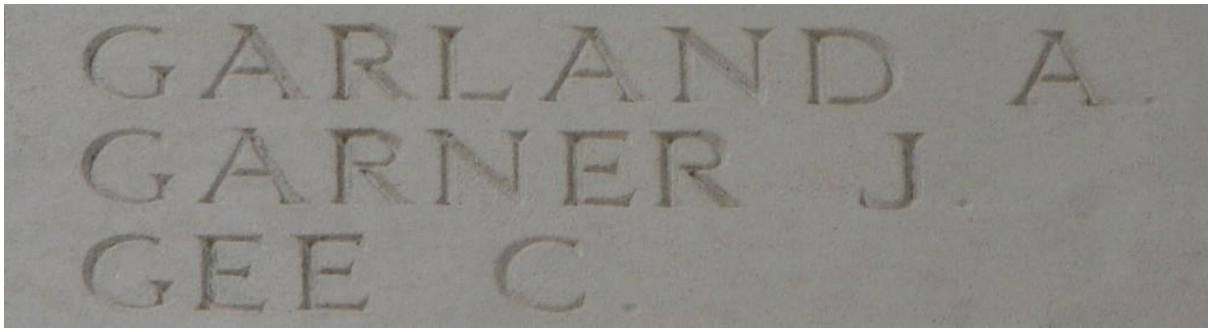
James Garner



Rank: - Private

Number: - 10542

Regiment: - King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, 10th (Service) Bn.

Died: - 1st July 1916

Memorial: - Thiepval Memorial, Somme, France

James' surname was technically Boles not Garner, and he does appear under both names in records. According to his baptismal register entry he was born on 13th October 1889, the son of Catherine (Kate) Boles. Locally-born in around 1868, rag sorter Kate was lodging with the Owens family in Ambler Street in the 1891 census.

Kate's marriage to John Garner, a coal miner from Batley, was registered in the Dewsbury registration district in the first quarter of 1892. She and John settled in Spa Street off Well Lane, Batley with John bringing up James as his own son. James nearly always adopts John's surname in records.

Following their marriage, John and Kate's children included Mary Elizabeth (born in 1892), Michael 1894), Margaret (1895), Catherine Ellen (1898), Agnes (1900), Ann (1902), Ellen (1903) and John (1906). Five of these eight children died infancy or early childhood- Michael in 1896, Margaret 1901, Ann and Ellen 1903 and John in 1906.

James had several brushes with the law which began on 6 October 1902. At around 12.30 at lunchtime, he and another boy John Armstead pulled about 20 stones off a wall in Carlinghow Lane. A police constable observed the offence, and as a result they appeared before Batley magistrates the following Monday. His mother pointed out that it was his birthday and, as it was their first offence and they promised not to offend again, the mayor let them off with a fine of 2s. 6d., and a caution not to offend again.

On 5 December 1902 James was back in Batley Borough Court (this time under the name of Bowles), along with 11-year-old John Armstead and 13-year-old Charles Craven. They were accused of breaking into two shops. Bail was refused and they were remanded in custody for a week. James received 10 strokes of the birch as a punishment.

He did not learn his lesson because on 16 March 1903 he appeared at West Riding Court, Dewsbury alongside John Armstead and 10-year-old Walter Thompson. This time the charge was breaking into the Batley Co-operative Stores at Grange Road, Soothill on 10 March.

James and John also faced a second charge of taking two overcoats belonging to two labourers who had left them on a fence, at the roadside whilst working in Grange Road.

The police and magistrates lost patience with James and John, with the police saying they had "bad minds". Walter was let off with six strokes of the birch but James and John were sent to the Yorkshire Catholic Reformatory School for Boys near Holme-on-Spalding Moor for five years. In early April John Garner appeared before Batley Magistrate Court where he was ordered to pay 1s. a week towards James' maintenance in the reformatory school.

The reformatory school has details about James. His pal there appears to be a Liverpool-born orphan John Murray. James worked on a farm and his education was described as very fair, with him able to read, write and do arithmetic. There is also a physical description. With fair hair and brown eyes, he had a fresh complexion, was of slim build and stood at 3 feet 9 inches tall. He had a permanent burn mark on his right cheek and a scar on the right side of his head.

He was discharged early on licence to his parents in Batley on 18 December 1907. By now his character was very good. The school followed his progress annually for three years. The entry for 12 November 1908 states he worked as a miner and his conduct was 'S'. On 9 October 1909 he worked as a general

labourer with a ‘FS’ conduct and on 18 October 1910 he had returned to mining and his conduce was ‘S’.

His mother died in February 1909 and the 1911 census records him working as a hewer in a coal mine and living in the two-roomed house at 5 Spa Street, with his step-father John and sisters Mary, Kate and Agnes. Some sources say he worked as a hurrier at Soothill Wood Colliery prior to enlisting.

Although his service papers have not survived, his number indicates he enlisted with the KOYLI in December 1911.

At the outbreak of war, he was serving with the 1st KOYLI in Singapore. The Battalion left there for England on 29 September 1914, to form part of the 28th Division which assembled at Winchester on 23 December 1914. The Battalion was a unit of the 83rd Brigade. James was with them when they embarked for France on 15 January 1915, seeing service in the Ypres salient until the beginning of March. The 83rd Brigade then moved to the Wulvergham area of Belgium, returning to the Ypres salient early in April. The Battalion was present throughout the 2nd Battle of Ypres.

Unfortunately, because his papers have not survived, it is difficult to sketch out his military career. What is clear is that at some point her transferred from the 1st KOYLI to the 10th KOYLI. In many cases these transfers occurred after a wounded soldier recovered and returned to action.

A newspaper piece in April 1917 stated James was wounded in action about 18 months earlier, so around October 1915. From the end of September through to 23 October the 1st KOYLI were in the Loos area, so it is possible it was here James suffered his injury, during the Battle of Loos. This engagement ended on 8 October. The Battalion suffered particularly heavy casualties on 4 October 1915 when at 4.45 am they commenced an attempt to recover lost portions of the Hohenzollen redoubt and were met with heavy machine gun and rifle fire from an enemy fully prepared for the counter-attack. In that incident 65 other ranks from the Battalion were wounded. It is not clear if James was amongst these and there were casualties on other days.

Whatever the exact timing and location, the 1917 piece goes onto say James completely recovered and re-joined his unit. Perhaps it was then he transferred to the 10th KOYLI, because towards the end of October 1915 the 1st KOYI set off for Marseilles as the first stage of their move to Salonika.

In James' last letter home, he said he was alright, having come through an engagement safely. This final communication was prior to the Battle of the Somme. By mid – August 1916 10 weeks had passed since his last letter and it was now his family were officially notified, he was missing, not having been seen since 1 July 1916, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme.

On 1 July the 10th KOYLI, part of the 21st Division 64 Infantry Brigade, were involved in the attack towards the north of Fricourt. The 10th KOYLI led the 64th Brigade assault. It is believed James went into action with James Trainor, another St. Mary's parishioner and Spa Street resident who died of wounds on 3 July 1916.

The Unit Diary of the day simply reports that they left the trenches at 7.30 am, took Crucifix Trench that morning and held it until early the next when they were relieved by the 1st Lincolns. The casualty figures in the margin of the diary for the day give more of a clue to the horrors of the engagement - nine officers killed and 16 wounded; 50 other ranks killed, 292 wounded and 135 missing.

In April 1917 John Garner finally received official confirmation that his stepson had been killed in action on 1 July 1916.

Although James has no known grave, his body was at one point located. On 12 December 1917 a Burial Officer from the 6th Corps reported James' burial. His grave was subsequently lost on the ebb and flow of war, and he is therefore commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing.

James was awarded the 1914-15 Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal. He is remembered with Honour at Batley War Memorial and St. Mary's Church, Batley.



Thanks to Jane Roberts.
For more information and references see https://pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk