John Brooks





Photo courtesy of Peter Bennett

Rank: - Private

Number: - 20429

Regiment: - King's Own Scottish Borderers 1st Battalion

Killed in Action: - 1st July 1916

Cemetery: - Knightsbridge Cemetery, Mesnil-Martinsart, Somme, France

John Brooks, the son of Lawrence and Susannah (nee Farrar), was born in Batley, on 20 March 1895 and baptised at St. Mary of the Angels on 14 April 1895.

His Dublin born father came to Batley in the 1870's and married Susannah Farrar in 1893 and both worked in the mills. John was their second child, his siblings included Mary Ellen, 1894, Agnes 1898, twins Annie and Catherine/Kitty 1900,

and Joseph 1903. Annie died in May 1902. Lawrence was a rag grinder and in 1901 the family was living in New Street, Batley.

John attended St. Mary's school and he was one of the children who had a role in St. Mary's controversial participation in the huge Batley schools' pageant which took place at Mount Pleasant in August 1907, which took place to celebrate the raising of money for Batley Hospital. John was a member of St. Mary's Boy's Brigade and a keen footballer and highly esteemed by his fellow players at Batley Albion Association Football Club.

By the 1911 census the family was living in Peel Street, Batley and John was working as a piecer. Before enlisting John worked at Messrs. Wrigley and Parker's, Valley Mills, Field Lane, Batley.

In June 1915, John enlisted and it was not long before he was posted to Gallipoli and was one of four Batley lads serving with the 1st Battalion, the others being James Edward Brook, Percy Whiteley and William Balmforth. John disembarked on 3 October 1915 but it was an ill-fated campaign which drew to a close with the evacuation of troops in January 1916.The KOSB Unit War Diary notes their phased withdrawal from the firing line over the course of 8 January 1916 with the final men pulling out just before midnight. They made their way to the shore to embark for the port of Mudros and then Alexandria, Egypt arriving on 14 January before boarding trains for Suez.

They remained in Egypt until March 1916 when they were redeployed to the Western Front. The Unit War Diary notes they departed Port Said on 11 and 12 March on board troop ships *Megantic* and *Wandilla* arriving at Marseilles on 17 and 18 March. In April 1916 the battalion moved to the Somme, initially to Mailly-Maillet, then Louvencourt for training, with intermittent spells in the trenches. On 23 June they moved to Acheux Wood where the following day the British bombardment up and down the enemy line commenced. The aim was to destroy the German barbed wire defences, neutralise their artillery, destroy their trenches and strong points, shatter the German morale and render them ineffective as a fighting force. The diary notes the weather as thunderstorms on 23 June, 24 was dull, with low cloud and heavy rain. The 25 June provided a temporary respite before the unfavourable conditions returned and thick mist

and very heavy rain was reported on the 27 and 28th. The attack was postponed until 1 July 1916.

At 9pm on the 30 June the battalion paraded and moved off to the trenches, taking a route from Acheux Wood via the outskirts of Engelbelmer. The KOSB were lined in the trenches south-west of Beaumont Hamel behind Mary Redan, a defence position in our front line, in the vicinity of what today is the entrance to Newfoundland Memorial Park. They were to be part of the second wave of the attack, behind the 1st Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. The KOSB's orders were to leave the trenches as soon as the last wave of the leading battalions had reached the enemy's wire. They were tasked with assaulting Beaucourt village.

The preceding several days of artillery bombardment had failed to destroy large swathes of the German defences, and the German troops remained largely protected in their deep dugouts. Additionally, the 7.20 am detonation of the Hawthorn Ridge mine forewarned the Germans of the impending attack. The 1st Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers went "*over the top*" only to be confronted by devastating German machine gun fire. Under heavy artillery fire themselves the KOSB watched on as the men in this first wave attack fell, knowing that they would be the next in line to go over. The KOSB's War Diary notes these events and their subsequent attack: -

07.33 1/Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers commenced attack from front line trenches. Battalion to advance when last wave of 1/RIF reached German wire.
07.40 1/R.I.F. held up by Machine gun fire.
07.52 1/R.I.F. attack not progressing. Battalion moved out under heavy machine gun fire.
08.10 Our attack not progressing owing to intense enemy machine gun fire. Attack on left observed to be equally unsuccessful.
08. 31 Advance still going on but being constantly checked.
08.30 Enemy heavily shelled MARY REDAN
08.45 The attack ceased.

The 87th Infantry Brigade War Diary commentary on the events that day painted a similarly bleak picture:

"*The 1st KOSB and 1st Border Regiment left their assembly trenches at about 7.35 am and advancing under very heavy machine gun fire failed to get as far as the*

leading battalions with the exception of the leading sections of the 1st Border Regiment which got as far as the German wire."

Throughout the day the carnage continued, until at pm the battalion received their relief orders. By 5.30pm this was complete, and what remained of the 1st KOSB assembled at Fort Jackson.

Their Diary notes on 1 July 1916 11 officers and 83 other ranks killed; 9 officers and 406 other ranks wounded; and 59 other ranks were missing. The Diary also has the following chilling simple entry to the end the 1 July 1916:

23:00 1 Officer and 20 men digging a grave at KNIGHTSBRIDGE

Initially John was amongst those reported missing but his family, now living in Cobden Street, had to wait until early August to find his fate. Further tragedy hit the Brooks family; his father died suddenly in December 1916. In October 1917 John's maternal uncle Matthew Farrar was killed in France and his mother, Susannah passed away in November 1918.

John was awarded the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal, 1914-18 and Victory Medal.

He is remembered with Honour at St Mary of the Angels R.C. Church, Batley and Batley War Memorial.



Thanks to Jane Roberts and for further details please see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk