Sam Sykes





Rank: - Private

Number: - 11371

Regiment: - King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry 6th Battalion

Killed in Action: - 28th January 1916 aged 24

Cemetery: - New Irish Farm, Belgium. V1.D.12

Family Details:

Sam was born at 18, White Lee Jail (Jail Road), White Lee on 17th March 1891 the son of William John Sykes, who came from Framwellgate, Durham and his wife Ellen (nee Scott) who came from Croft Street, Heckmondwike. The couple had married at St. Peter's Church, Birstall on 7th April 1887. At the time of the marriage William was a plate layer.

In 1891 the family was living at White Lee Jail (Jail Road) with William now employed as a miner before moving to live in Littleborough for several years where at least four of their children were born.

Sam had an elder brother Frank Scott (1896) and his younger siblings were Mary Ellen born 1893 in Heckmondwike, Hannah Eliza (1896), Elizabeth (1897), Lilly (1899), Joseph Henry (1900) were born in Littleborough.

A decade later the family were living at 23, Healey Street, which was a two roomed house and William was working as a coal miner (hewer). Richard was born in Healey Street in 1901 and Nora in 1905.

At the time of the census in 1911 William John was a dyer's labourer, Sam was a trammer in a coal mine, Mary and Hannah were cotton waste sorters and Elizabeth was a worsted doffer. The couple had lost 3 of their 12 children who had been born alive.

On the 16thSeptember 1911 Sam married Ada Kaye at St.John's, Carlinghow. Sam was a miner and Ada a warper living at Birch Street, Batley where they were still living at the time of Sam's death.

Sam and Ada had three daughters, Nora was born in 1912 followed by May 1914 and Mary in 1915.

Sam worked for several years at Shaw Cross Colliery as did his father, William John. He and his father were both well known members of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church. William had worked at Shaw Cross Colliery but changed his job to work for Messrs Henry Ellisons at Hollinbank Lane, White Lee where a terrible explosion occurred in December 1914. The firm had originally been used to manufacture picric acid for explosives in the Boer War but then lay unused

until the outbreak of the First World War, when Henry Ellison Ltd. reopened at the Government's request.

The chemical firm was making picric acid for the production of lyddite shells which was commissioned by the Government and on Wednesday 2nd December at around 1.50 p.m. an appalling explosion was heard followed by a deep rumble and the spot where some magazines had been were seen to be shrouded in a pall of heavy smoke. Debris was thrown enormous distances and the explosion was heard 50 miles away. Ten men were killed and six more badly injured. The factory was reduced to rubble and pieces of machinery were scattered in nearby fields. Houses nearby was destroyed and furniture flung into the street. Homes in Hollinbank Lane took the brunt, with many residents injured, while in Healey every house in the terrace at Belle Vue Street had its windows blown out. Sam's sister, Lizzie, working in a nearby mill, suffered a broken arm when the blast blew off the mill roof.

Workers had been grinding the acid crystals into powder. The cause of the blast was never confirmed, but at the inquest into the deaths the coroner blames a spark from a grinding machine. Doubt was cast on the safety standards at the factory, which had only been back in operation for six weeks Battalion before the disaster.

William was working in the boiler house when the explosion occurred. According to the newspaper reports at the time he had a remarkable escape. Although the boiler house was completely demolished, he was unscathed though dazed by concussion of the air and dyed yellow by the fumes of the explosion. However this version of events is subsequently contradicted, because at the time of Sam's death newspaper reports said that William sustained injuries to his eyes and legs in the blast, his health deteriorated and he died at the end of July 1915.

Service Details

Sam enrolled shortly after the outbreak of the war at the same time as his brother Frank, both with the 6th KOYLI.

The 6th were part of 14th (Light) Division. This was formed by volunteers after the 21st August 1914 and at first did not have any arms or equipment of any type. They were however deemed fit to serve by May 1915 although the move to the

fighting front was delayed due to lack of rifles and artillery ammunition. They disembarked on 9th June 1915.

Sam went to France about a fortnight after his brother, Frank, because he had suffered some foot problems. Newspaper reports said that Frank's brother who was serving in the same Regiment wrote home to the wounded soldier's mother saying:-

" I am sorry to inform you that our Frank has been wounded in the breast. He was wounded last Friday, the 30th July".

In a later letter the same unnamed soldier, but presumably was Sam, said that he was in good health, they were having some very wet weather just at present and a very hot time.

Frank, was wounded and in hospital for 18 weeks as a result first of a bullet which went right through his chest and came out at his side and second as the result of a wound in his leg. The bullet which passed through him was given to his family and Frank was being treated at Pontefract Barracks for his injuries.

The first battles he would have encountered would have been the actions at Hooge followed by the second attack on Bellewaarde.

Sam was one of the Battalion's stretcher bearers. He was killed in action on the 28th January 1916, although a report in the Batley News of 19th February said it was the 29th July. CWGC records show that he was one of two soldiers from the Battalion to die on the 28th. His death occurred at around the time he was expecting to obtain leave to come home for a few days. The family received news of Sam's death in February 1916 in the form of a message from Bugler Major G.H. Webb of the 6th KOYLI. Official confirmation came shortly afterwards in a letter from the Infantry Records Office, York.

Sam left a widow and three children. His brother Frank returned to the Front and in around October 1917 was posted as a prisoner of war at Muster, Westphalia after being missing for several months. Sam's brother in law Michael Phillips, Hannah's husband, also served in the Army during the war with the Royal Field Artillery.

His family remembered Sam in the local paper after the war on the anniversary of his death. On the 8th February 1919 they wrote:

Sykes- *In loving memory of my dear son, Private Sam Sykes, KOYLI, who was killed in action January 28th 1916 and whose mother resides at 23Healey Street Batley.*

There is in France a grave unknown
Where my dear son he sleeps alone,
From memory's page we will never blot
three little words:" Forget him not".
Days of sadness still come o'er us,
Hidden tears often flow,
Memory keeps our dear one near us,
Although he died three years ago.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.
From his loving mother, sisters, and brothers, and Frank (from Germany).

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

He is remembered on Batley War Memorial, St. John's Church, Carlinghow, St. Mary's Church and New Irish Farm Cemetery, Belgium.



Researched by members of
Batley History Group