Willie Brearey



Rank: - Private

Number: - 104480 (formerly 29227 Durham Light Infantry, 49473 Devonshire Regiment 9th Battalion)

Regiment: - Labour Corps, Devonshire Regiment 743rd Area Employment Company.

Killed in Action: - 4th July 1918 aged 31

Cemetery: - Camon Communal Cemetery Grave No.1

Batley News, 27 Jul 1918 (photo), 10 Aug 1918 (Roll of Honour)

Family Details

Willie was born in 1887 in Grinsberg, Germany as was his elder sister, Annie (1885). They were the children of Thomas (Tom) and Annie Milner Brearey (nee Williamson). Tom was from Dewsbury whilst Annie was born in Cleckheaton. John Thomas (1869), Joseph Edward (1872), Albert (1875) and Bertha (1881) were all born in Batley before the family moved to Grinsberg, Germany. In 1881 the family were living in Beaumont Street, Batley. Tom was a woollen spinner and several Batley firms had opened mills in Germany and sent their employees to work there. Mark Oldroyd's of Dewsbury and Blakeley's had mills in Grinsberg since at least 1880. The town of Forst was known as the Batley of Germany. Before 1891 he family had moved back to Batley living at 10, Purlwell Lane, Batley. Tom, John Thomas and Joseph Edward were all woollen spinners. A decade later the family had moved to 31, Brown's Terrace, off Brown Street, Batley and both Tom and Joseph Edward had become employers making hearth rugs whilst Willie was making hearth rugs as a worker. Both Bertha and Annie were weavers. The business of rug making was in Station Road, Batley and was later taken over by Joseph Edward. Before joining the Army, Willie had started his own business in Russell Street, Batley. He was an old boy of Purlwell Council Schools, attended Batley Parish Church and Sunday school and was a bugler in the Church Lads' Brigade. He was also in the Zion and Purlwell Wesleyans Chapels Boys' Brigade. Later he joined Hanging Heaton Orchestral Society as a cornetist and he also attended Batley and Dewsbury Brass Bands.

Service Details

Willie enlisted in Batley in 1916 and disembarked in March 1917. The records suggest that Willie may first have been posted to the Durham Light Infantry (D.L.I.) before being transferred to the 13th Devonshire (Works). This was a 'labour' battalion, these were formed from men of the 'navvy'class and from men who were over military age or from men who because of wounds, injuries or illness were no longer fit for front line combat service. Labour Battalions were employed in road making, quarrying and forestry.The Corps always suffered from its treatment as something of a second classorganisation for example the men who died are always commemorated undertheir original regiment, with Labour Corps.

Willie Brearey was killed in action on the 4th July 1918 whilst serving with the743rd Area Employment Co Labour Corps although his 'cap badge' remained the 13th Devons. The Commonwealth War Graves record the Devonshire's as Willie's primary Regiment.

His particular whereabouts at the time of his death are uncertain but he is one of only 17 WW1 Commonwealth, including 9 British, soldiers remembered at the

Camon Communal Cemetery, to the east of Amiens, in the Somme region of France. None of the other soldiers lost their lives in July 1918 but 8 Australian men are buried there who were killed in May and June 1918. This suggests that Willie's Labour Corps were working in support of the Australian forces in the Camon area east of Amiens. This association may provide the clue to Willie's location at the time of his death.

The village of Le Hamel is situated 12 miles to the east of Camon and on the 4th July 1918 the Battle of Hamel saw a successful attack launched by the Australian Corps of the Australian Imperial Force, several American units and the British Tank Corps against German positions in and around the town of Le Hamel. All of the Allies objectives were reached in 93 minutes.

On that day as the barrage advanced the infantry continued to follow it into the cloud of smoke and dust caused as the chalky ground was churned up by the exploding shells which made the observing of the line of the barrage difficult and obscured some of the objectives in front of the infantry. Allied casualties numbered 1400 men killed or wounded and the enemy suffered losses of 2000 men and 1600 captured.

On the family grave in Batley Cemetery is written: -

"*In Loving Memory of Thomas Brearey died July 12th 1926 aged 81*
Also
Ann, his wife, who died August 9th 1927, aged 79 also
Willie son of the above who died in France July 4th 1918 aged 31
At Rest"

He was awarded the British 1914-18 War Medal and the Allied Victory.

Willie is remembered with Honour at Camon Communal Cemetery, Batley Parish Church and Batley War Memorial.

Camon is a village in the Department of the Somme immediately east of Amiens across the river. The cemetery contains 18 Commonwealth graves from W.W. 1.

