

Lest we Forget – Robert Charles Knott

We continue with our occasional articles on those who lost their lives in military service during World War 1 and are remembered on our War Memorial in the grounds of St Mary's.

Robert's mother, Elizabeth, was born and raised in Wick and lived with her family, the Royston's, before going off to London to work in domestic service for a period. She returned to this area, married Henry Knott in 1893 and it was a couple of years later that Robert was born.

By the time of the 1901 census, we know that Elizabeth was already a widow and visiting Wick to stay with her father, Charles Royston, and was accompanied by Robert now 5 years old. She gave her occupation as housekeeper and therefore was back in domestic service somewhere. Sadly, Elizabeth passed away in 1910 and by 1911 Robert was living with his grandfather and his mother's spinster sister, Emma. Full time education had finished for Robert, aged 15, and he was earning a living as a domestic gardener. It is likely that his wage went a long way to sustain the family as his grandfather was by now in his late eighties and retired, while his Aunt Emma did not appear to have any form of employment.

(After previous articles, it has often been asked why the exact address in Wick of the people concerned is not always mentioned. The reason is that the census around the late 19th/early 20th century only provided a house name if it was a large, well known property. For those living in smaller houses or cottages, no address is contained within the records other than a "villager" living Wick.)

After the commencement of the Great War, we know that Robert enlisted with the Cheshire Regiment. Why he joined there and not, say with the local Worcestershire regiment is not know – perhaps he had moved there for employment reasons. Another possibility was that he had family in that part of the country.



Cap Badge of the Cheshire Regiment

The plaque in our church commemorating those who served in WW1 states that Robert was in the 8th Battalion Cheshires but the army records available today advise that he was in the 9th Battalion. Does it make any difference? Well, yes it does as the 9th were sent to France in July 1915 and remained fighting there and in Flanders for the rest of the War. According to the Cheshire Regiment history, the 8th battalion were in Egypt, Gallipoli and then Mesopotamia. Therefore, given that Robert died in France, he clearly was not in the 8th. (Another potential point of confusion is that another Private Robert Knott of the Cheshire Regiment was also killed in France in 1918 – but he was part of the 6th Battalion.)

The 9th (Service) Battalion, Cheshire Regiment was raised in Chester on the 13th of September 1914 as part of Kitchener's Second New Army. They moved to Salisbury Plain

for training and went into billets in Basingstoke in December 1914 for the winter, returning to Salisbury Plain in March 1915. When exactly Robert enlisted is not known but records show that he, Private R Knott serial number 18560, was shipped out to France with the rest of his battalion on the 19th of July 1915, landing at Boulogne and then the division concentrated near St Omer.

These soldiers would have seen action in a few places in that northern part of France throughout the second half of 1915 and early 1916, when on 1st March 1916 their orders were to go back to the trenches in preparation for a further attack upon the German forces at the Boar's Head, which was all part of the build up to the Battle of the Somme. The following extract from the War diaries of the battalion contain the Operations order for the day:

appx II

SECRET

OPERATION ORDERS No. 9. Copy No. 1
9th Bn. Cheshire Regt. 3.3.16

Reference 1/10000 Trench Map.
Sheet 36.S.W.3.

Operations. Commencing at 4.47 P.M. Nos. 68 and No.A/58
1 Trench Mortar Batteries assisted by the Left Group
Artillery will bombard the BOAR'S HEAD about
8.16.a.s.7¹.
The Operations will last about 1 hour.

Orders O.C. Right Fire Company will temporarily with-
draw the garrison of Nos. 3 Post before dawn and
distribute the men between Nos. 4 and 5 Posts.

O.C. Centre Fire Company will withdraw his
Company, except two Sentry Groups and the Machine
Gun Detachment to the Support Line by 4.30 p.m.

O.C. Left Fire Company will thin out his line
leaving Sentry Groups at well-protected spots.

Normal positions will be resumed after conclusion
of operations.

Right and Left Battalions have been notified.

A. Alexander Captain,
A/Adjutant 9th Bn. Cheshire Regiment.

Issued at 2 a.m.

Besides the "official" record of the day, what happened to Robert is recounted in an extract from a letter subsequently sent to his family by a comrade;

"At about 4am Bob got up on the fire step to execute his duty, but, unfortunately, a German sniper shot him through the head, and death was instantaneous. He suffered no pain. He was the most generous and willing lad in the platoon. Never did he complain of circumstances, and I am heart-broken in consequence, as we two mated together since leaving Weston-Super-Mare."

Intelligence reports show that 3 soldiers were killed and 4 wounded by snipers that day.

From the Army Register of Soldiers' Effects we learn that Emma Royston was Robert's sole remaining relative and it was she who was the beneficiary of his estate amounting to £9 5s 11d.

At the age of just 20 years old, Robert was finally laid to rest in St Vaast Post Military Cemetery in the village of Richebourg-L'Avoué . It was here where British soldiers began burying their fallen comrades in an old orchard near a forward dressing station which was located at the terminus of a trench tramway between the hamlet of Richebourg St. Vaast and La Croix Barbet - a long way from the fields and orchards around Wick where Robert grew up.



St Vaast Post Military Cemetery