

Frank Griffiths

Private

14th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment

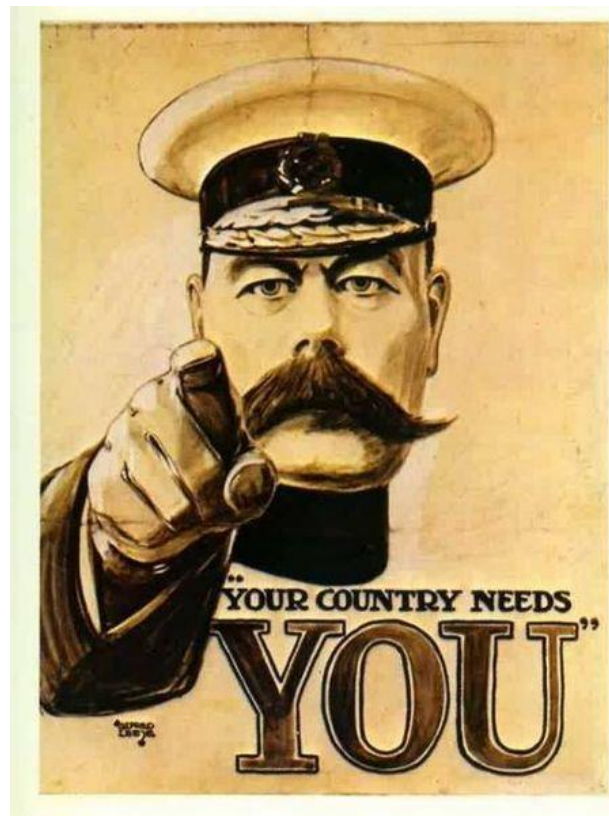


In the 1891 census Frank Griffiths, a shoemaker from Lydbury in north Shropshire, was living at 24 Crooked Well, Kington. Also living in this small terraced house was Elizabeth Price, who is recorded as Frank's servant and housekeeper. This intimate relationship resulted in the birth of a baby girl called Kate, in 1892. The following year, Frank and Elizabeth were married and shortly after had a second daughter, Mary. A third daughter, Gertrude Griffiths arrived in 1896 and the focus of this biography, Frank junior, was born in 1898. All would seem to have been going well for the Griffiths family however, these happy events were soon to be thrown into chaos when the dichotomy of life and death appeared at the start of the new century.

Having served her country for nearly 64 years, Queen Victoria relinquished her crown when, on the 22nd January 1900, she passed away at Osbourne House on the Isle of Wight. This tragic but not unexpected event came as no surprise to the country, but for the Griffiths family a shocking and unexpected death was to genuinely rock their world. Frank senior died in early 1900, the circumstances of his demise are unknown. However, as one life expired so another began when William Griffiths, Frank and Elizabeth's second son was born, also in early 1900. Today we can only speculate on the emotional turmoil Elizabeth must have been going through and hope Williams birth acted as a salve for the tragic loss of Frank. At the age of forty-one, with a very young family of five, she had lost her beloved

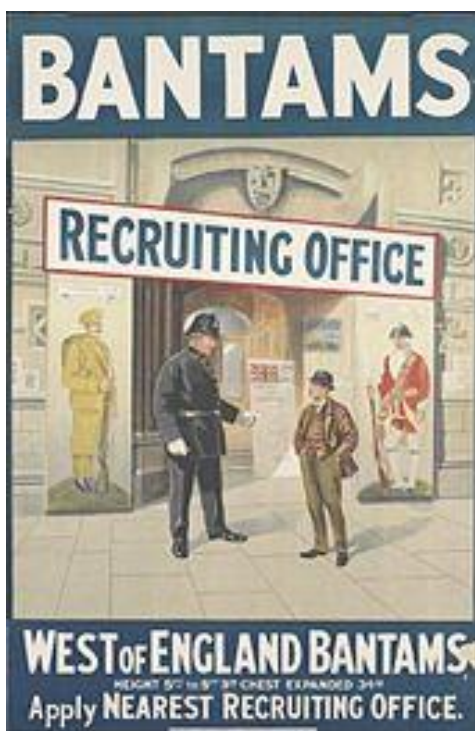
husband and the breadwinner of her family. Life can be so cruel, and the heartbreak of tragedy had not finished with Elizabeth yet.

Life must go on and in the 1901 Kington census we find Elizabeth, with her five children, living at 5 Oxford Terrace and employed as a charwoman. Ten years later the family had thinned down somewhat and only Elizabeth and the two boys were living together at 27 Bridge Street. In 1911 Elizabeth was still employed as a charlady and the two boys were attending Kington Boys School on Gravel Hill. When old enough Frank had left school, and taken a job as a farm hand, no doubt supplementing the family income.



Frank's story now progresses to the outbreak of war on 4th August 1914. Initially it was thought the nations professional army could deal with it and that it would be short lived and over by Christmas. However, after the Battle of Mons and the British armies long retreat to Paris, it became obvious that this war would not be short and indeed would be longer and tougher than many expected. If that wasn't bad enough, it also became evident that the regular army, under immense pressure, would need help. Lord Kitchener was tasked with raising a volunteer army from existing Territorials and then new volunteer recruits. The patriotic 'call to arms' went out resulting in tens of

thousands of young men volunteering to serve their country. Kitchener's New Army was formed and quickly blooded on the battlefields of the Western Front.



Frank Griffiths answered the call and enlisted in Glasbury, initially joining the Herefordshire Regiment as Private 5341 Griffiths. Sadly, Franks service records do not survive however, analysis of Herefordshire regimental service numbers suggest this was in November or December 1915. Frank would have been just seventeen and too young to serve, but enlisting at such a young age showed his intent. Those who signed up toward the end of 1915 were eventually called to service around May 1916. Following his initially training with the Herefords he was transferred in January 1917 into the 14th

Service Battalion (West of England) the Gloucestershire Regiment and assumed a new service number, 32043.

The 14th Service Battalion was a somewhat unusual battalion in so much as it was called a 'Bantam' battalion. The established height limit for service was 5' 4", but this excluded many able-bodied men from fighting. In truth men of any height were in short supply. The MP for Birkenhead in Cheshire, ironically named Alfred Bigland, petitioned Lord Kitchener to allow men of shorter stature to serve their country. The War Office agreed and Bigland was ordered to recruit men between 4' 10" and 5' 3" and establish the 15th Cheshire Regiment. These shorter battalions attracted the nickname of 'Bantams', so named after the small aggressive chickens. An image of these feisty



Recruitment Poster for
14th Gloucestershire Bantam
Battalion

fowl became a bantam battalion's proud emblem. The concept of smaller, aggressive fighting battalions soon spread around the country and indeed to allied countries as well. However, bantam battalions did not come without their problems. Allowing shorter chaps to enlist meant it was easier for patriotic underaged boys to volunteer. There is no suggestion that Frank was one such, but we can assume he was of shorter stature. Formed in Bristol on the 22nd April 1915 the 14th Gloucestershire Regiment was designated a bantam battalion, enabling them to accept men of shorter stature, many of whom were stocky, determined miners from the South Wales coalfields. As the demands for tunnelling companies and tank crews grew so did the demand for these tenacious little fighters. High demand meant that the number of short men diminished, and before long bantam battalions were forced to accept taller men. This brought about the demise of these plucky little battalions who lost their bantam designation and became indistinguishable from ordinary battalions.

The 14th Gloucestershire Battalion came under the command of the 105th Brigade of the 35th Division, a predominantly bantam Division who were renowned for their fierce fighting ability. The battalion initially landed in Le Havre on 30th January 1916. It is not thought Frank was with the initial wave but arrived later as part of a relief tranche. Through 1916 the battalion were present at the Battle of Bazentin Ridge, the fighting at Arrow Head Copse and Maltz and Falfemont farms. They were badly mauled during the Somme Offensive and desperately needed to regroup. The pressing demand for reinforcements meant Somme reliefs were rushed through and tended to be of inferior calibre to the original recruits. This led to many being transferred straight into the Labour Corps. Frank was not one of these. Such was the demand for men that gaps in manpower were filled by recently dismounted Yeomanry who underwent a crash course in trench warfare before

being drafted into those depleted frontline regiments. These new reliefs and dismounted Yeomanry were soon in action during 1917. With the tide of war turning against the enemy, but with little or no respite for the 14th, they were soon chasing the Germans back toward their mighty defensive Hindenburg Line. That year they also fought in Houthulst Forest and the Second Battle of Passchendaele. It is quite probable Frank was involved in many of these actions if not all and his brave efforts were to continue into 1918. To discover what happened to Frank in 1918 I will now turn to the battalion War Diary which reveals all.

The end of 1917 found the battalion relaxing, away from the front lines, and frankly enjoying themselves as best they could under the circumstances. During December the men spent most of the month training at an establishment called SCHOOL CAMP. On Christmas day the men were invited to attend a voluntary divine service followed by a Brigade football match in the afternoon. Over the next couple of days Brigade sports days and boxing matches were organised and the compiler of the diary is pleased to report that the battalion won second prize in the cross-country race. The winners are not mentioned. The close of 1917 was spent training in the mornings and general recreation in the afternoons. However, this air of peace and tranquillity was to change on the 2nd January when the battalion were marched to MURAT CAMP, a forward training facility. The following week saw the men employed in working parties, alongside II Corps, Royal Engineers. During the second week of January they moved further forward and were at a location called Canal Bank in the Langemark Sector, north of Ypres. On 16th January the battalion moved back into the front lines, relieving the 23rd Manchester regiment. In spite the enemies determined, heavy shelling casualties were light and after eight days they were relieved by their old pals the 23rd Manchester's. Retiring behind the lines to TURCO CAMP, they recuperated, regrouped and undertook further trench warfare training. This proved to be a quiet time for the men who took the opportunity to relax and have any trench foot or general healthcare problems addressed. On 1st February they returned to the trenches in Langemark Sector again relieving the 23rd Manchester Regiment.

Direct contact with the enemy was imminent and at 7pm on the 4th of February a unit of the battalion undertook a raid on Gravel Farm, a well-known German stronghold to the north of Poelcapelle. The raiding party consisted of two officers and thirty-eight other ranks of 'Z' Company. The raid was preceded by a heavy artillery barrage on the farm and surrounding Pill Boxes with Bangalor Torpedoes used to cut defensive barbed wire. Once a path was cleared the raiding party entered the farm complex and proceeded to clear all buildings of enemy troops, killing or taking them prisoner. The German response was ferocious. They shelled the farm and surrounding support trenches with a hellish, heavy bombardment and it was during this action that the party received casualties. The war diary records that six other ranks were wounded with no deaths. However, military records sadly inform us that Frank was 'killed in action' on the **4th February 1918**.

In the 23rd February edition of the Kington Times Frank's death was reported.

KINGTON MAN KILLED

Information has been received that Pte. Frank Griffiths, son of Mrs. Griffiths a widow, residing at Majors Row, Kington, was killed on the 4th inst. in France while serving with the Gloucester Regiment. His officer writing to the mother said he was a good and reliable soldier and that he with two others were killed by a shell entering their shelter. He was 20 years of age and had been in the army nearly two years, previous to which he was working as a farm hand.

From this report we can assume Frank was not directly involved in the raid but may have been killed during the bombardment of the support trenches. If so these deaths are not recorded in the war diary. The following day the 14th Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment were relieved by the 15th Sherwood Foresters. The raid on Gravel Farm was to be the last action undertaken by the battalion during the war. About this time many regiments were consolidation and on February 11th the 14th Battalion was disbanded. Many of its number were absorbed into their sister battalion the 13th Glosters.

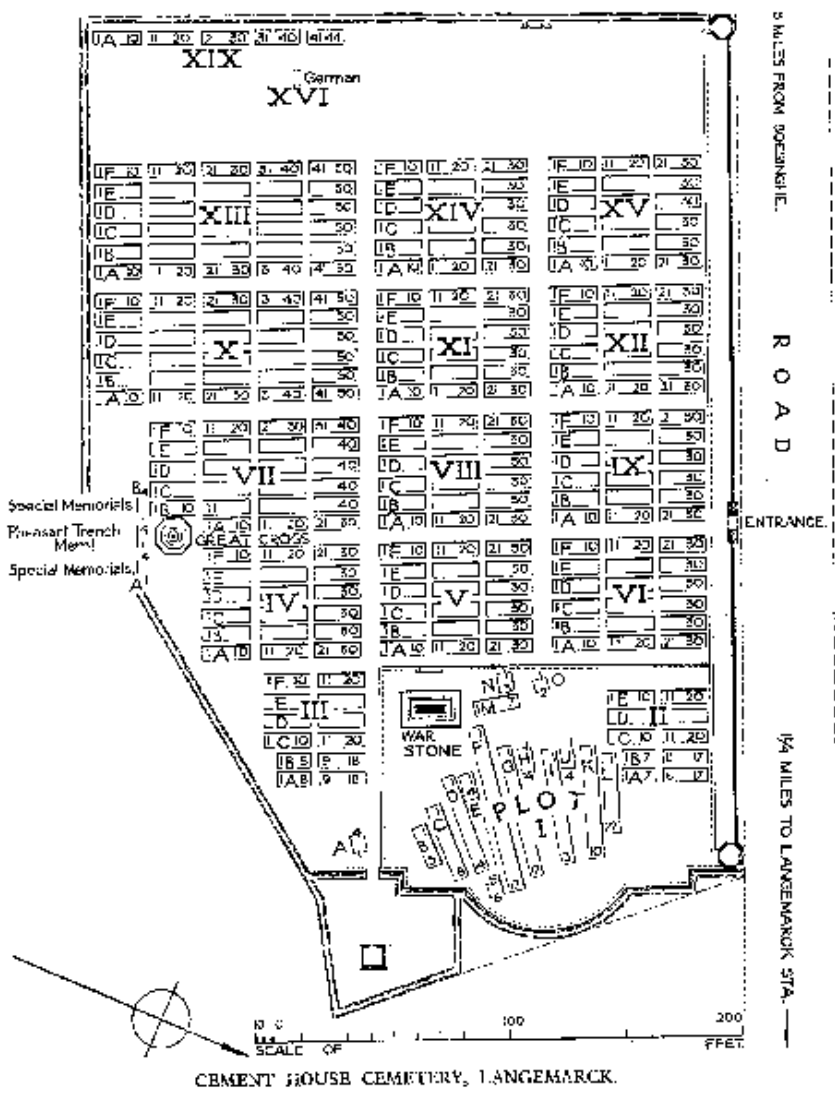
Frank is buried in Cement House Cemetery, grave reference II.A.5. The cemetery is located to the south west of Langemark. Cement House was the military name given to a fortified farm house on the Langemark-Boesinghe road. Plot I, the initial burial ground, was started at the end of August 1917 and was used by burial officers, field ambulances and units in the line until April 1918. After the November Armistice, plots II-XV were added when burials from outlying battlefields, cemeteries and churchyards were brought in. The cemetery continues to expand



as further remains are discovered in the vicinity. Cement House Cemetery now holds the bodies or commemorates the deaths of 3,592 Commonwealth servicemen of the First World War. The included plan demonstrates the sheer scale

of the cemetery. Plot II can be seen in the bottom right hand corner and it appears Frank was one of the first to be moved and reinterred from his original burial site, which is unknown.

Following his death Frank's pay accounts were finalised and on the 6th May 1918 his mother Elizabeth received £7 13s 9d. Another £1 18s 6d was forwarded in September and this was followed by a War Gratuity of £7 10s in January 1920. Elizabeth also took receipt of the medals posthumously awarded to him, the Victory and British War medals.



CEMENT HOUSE CEMETERY, LANGEMARCK.

Frank had patriotically and bravely fought for his country for nearly two years. At his death he was just twenty years old. Sacrifice such as his allows us to enjoy the lives we lead today.

*When you go home, tell them of us and say
For their tomorrow, we gave our today.*

John Maxwell Edmonds

Frank's story is one of dedication to duty and the sorrow of death. The pain and anguish his mother and sisters suffered can only be imagined, but the war had not finished with this family. The gift of life is so precious but can be extinguished too easily. Please now read the biography of William Griffiths, Franks young brother.

