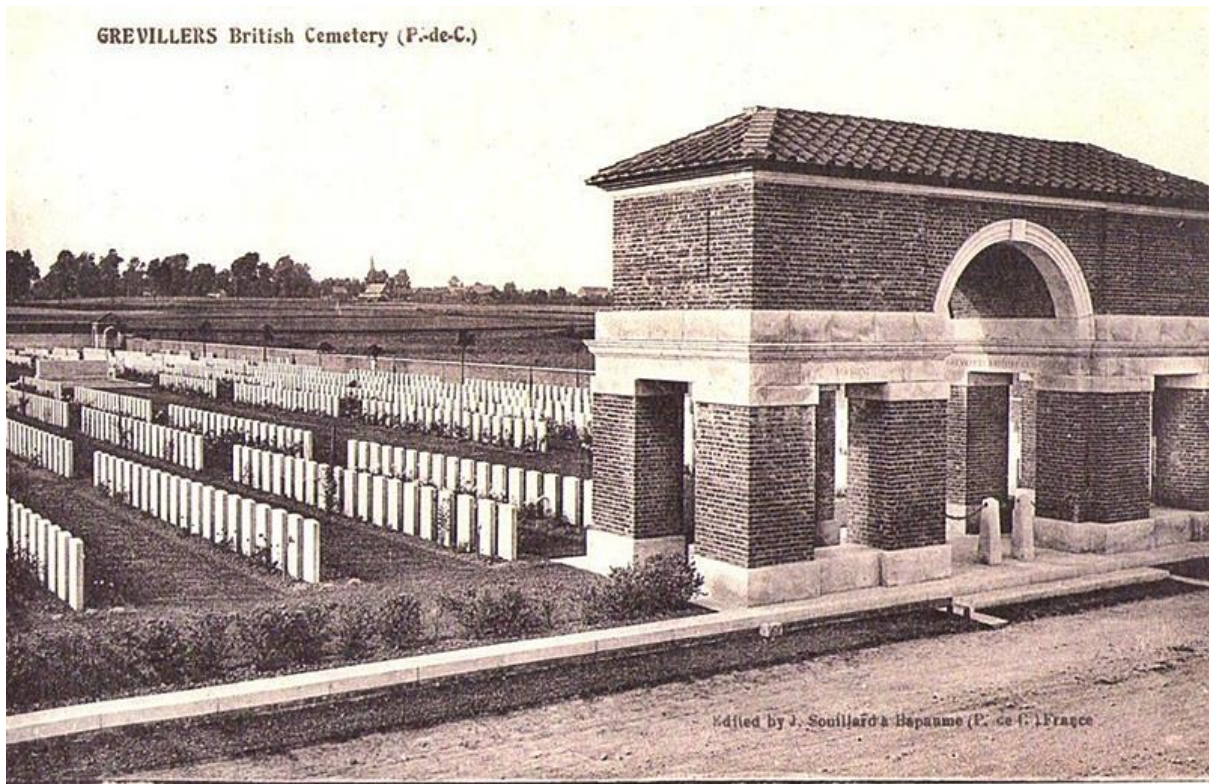


Figure 5: Grévillers British Cemetery, Pas de Calais

Earlier in 1918, the British Army went through a divisional reorganisation of three battalions to a brigade rather than four. The 5th Division had turned a blind eye to this at the time and continued to function with four battalions. The loss of so many of the senior ranks in 15th RWR on the 29th September 1918 made the belated decision regarding the reorganisation easier. On 1st October 1918 when the 5th Division came out of line in the vicinity of Ytres, the 15th Battalion RWR was disbanded. The remaining men in the 15th RWR were equally divided between the 14th and 16th RWR. This might explain why later Harold is referenced on the Commonwealth War Grave site, with the regimental No 16/1690 and not 15/1690.^{ix}

Harold is also commemorated on the WW1 memorial at St Mary's Church, Moseley and is named on the Roll of Honour at Birmingham's Hall of Memory.



Figure 6
WW1 memorial at St Mary's
Church, Moseley

At the time of his death, Harold was noted in the Absent Voters List as living at 52 Birchwood Crescent, Moseley.

Henry's brother, Bertram also served, He enlisted in 2nd Battalion RWR on 11th November 1915 as a private, No 20414. When he enlisted, he was a despatch clerk for a wholesale grocer. After a period of training at Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight, he embarked for France, arriving on 4th November 1916. Bertram served in France and Italy. He survived the war and in 1920 married Florence Esther Hawkins. In the 1939 Register Bertram was recorded as a wholesale grocer's assistant. He lived at 28 Waterloo Road, Kings Heath, Birmingham, with his wife and nineteen year old son Harold. Bertram died in 1955, aged sixty-nine.^x

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Endnotes

- i Civil Registration Death Index, Kings Norton, 4/4, volume 6c, page 223
- ii Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837-1915, Birmingham, 2/4, volume 6d, page 104
- iii England, Church of England Baptisms, 1813-1912 for Holy Trinity Church, Bordesley, 1882
- iv England & Wales, Civil Birth Registration for 1884 and 1886
- v Birmingham, England, Church of England Baptisms for 1888, 1889
- vi British Army Medal Index records Harold's entitlement to the Victory and General Service Medal indicates that he enlisted around 1916.
- vii Ancestry, War Diary 15th Royal Warwickshire Regiment, WO 95/1557, April 1918 – October 1918, pp 702 -714
- viii See vii
- ix Carter, Terry, 1997. *Birmingham Pals: 14th, 15th & 16th Battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment*. Pen & Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley. p 267
- x British Army Service Records, Find My Past

Illustrations

- Figure 1 House Revivals, J is for Japanning
<https://houserevivals.blogspot.com/2010/03/j-is-for-japanning.html>
Gardening Know How
<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/trees/lacquer-trees/what-is-a-lacquer-tree.htm>
- Figure 2 St Thomas in the Moors Church, Dargue, William> *A history of Birmingham Churches from A to Y*
<https://ahistoryofbirminghamchurches.jimdo.com/kings-norton-st-nicolas/st->

thomas-in-the-moors-balsall-heath/

Zoopla

<https://www.zoopla.co.uk/property/12-tudor-road/moseley/birmingham/b13-8ha/400809>

Figure 3 Zoopla

<https://www.zoopla.co.uk/for-sale/property/kings-heath/woodville-road/>

Figure 4 Battle of the Canal du Nord

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_the_Canal_du_Nord_-_ITA_-_map.png

Figure 5 Grévillers British Cemetery

<https://www.w1cemeteries.com/grevillers-british-cemetery.html>

Figure 6 Picture from the archives of the Moseley Society History Group