Willie Townsley





Rank: -Private

Number: - 18734

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

Died of Wounds: - 1st June 1918 aged 22

Cemetery: - Etaples Military Cemetery, Pas de Calais LXV11. E.15

Batley News 8/6/1918

Family Details

Willie was born in Bradford on the 3rd July 1895 the son of Arthur and Annette Townsley (nee Gibson) who had married on 5th July 1888 at St. John's Church, Carlinghow, Batley. He was baptised at St. Luke's Eccleshill on 28th April 1897 on the same day as his siblings, Harry (1890) and Annie (1893) when the family lived at Killinghall Road, Bradford and Arthur's job was a warper.

George Hewitt was born in 1898 followed by Ben Gibson in 1900 when the family still lived in Eccleshill. Shortly after this the family must have moved to Batley because Willie attended Mill Lane School and Warwick Road School.

Harry died in February 1906 when the family was living at Back Bromley Street, Hanging Heaton.

By 1911 the family was living at 5, Mount Terrace, Mount Street, Batley Carr where the census shows there had been another sibling who had died in infancy.

Willie was connected to the Wesleyan Chapel at Commonside, Hanging Heaton. After leaving school he was a piecener later becoming a warper at Messrs. J. Newsome and Sons, Batley Carr where his father also worked.

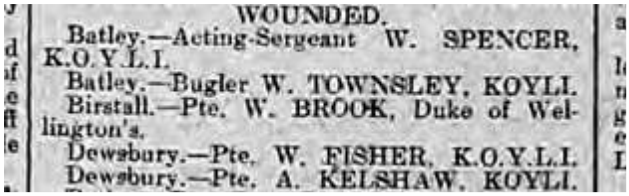
Service Details

Willie enlisted in Dewsbury in October 1914 and disembarked in France on 21st May 1915.

The 6th (Service) Battalion of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry was part of 43rd Brigade in 14th (Light) Infantry. They were training in Woking in October 1914, moving to Witley in November 1914, before moving again to Aldershot in February 1915.

In 1915 they saw action at Hooge where they were the first Division to be attacked by flamethrowers and the Second Attack of Bellewaarde.

In 1916 they fought at the Battle of Delville Wood and Battle of Flers-Courcelette (15-22 September). According to the Batley News it appears he was probably wounded in this battle.


WOUNDED.
Batley.—Acting-Sergeant W. SPENCER, K.O.Y.L.I.
Batley.—Bugler W. TOWNSLEY, KOYLI.
Birstall.—Pte. W. BROOK, Duke of Wellington's.
Dewsbury.—Pte. W. FISHER, K.O.Y.L.I.
Dewsbury.—Pte. A. KELSHAW, KOYLI.
Batley News 30 Sept 1916

In 1917 they fought at the German retreat of the Hindenburg Line, First Battle of Scarpe, Third Battle of Scarpe, Battle of Langemark, First Battle of Passchendaele, and Second Battle of Passchendaele

In 1918 they fought at the Battles of St. Quentin and the Avre.

Willie had served in France for over three years and injured twice when he was taken ill with influenza and taken to the Casualty Clearing Station at Etaples. He had been there for about six weeks when he died.

Etaples became the principal depot and transit camp for the British Expeditionary Force in France and also the point to which the wounded were transported. Among the atrocities of that war, the hospitals there were bombed and machine-gunned from the air several times during 19th May 1918.

In one hospital alone, it was reported, *'One ward received a direct hit and was blown to pieces, six wards were reduced to ruins and three others were severely damaged. Sister Baines, four orderlies and eleven patients were killed outright, whilst two doctors, five sisters and many orderlies and patients were wounded*." The nearby six-hectare Etaples Military Cemetery is resting place to 11,658 British and Allied soldiers from the conflict.

Willie wrote him in May 1918 saying that he would be there for some weeks adding: -

"Perhaps *you have seen it in the papers about Fritz making a raid on us the other night. My word; he didn't half drop some stuff. I never thought women were so brave but you can take my word for it they can give us chaps some start. They were just having calm as if nothing was happening. They filled me with admiration. Above a few of the sisters were killed. Some of the cases of shell shock we had to hold down in bed. I don't think anything is too bad for Bill. The long and short of it is he intends to finish this business one way or the other."*

Two days after receiving this letter another arrived saying he was seriously wounded, followed the same day, by a telegram saying he had died.

Etaples Hospital was at the centre of the 1918 flu pandemic, but he did not die of flu but the very bad bombing raid which took place on 1st June 1918.

His brother, George, who had been in France for 16 months, had just left hospital.

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

He is remembered with Honour at Holy Trinity Church, Batley Carr, Warwick Road School and Batley War Memorial.



Researched by members of
Batley History Group