

Frank Harley Owens

Private

52858

13th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment

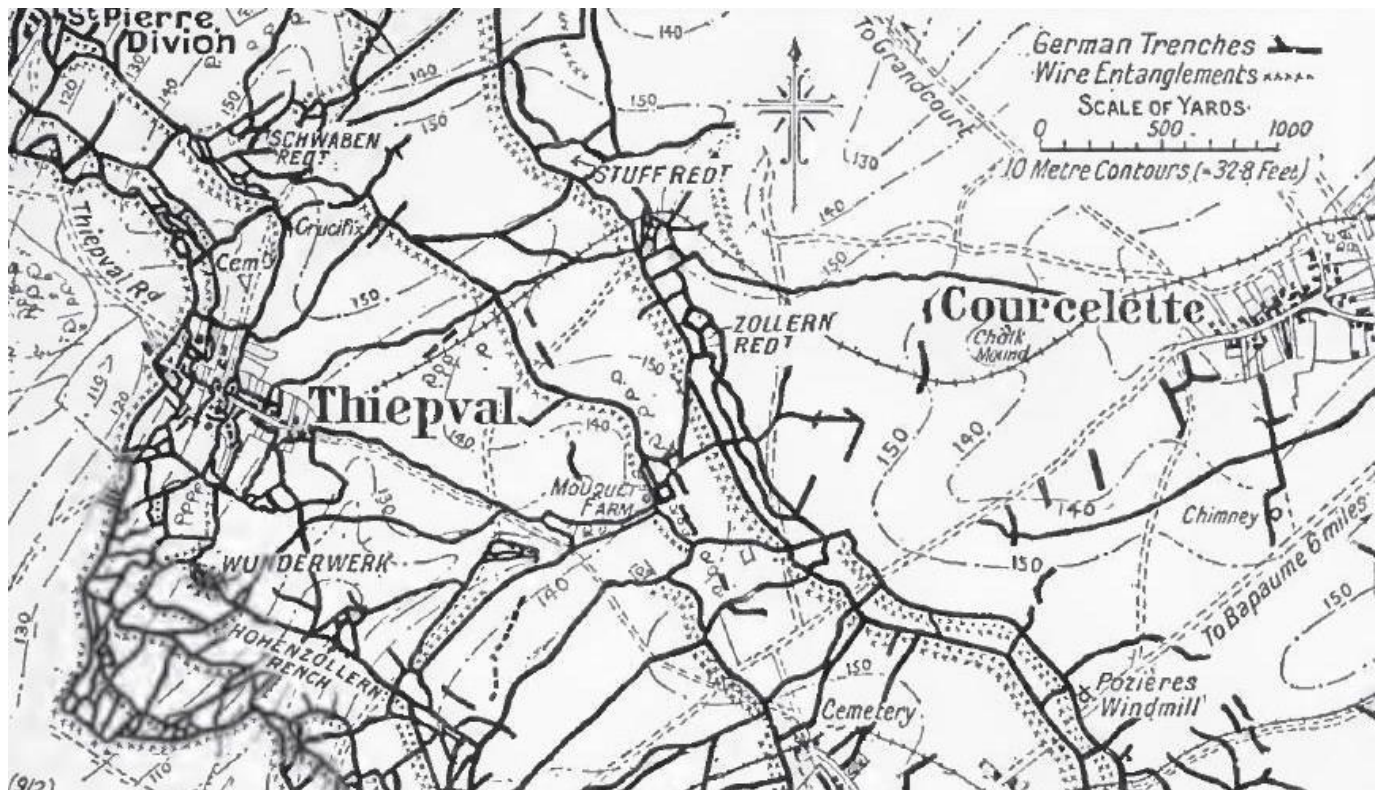


The Owens family were Welsh border farmers of long standing. Owen Owens was born at Llanwenny Farm, Llanfihangel-nant-Melan in 1846. He married local girl Margaret Worthing in 1866 and shortly after their first child Mary Alice Owens arrived. Mary, known by the family as Polly, was the first of twelve children and was to play a major role in the upbringing of future generations of Owens children. The 1871 census reveals that the fledgling family were farming at Llanbardarn Vawr, a small village on the road to Llandrindod Wells and Margaret's birthplace. From here they farmed at Brynhynlle near Penybont and it was at this farm that the first five of their children were born. Around 1873 the family moved into the Kington area when they were tenant farmers at Hergest Court. The next seven of their children were born here culminating with the focus of this biography, Frank Harley Owens in 1891. However, this rural idyll was torn apart when tragedy hit the family in early 1895. On the 13th March 1895 Margaret passed away. Her death certificate records cancer of the spleen and quantum asthenia as the cause of death. Tragically this means she died of extreme exhaustion brought on by her cancer. She was just 47 years of age. If that was not enough tragedy for the family, later that year on 6th December, Owen Owens was also taken. He died of acute gastritis syncope or more simply put, severe inflammation of the stomach lining. His life too was cut short at the age of just 49. The devastation these events caused the Owens family can only be imagined. Frank had lost both mother and father in quick succession and he still barely a toddler.

Franks older brothers, William Henry Owens and Arthur Percy Owens, took over the farm at Hergest Court. In 1894 Mary Alice married Joseph Taylor who farmed Stones Farm at Dolyhir. They moved to Gladestry Court Farm, where they were tenant farmers, and upon the death of her parents in 1895 took over caring responsibilities for the two youngest siblings, Frank and Eleanor. Another of Franks brothers, David Thomas Owens had married his first cousin Jesse Margaret Owens and together they farmed at Lower Harpton, Walton and had four children. This branch of the Owens family was also struck by tragedy when David's wife Jesse died on the 14th April 1911, one week after the birth of her fourth child Frederick, she was just thirty years of age. This devastating event led to the fragmentation of the family. A distraught David chose to leave Britain and on the 12th May 1912, sailed from Liverpool, emigrating to Canada. His two older children Cecil and Enid moved in with Mary and Joseph Taylor in Gladestry. The two youngest, James (Harry) and Fred, went to live with their aunt, Fanny Davies at Upper House, Evenjobb. The 1911 census reveals that Mary and Joseph had been married for seventeen years and there were no signs of them having had children of their own. It is quite evident that older sister Mary had taken responsibility for bringing up the four young Owens children, perhaps this made up for not having children of her own. As for Frank, each day he travelled the three miles from Gladestry to Kington, taking the lane through Upper Hergest, to be educated at Lady Hawkins' School. Upon graduation, records indicate Frank worked for his brother-in-law Joseph on the farm at Gladestry. The Gladestry Primary School Admissions Register indicates that Enid and her older brother Cecil were admitted to the school in May 1912 but attended for less than a year since in April 1913, Joseph moved the whole family to Mill Farm in Little Cowarne, near Bromyard. And then came war.

Rather exceptionally Frank's military service papers survive and from these we discover that on the 3rd December 1915 he enlisted at Shrewsbury, into the 3rd/1st Shropshire Yeomanry. He gave the family address as New House Farm, in Little Cowarne, suggesting perhaps that the family had moved again. Private 2813 Owens undertook basic training and would have known he was about to go overseas when in July 1916 he was inoculated against typhoid. On the 11th of August 1916, he embarked at Southampton, sailed across the Channel and set foot on French soil at Rouen on the 13th. Here he joined No 1 Territorial Base Depot and on the 19th of August was transferred to the 13th Battalion the Cheshire Regiment where his service number changed to 52858. 13th Battalion the Cheshire Regiment, unofficially referred to as the Wirral Battalion, were attached to 74 Brigade, 25th Division and had originally arrived in France in September 1915. The battalion were heavily involved in actions at Vimy Ridge in May 1916, The Battle of Albert in early July and the Battle of Bazentin in mid-July 1916. Toward the end of July and until the 10th of August the 25th Division were fighting at the Battle of Pozieres. The Battles of Albert, Bazentin and Pozieres were smaller actions in the much larger offensive now known as the Battle of the Somme.

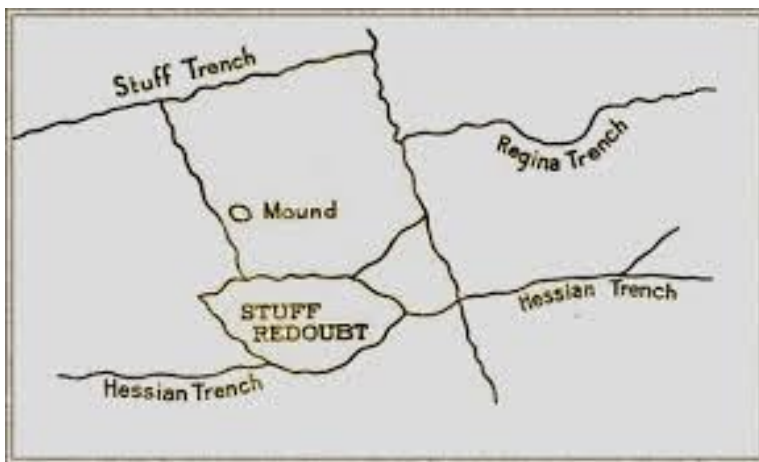
Frank, having joined the Cheshire Regiment on the 19th of August, would have been a tranche of relief soldiers sent to boost numbers in the regiment and was immediately pushed into the front line. The Somme offensive continued into September and on the 26th the 74th Brigade were allocated a section of the front line immediately south of the River Ancre, outside the town of Thiepval. Frank's battalion were involved in a series of small scale raids in early October 1916 and it was during one of these raids that Frank received a relatively minor gunshot wound to his right ear. On the 8th of October, he was admitted to the 133rd Field Ambulance for treatment and by the 15th of October had recovered sufficiently being discharged and sent back to his battalion.



German fortifications opposite the British lines at Thiepval were formidable. A huge network of trenches had been developed and at strategic points the enemy had augmented heavily fortified redoubts. The enemy considered these strongpoints so important that they garrisoned them with thousands of troops. Each redoubt consisted of a battalion command post, signal and first aid posts, massed interlocking machine gun emplacements and a myriad of trenches and deep dug-outs for protection. Redoubts such as Schwaben, Stuff and Zollern became the Achilles' heel of the British Military. These three redoubts are clearly identified in the contemporary German trench map above.

The Ancre Heights run from Courcellette in the east to Thiepval Ridge and Schwaben Redoubt in the west. This elevated plateau has no discernible high points however it

was of enormous strategic importance to the Germans since it overlooked the Ancre Valley where their forces were concentrated. Hence the formidable fortifications, notably Regina Trench (Stavfen Riegel), Stuff Trench and Redoubt (Stavfenfest) and Schwaben Redoubt, part of the Thiepval Ridge. Following bitter fighting between 27th and 30th September, Zollern Trench and Redoubt and Hessian Trench had fallen to Canadian and British forces, but only after enormous loss of life. Following an intense barrage British forces attacked Stuff Redoubt on the 9th October, with only partial success. On the 14th British forces push on from Stuff Redoubt to a position called the 'Mounds'. This high point gave an excellent observation point for overlooking German forces in the Grandcourt area to the north. After intense fighting Schwaben Redoubt finally fell to the British on 14th October. The enemy counter attack Schwaben Redoubt three times, however all were repulsed. Schwaben was of vital importance to the Germans and they again attacked on the 21st, partially reoccupying the redoubt before once again being repelled later in the day. The ferocity of the fighting can only be imagined, with both combatants giving no quarter. The 21st October saw a massed advance over a 5000-yard front by British and Canadian forces. Heavy shelling had severely damaged Stuff and Regina trenches and at 12:06 Canadian forces attack Regina Trench with 11th Brigade in support. Regina was taken. This action was augmented by the British forces, including the 13th Cheshire's, advancing on Stuff Trench.



I would like now to turn to the war diary of the 13th Battalion the Cheshire Regiment which provides details of the battalion, and Frank's, involvement in the titanic struggle to take Stuff Redoubt. On the 6th October, the battalion had relieved the 2nd South Lancashire Regiment in Hessian Trench in the Mouquet Farm sector, to the east of Thiepval. Mouquet Farm can clearly be seen in

the centre of the map above. Through July and August, the Australian Army had seen savage fighting at Mouquet Farm and although fighting was still intense, casualties were light for the 13th Cheshire's. They were relieved on the 13th by the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers and moved into reserve. On the 18th the battalion was moved back into Hessian Trench and prepared for an imminent big offensive. However, the following day the operation was postponed and the men were moved back out of the trenches and placed again into reserve. On the 20th they took up their positions again in Hessian Trench, Mouquet Farm and again prepared for the big push. This push started at 12:06 pm on the 21st. What follows is a transcript of the action that day, taken from the diary.

The battalion made an attack from Hessian Trench on the enemy in Regina Trench. The battalion, after the usual bombardment, followed up our barrage with the greatest gallantry. The jump off from our parapet was timed at 12.6pm. The whole battalion went over and entered the enemy trenches, drove back the Germans, retained about 250 prisoners, captured a machine gun, one party advancing well forward, put a German field gun out of action but was unable to bring it back, consolidated the position and were finally relieved at 6pm on the 22nd inst. Numerous congratulatory telegrams were received, one from Commander-in-Chief to reserve army Commander 'Hearty congratulations to you and your troops on the excellent work done on Saturday. The superiority displayed by all arms in the fight and the complete success are a happy augury for the future'. The telegram received from the Army Reserve reads 'The Army commander wishes you and your gallant troops to accept his best congratulations on Saturday's success beginning with SCHWABEN REDOUBT. It has been a very good day's work which is a good augury for future success in the near future. Please convey congratulations to all troops under your command'.

The congratulatory messages mention Schwaben Redoubt, which had been taken earlier by British forces. I do not believe the 13th battalion were involved in that advance since Hessian Trench is located just north of Mouquet Farm, south of Stuff Redoubt and a considerable distance from Schwaben Redoubt. Regina Trench mentioned in the war diary was



Stump Road Cemetery, Grancourt

an enemy trench to the north east of Stuff Redoubt, see diagram above. It is quite possible the messages received were blanket communique released to all those who participated in the successful advance across the whole of the front. Battalion casualties



on the day amounted to 3 officers and 24 other ranks killed, with 7 officers and 118 other ranks wounded. 2 officers and 56 other ranks were recorded as missing.

Private 52858, Frank Harley Owens was killed in action on the **21st October 1916** during the 13th Cheshire's brave assault on the Stuff Redoubt. Frank died at the age of 25 and his army career lasted just 323 days. Frank did his duty, fought like a lion alongside his comrades, but paid the ultimate price. He is buried at Stump Road Cemetery, just outside the village of

Grandcourt on the Somme, grave ref C8. For his brave and unfaltering courage Frank was awarded the British War and Victory medals.

In April 1917, a memorial service was held in Kington to commemorate Frank's life and passing. He had the foresight to complete a will before leaving for France, hence, when it came to probate of his estate, the process was a relative formality. On the 23rd of April 1917, his wishes were respected when all his estate, £461 4s 10d (£19861), passed to his sister and next of kin, Mary. Worry and concern continued for the Owens family when one of Frank's brothers, Frederick Owens of the South Lancashire Regiment, was reported missing in early 1918. The family must have been relieved to learn in the April that Fred was in fact being held as a Prisoner of War. Fred survived and was released from captivity at the end of the war and returned to Kington in December 1918.



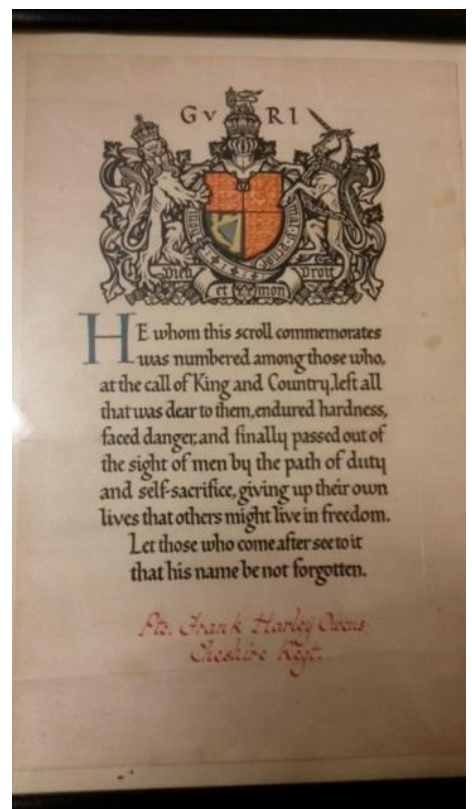
The pain of losing a loved one never went away and events conspired to ensure his loss was constantly refreshed. Frank's service record shows that Mary did not receive her brother's effects until 16th January 1919, when she signed the requisite receipt. The authorities then appear to have lost track of Mary and once the dust of war had settled were attempting to track down the family. In June 1922, a letter from the

Chief Constable of Herefordshire confirmed that Mary Taylor was Frank's next of kin and that she was still living at Little Cowarne. On Army form 5080 Mary confirmed that Frank's parents were deceased and that he was not married nor had any children. She acknowledged receipt of his Medals and Commemorative Scroll on the 14th of July 1922. The photograph above is of Frank's memorial plaque, issued after the war. Frank's parents, Owen and Margaret were buried in Newchurch cemetery in 1895 with a gravestone erected to them shortly after. Upon Frank's death in 1916 the family had a memorial plaque placed adjacent to his parent's

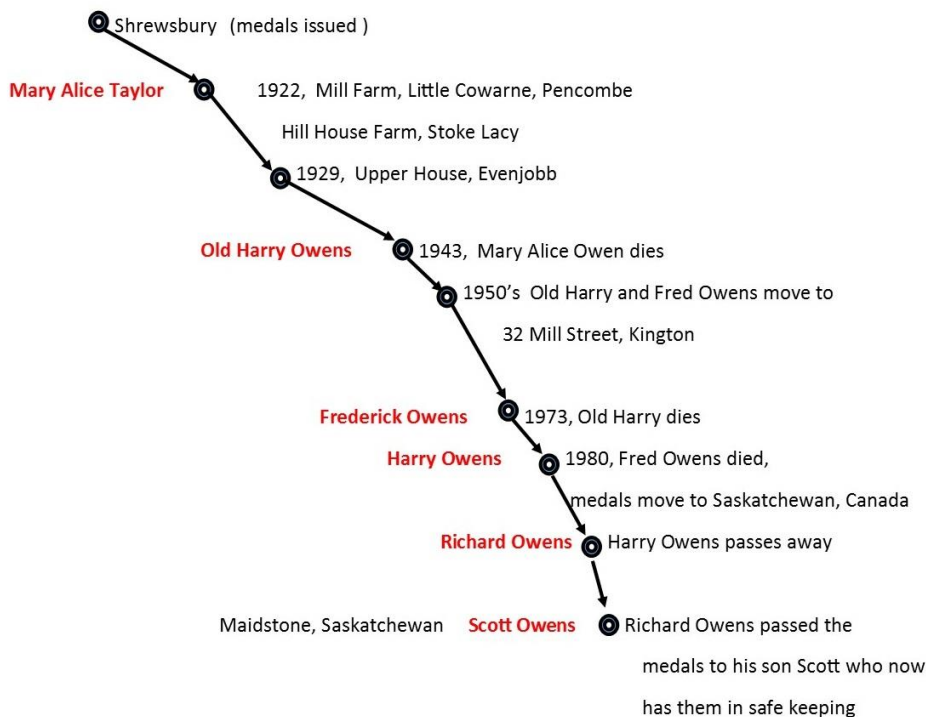


gravestone. Effectively Frank was once again close to his parents.

Normally this would be the end of my biography of this brave young man but not on this occasion. A living relative of Frank's, Roy Pryce, made contact and provided invaluable family



information and detail which has enabled me to compile this comprehensive account of Franks life. Roy is the distant nephew of Frank Owens, his mother being Enid Margaret Owens, the young girl who went to live with her aunt Mary at Gladestry Court following the death of her mother in 1911. Not only was Roy able to provide invaluable information regarding his family but has also researched what happened to Franks medals. Medals awarded for bravery or service assume a life of their own and develop their own history, such is the case with Franks medals and Roy's fascinating research is worth reproducing in this document.



As we know Mary Taylor received Franks medals in 1922. Mary and her husband Joseph moved from Little Cowarne to Upper House Farm in Evenjobb in 1929 where they lived with Mary's sister Fanny and her husband Oliver Davies. The medals moved to Evenjobb with Mary. In the meantime, Cecil and Harry Owens, brothers of Enid, had married and both emigrated to Canada in 1926-27, as will be seen this is

relevant. Joseph Taylor died in 1933 with Mary passing away ten years later in 1943. The medals passed to her brother Harry (old Harry, Frank and Mary's brother) who also farmed in Evenjobb. When old Harry retired, he moved to 32 Mill Street, Kington where he was cared for by his nephew Fred Owens and his wife Eleanor. You will recall Fred was the younger brother of Enid, whose father David Thomas Owens had emigrated to Canada in 1912 following the death of his wife, after giving birth to Fred. When old Harry passed away in 1973, aged 90, the medals passed to Fred. Fred Owens died in 1980 in Kington and in his will, possibly influenced by old Harry Owens wish that the medals should follow the male Owens line, bequeathed Franks medals to Cecil's family in Canada. However, Cecil had died in 1966 so the medals were passed to his brother Harry, in Maidstone, Saskatchewan. You will recall Harry had emigrated to Canada with his brother in 1926. When Harry passed away the medals were passed to his son Richard Owens, who in turn has passed the medals to his son Scott Owens who runs

the families arable farm in Maidstone. It is gratifying to know the medals are still to this day safe in the hands of one of Frank Harley Owens descendants.

My sincere thanks go to Roy Pryce for his collaboration in compiling this biography and to the Owens family in Canada who provided photographs of Frank's WW1 effects and medals. Frank may not have served long in France but his sacrifice was no less painful to his family. Sacrifice such as Frank's, should never be forgotten.

