Willie Speight





Rank: - Private

Number: - 18163

Regiment: - Royal Welsh Fusiliers 13th Battalion

Killed in Action: - 6th July 1916 aged 30

Memorial: - Thiepval, Somme, France. Pier and Face 4A

Batley News, 22 Jul 1916 (photo)

Family Details.

Willie was born in Soothill, Batley in 1885 the son of Walter and Clara Speight (nee Hirst). The couple had married at All Saints, Dewsbury on 3rd August 1881.Walter had previously married Mary Hardacre at St. Thomas's, Batley on 25th December 1874 and they had a daughter Esther A born in 1877. Mary died in 1880.

Walter and Clara had Albert (1883), then Willie then Arthur born in 1891 but died in1892, Luther (1893) and Eunice (1895), they lived at 18, High Street, Hanging Heaton and Walter was a loom tuner. The 1911 census shows they had another child who had died in infancy. Walter of High Street died 13th November 1907.

Willie had a lifelong connection with Hanging Heaton United Methodist Church. He was a scholar at the Sunday school and for a long time the school organist. Willie was also a member of the choir. He had a quiet and reserved disposition; he was greatly respected by many.

Willie attended Hanging Heaton C. of E. Church Day School and Batley Technical School where he commenced to have a promising career in art. He joined the Technical School classes in 1901-02 and became an art pupil teacher the following year. He received his early training at Batley under Mr. C. B. Barber and in 1906-7 became assistant teacher. In 1910 he accepted a post at the Huddersfield Technical College (School of Art) as assistant art master and kept that position until war broke out. Whilst at Batley he gained the Art Class Teachers' Certificate and passed advanced examinations for the Art Masters Certificate. He worked in light and shade designing and craftsmanship was of high quality. He especially designed decorative designs and it was his work in painting and decorating and typography which secured his place at Huddersfield.

In 1911 he was residing at 42, Bentley Street, Lockwood, Huddersfield with Norris Jubb, who was also an art teacher and his mother.

Service Details

Willie enlisted in Huddersfield on 18th November 1914. The 13th (Service) Battalion (1st North Wales) was formed at Rhyl in September 1914. It came under

the orders of 128th Brigade, 43rd Division. On 28th April 1915 its formation became the 113th Brigade, 38th (Welsh) Division. They moved to Winchester in August 1915 and to France on December 2nd 1915.

The first major conflict was at the Battle of Albert when the Division was used to assault and clear Mametz Wood. It suffered severe casualties and was described as "hell on earth". Around 4,000 men of the Division was killed or injured in Mametz Wood.

The first intimation of his death was received by his mother from Cpl. E. Clapham of the same regiment

"I *am sorry to inform you, your son in this battalion was killed two days ago (July 7th). His friend Lance-Corp. Topping has asked me to inform you. By what I can gather he was standing at the entrance to the regimental aid when a shell killed him instantaneously. Of course, his work as stretcher bearer made it necessary for him to be there, and thus he died doing his duty. He was a nice lad, and a great friend of mine, and he always helped out at our concerts. You have my very deep sympathy and may God comfort you in your bereavement."*

Another letter, illustrative of the esteem in which the deceased was held, has been received from Mr.T.Williams, Council Street, Llandudno, who made his acquaintance while the battalion was training there. This gentleman, after receiving news of Pte.Speight's death from friends at the Front, writes: -

" I am taking the opportunity of writing to let you know of the sad death of your late Sunday School organist .He joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and trained here for some time previous to going to Winchester and then to France.Mr. Speight was killed by a German shell which exploded near to the medical hut where he was standing. Sad as the news is to Mrs. Speight it is equally sad to us as we had known him almost from the time he came here to train with his regiment. His beautiful disposition and character soon made us very dear friends."

At the time Corporal Luther Speight was with the R.A.M.C. and Albert who was with the Yorkshire Regiment had been killed on the 1st July but his mother had not yet received the sad news.

Mametz Wood (2005) by Owen Sheers

For years afterwards the farmers found them –
the wasted young, turning up under their plough blades
as they tended the land back into itself.

A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade,
the relic of a finger, the blown
and broken bird's egg of a skull,

All mimicked now in flint, breaking blue in white
across this field where they were told to walk, not run,
towards the wood and its nesting machine guns.

And even now the earth stands sentinel,
reaching back into it for reminders of what happened
like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin.

This morning, twenty men buried in one long grave,
a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm,
their skeletons paused mid dance-macabre

in boots that outlasted them, their socketed heads tilted back at an angle
and their jaws, those that have them, dropped open.

As if the notes they had sung
have only now, with this unearthing,
slipped from their absent tongues.

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

He is remembered with Honour at Ebenezer Methodist Church, Hanging Heaton, Hanging Heaton War Memorial (St. Paul's) and Batley War Memorial.



Researched by members of
Batley History Group