

Arthur Wedgwood ~ Boy Soldier



Hidden away in St Barnabas Church at New Whittington, Chesterfield on the side of the organ is a memorial to honour the fallen men of the village in both World Wars. Arthur Wedgwood, my grandfather's Uncle Arthur is amongst the 85 names on the memorial from World War 1.



Arthur (sitting) and his elder brother
Ernest Wedgwood

Arthur was the son of William and Emma Wedgwood. He was born on 23rd March 1898 at 19 Midland Terrace, Barrow Hill. He was their fourth and last child; Arthur had a sister Maud and a brother Ernest. Arthur was named after an elder brother Arthur Robert who had sadly died as a baby in 1895. Arthur's father William worked for the

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Midland Railway as a goods guard and the family continued to live at 19 Midland Terrace, Barrow Hill until around the time of the Great War.

On the 1911 census just three years before the war began, Arthur is recorded as being 13 years old and still at school. He attended Barrow Hill infant's school which was built in 1898 for 230 children. The school was just a short walk from the terraces of Barrow Hill, alongside the railway embankments. William must have received a reasonable education as his letters that he wrote in his teens are neatly written and grammatical. On leaving school Arthur gained employment at the Old Foundry working for Staveley Coal and Iron Company Ltd.

England's declaration of War against Germany on 4th August 1914 was to change the lives of the Wedgwood family forever. At the time Arthur was just 16 years of age, too young to join up. Chesterfield was embracing the patriotic fervour which swept over England, encouraging men to volunteer to serve King and Country, in the war which would be over by Christmas. The Derbyshire Times included articles from soldiers already serving, telling of their adventures. An article on 7th November 1914 from the 12th Cavalry Boys 18th Hussars stated *"it will not do them any harm, to enlist, even if they do not get to the front. They will learn much and it will do them the power of good"*. Another similar account from Private William Johnson under the heading *"Wounded but happy"* recalled details of a letter William had written to his mother on 27th October 1914, in it he wrote *"The Germans are very good to us, and we are getting very good food, so we are quite happy"*.

On 30th October 1914 a "Great Meeting" was called at the Skating Rink in Chesterfield to appeal for recruits. Lord Charles Beresford was the host, retorting *"an appeal to the men of Chesterfield and district to rally to the countries call for men"*. He went on to state *"the need is great, the issues enormous, the very existence of the Empire and the safety of our kith and kin, of ourselves in fact"*. The meeting was well attended by both men and women, concluding with Bryan Donkin's Orchestra providing the music for a rousing chorus of "God Save Our King". There is no wonder that in the week preceding the 14th November 1914, Chesterfield was proudly announcing that the town had 130 new recruits volunteered to the British Expeditionary Force.

Arthur, his friends and work colleagues probably attended this meeting and the subject was sure to be the topic of conversation all around Chesterfield. He is said to have wanted to volunteer because his friends were and he didn't want to be left out. Honourable and very naïve intentions, I am sure ones which Arthur probably had time to consider when he was stationed in the muddy, rat and flea infested trenches in the months to come.

Unfortunately for Arthur the minimum age for enlistment was 18 years to serve in the United Kingdom and 19 years to serve abroad (1). Arthur was two years too young even for enlistment for home service. He must have thought his prayers had been answered, when in November 1914 a recruiting party visited Chesterfield from the 3rd Battalion Training Company of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, none of the officers would know who Arthur was; unlike the local recruitment officers who may well have known Arthur or his family.

And so, in November 1914 Arthur told his lie about his age, they did not require a birth certificate for proof, Arthur must have looked older than his years. Family story says that his poor mother was beside herself and went to the Officers to demand they refuse Arthur's enlistment as he was only 16, but alas he was readily accepted into the grown up world of warfare. It is not known exactly how many under age men enlisted into World War 1, but the numbers were high. They became known as "Boy Soldiers". At the Battle of Loos, of the 50,000 casualties and wounded 3,600 are known to have been under 19 years of age.

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Arthur Wedgwood - Private 15894
1st Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers

Arthur was sent to Scotland to undertake his basic training. The 1st Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers trained at Fort Matilda, which was west of Glasgow and near to Greenock. The camp was situated in a large area around the railway station and comprised of tents and huts. One thing that is for sure, it would have been mighty cold in the winter months of 1914/1915 when Arthur was there.

Arthur wrote to his cousin Irene from the training camp and the letters still exist. He told of the time a Corporal from his Battalion fell from a train and died, Arthur and five other men transported the Corporal back home to Edinburgh. He described how the mother "*nearly went mad*" on seeing her dead son, this must have struck a cord with Arthur and how his own mother Emma would react if the same happened to him. There is also mention of a sweetheart of Arthur's; he sends the message "*just remember me to the Misses Johnson's next time you see them and tell Edie it's a long time since I kissed her, but I hope it won't be the last*". In January 1915 he tells Irene that it is said that they will be going to France on 24th February, but not to tell his parents or they will only bother about him. By now he must be getting some idea of the horrors that he is about to face as he mentions other men; a "*chap named Shully, that listed with me is killed*" and writes how "*it's a bad job for Cecil Wilson, I feel sorry for his parents*". The statement which is most telling is "*the English have been ordered to kill the Germans and take no prisoners, because they have been killing wounded men*". This prospect must have surely scared a young lad half to death no matter how grown up he pretends to be. A stark contrast to the local newspaper's article's reporting positive accounts of the war.

Arthur saw active service in the Flanders theatre of war, around the Ypres area in Belgium which was the scene of heavy bombardment on both sides and many losses were sadly reported on a day to day basis within the battalion's war diaries. Arthur and his comrades in the 1st Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers were part of the 9th Brigade, 3rd

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Division Infantry Unit. In letters home he told how he had been in the trenches for 20 days and nights before being relieved. He also mentioned one battle where they went into combat 900 men strong but only 130 returned to answer the roll call.

On 22nd April 1915 Chlorine gas was first used by the Germans during the 2nd Battle of Ypres. Even if Arthur did not witness this, the trenches would have been buzzing with talk of its terrible effects, how in the evening of the 22nd a strange yellow/green coloured cloud was drifting towards the French and Algerian troops on the front line. The chlorine gas would attack the respiratory tract within seconds of inhalation, causing choking and respiratory difficulties which were often fatal.(2)

During the month of June the Battalion were in the trenches at Bellewaarde. On 15th June they were given their orders to take part in the first phase of attack in the first Battle of Bellewaarde. They were to gain the German front line trenches as far as Railway Wood. By midnight the battalion; 18 officers and 839 men were assembled in the trenches. At 2.50am on 16th June their trenches were slightly damaged by the Germans bombardment, but by 4.50am the attack had ceased and the battalion was able to advance and win their objectives of the front line trenches. Unfortunately, this victory was short lived as their being unsupported by extra troops at 6.30am they were forced to retire along the same route back to their original trenches. Continuous shell fire lasted all day from both sides and heavy losses were incurred – 36 men were killed, 199 men wounded and 202 men were reported missing in action. This battle may well have been the battle that Arthur mentioned in his letters home.



Arthur's Rosary Beads

As if the first Battle of Bellewaarde was not horrific enough for Arthur and his comrades, orders were again received for a second attack on Bellewaarde. The purpose of this attack however was diversionary to occupy and distract the German Armies in and around Ypres and leave them off guard for a further attack later that day – the Battle of Loos. On 25th September at 3.00am Arthur and his friends and comrades led the attack and began an artillery bombardment against the enemy. By 4.20am the platoons were advancing every 5 minutes, but by this time the Germans were returning with heavy bombardment and there were heavy casualties on the battalion's side. At 6.23am it was

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reported that the enemy's bombardment was less severe and by 7.00am the men had captured their position and were now under severe shell attack and bombing. Unfortunately, by 1.20pm the men could hold their newly captured position no more and were forced, along with the 4th Gordons to evacuate enemy trenches and fall back. After a day of long bombing combat the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers "*held their own till the very last and not until the men on their flanks had been forced back had they retired*". Two days later General Allenby was to congratulate the men on taking one of the strongest positions on the enemy lines, "*they had stuck at it through an inferno of machine gun, bomb and shell fire in a way that would have been a credit to any regiment*".

For the 1st Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers the 2nd Battle of Bellewaarde was in fact another mass slaughter of its selfless, brave soldiers – 3 officers were killed, 1 was missing, and 6 were wounded. Of the other ranks – 30 men were killed, 161 were missing and 120 were wounded.

Sadly Arthur was one of the men who sacrificed his young life to fight for King and Country at the 2nd Battle of Bellewaarde. It is most probable that he was one of the 161 men who were reported missing in action on that fateful day of 25th September 1915, there is no known grave to mark his death. Arthur was killed in action aged just 17 1/2 years old; six months too young to legally join the British Army.



Menin Gate, Ypres where Arthur is remembered

Back in Chesterfield news was soon heard regarding the death of Arthur, although it does seem that there was some confusion as Arthur's family were told different accounts of his whereabouts. A letter from a Private Charles Wardell of the same regiment had told that "*young Wedgwood had gone under*" but confirmation from the War Office was not received by William and Emma Wedgwood until the following month. The Derbyshire Times Obituary dated 23rd October 1915, states incorrectly that Arthur was killed at the Battle of Loos in France. It also includes a photo of "boy soldier" Arthur proudly wearing his Royal Scots Fusilier's cap at its jaunty angle. The family now lived at 222 South Street, New Whittington, Chesterfield.

The death must have affected the family very badly, Emma is said to have been

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mortified and never really recovered from the shock. She died on 24th June 1922 of liver cancer. William remarried shortly after in 1923. Arthur's elder brother Ernest joined the Sherwood Foresters Regiment to seek revenge on the Germans that took his young brothers life so tragically. His sister Maud was married and had three young sons by now, her fourth son who was born on 17th July 1916 was named after his heroic Uncle Arthur. Maud kept photos of her beloved brother and even has a post card of the memorial in the Church at New Whittington, a testament I believe to the love and sadness the family held for their beloved "boy soldier" young Arthur Wedgwood.



The Royal Scots Fusiliers named on the Menin Gate memorial - Arthur is on the right hand side

Arthur received the Victory medal, British medal and 15 Star for his bravery and sacrifice. He is remembered on the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres alongside the many thousands who also gave their lives in the Great War. At 8pm every night of the year the Menin Road is closed to traffic and the Ypres Fire Brigade play the Last Post to honour these men. I have had the honour of visiting the memorial and paying my respects to my Great Great Uncle Arthur Wedgwood, Private 15894, Boy Soldier.



Ref -

(1) http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/boy_soldiers.htm

(2) <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWchlorine.htm>

Further reading -

<http://www.bellewaarde1915.co.uk/>

Sources -

1st Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers Regimental War Diaries
Regimental History of the Royal Scots Fusiliers - John Buchan
Commonwealth War Grave Commission
Derbyshire Times Newspaper
Family papers and letters
GRO Birth & Death certificates
Medal Rolls World War 1

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