

Frank Harvey Parker

Private

244134

1st/5th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment



The Parker family were prominent in Kington throughout the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Parkers and Sons Drapers and Milliners was a large business operating from premises at 38 High Street, Kington and provided employment for many locals and specialists, such as Milliners, from further afield. The name of Parkers' is immortalised in this fine mosaic at the entrance to No.38. Today the shop has been extended and is in the care of Nisa, or as many older Kington folk recall, Ashby's. Francis Parker was the original proprietor but in his more senior years passed the mantel of upholding the family business to his son Alfred. Trained by his father, Alfred is found in the 1881 census to be a fully qualified Master Draper who had established his own small independent business at 12 Church Street, Kington. Early in 1881 Alfred married Eleanor Jane Harvey, originally from Cardiff but at the time the daughter of The Oxford Arms landlord, William Harvey. By 1891 Alfred had assumed responsibility for the family business at 38 High Street. Parker families tended to be large with



Alfred and Eleanor's being no exception. Frances was their first born, in 1884 swiftly followed by the rather grandly named Milbrough Marshall Parker a couple of years later in 1886. More about Milbrough later. The focus of this biography, Frank Harvey Parker, was born in late 1888 followed by Hilda May Parker in 1892. So, what of Frank Harvey Parker. The detail above provides a hint as to the pedigree of the family he was born into. Frank attended Lady Hawkins' Grammar School and it could be suggested his future was all plotted out in the drapery business. However, Frank had other ideas and it appears he had no desire to enter the family business. The 1911 census informs us that he had moved away from Kington and was employed as an apprentice carpenter living at 74 Llandaff Road, Cardiff.

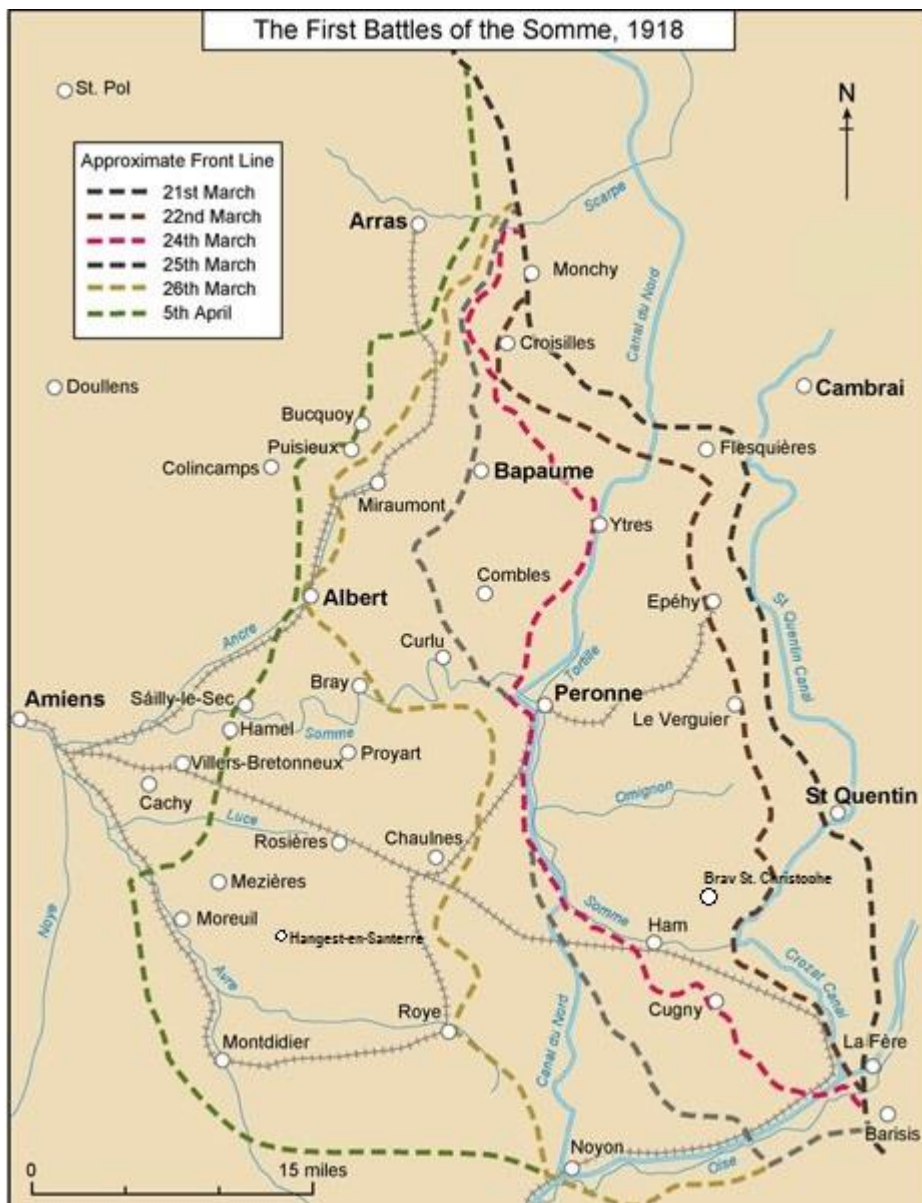
Sadly, very few of his service records survive but from those which do we can see that he was one of the first to volunteer for war service. The 7th November edition of the Kington Times provides useful details of his actions at the outbreak of hostilities. It was at the Burton Hotel, that Frank enlisted into 'D' Company of the 1st Herefordshire Regiment, assuming the new identity of Private, 1182, Parker. The Times records that numerous other Kington men, in a surge of patriotic fervour and a desire for adventure, also enlisted at the same time and had been assessed as fit and inoculated in preparation for overseas service. We can assume Frank undertook his initial training with the Herefordshire Regiment but at some point, he was transferred into the 1st/5th Cheshire Regiment, at which point his service number changed to Private 15534 Parker.

The 1st/5th (Earl of Chester's) Battalion was formed in Chester in August 1914 and became part of the Cheshire Brigade, Welsh Division. Initially based in Shrewsbury and Church Stretton by the end of August it had transferred to Northampton, and again in December 1914 to Cambridge. On 15th February 1915 the battalion landed at Le Havre, then forming part of the 14th Brigade of the 5th Division. The 1st/5th Cheshire's were a frontline infantry battalion, fighting in the trenches and encountering the enemy at close quarters. They also proved themselves adept at repairing damaged trench systems and rebuilding new when required. It was this aptitude which came to the attention of command and on the 29th November 1915, they were taken out of their infantry role and converted into a Pioneer Battalion for the 5th Division. Later, on 13th February 1916, the battalion were transferred, as a Pioneer Battalion, to the 56th (London) Division. It was also about this time that Frank's service number was once again change to 244134, Private Parker.



The role of a Pioneer Battalion was twofold. While maintaining their frontline infantry capability they also became Divisional engineers. In conjunction with Royal Engineers their primary function was field engineering and only in an emergency would they be called upon to perform their infantry role. Field engineering works were almost entirely

undertaken in dangerous circumstances the object of which was to support the success of allied attacks/defences. Roads, bridges, tracks, tramways as well as trenches all came under their remit. The success of an attack, resupply of troops, ammunition, food, water, evacuation of casualties etc. relied on the effectiveness of the Pioneer Battalion. They were not expected to build state of the art communications links, roads, etc. but they were expected to make transport links which made use of available materials and to work quickly in extreme conditions. Invariably this work was undertaken within the battle zone and at night. Under constant threat of enemy shellfire, rifle and machine gun attention, this was a truly dangerous but vital activity, requiring great skill and accuracy from battalion officers. The dangers of pioneer work are evidenced by the heavy losses of 1st/5th Battalion officers.



To gain an appreciation of what Frank endured in the early months of 1918 it would be useful to contextualise the fighting on the Western Front at that time. The start of 1918 saw the German army defending the Hindenburg Line, a heavily fortified position they had been driven back to in the latter part of 1917. Battered and bruised but still determined to continue the fight, the Germans planned a major Spring Offensive, codenamed Operation Michael, the objective being to force the allied army back to the Channel ports, effectively driving them into the sea, thus cutting off resupply routes from Britain. The advance took place over an extended line from La Fere in the south, north through St Quentin and on to Flesquieres, a

town to the south-east of Arras. The massed offensive was initiated from the Hindenburg Line on 21st March 1918. Progress was rapid and decisive and after two days General Ludendorff, officer commanding the advance, modified his plans driving due west into the British lines hoping to drive a wedge between the French and British

lines, using the Somme River as a defensive barrier. However, such was their speed of advance, they outstripped their ability to resupply and the charge petered out at Villers-Bretonneux to the east of Amiens. The awful irony of the German Spring Offensive was that most of the fighting took place over much of the ground covered during the original Battle of the Somme in 1916. The German army suffered terribly in their rapid advance and with depleted manpower and over-stretched resupply lines they were unable to recover. Operation Michael failed in its objective and the halt at Villers-Bretonneux on 5th April 1918 marked the end of the Spring Offensive. Large numbers of American troops were drafted into the area to relieve the beleaguered allied forces. A period of reconstitution followed and, on the 21st August the allies launched their counter offensive. This rolled into the decisive Hundred Day Offensive, which saw the allies effectively push the Germans out of France and Belgium and brought an end to the war on 11th November 1918. So, with this brief overview of the fighting in 1918, I will now turn my attention more directly to the 1st/5th Cheshire Battalion and examine what happened to them, and more particularly Frank, during the German's headlong advance to the coast in March 1918.



The battalion war diary for this period reveals that the 1st/5th Cheshire Regiment were billeted in the northern suburbs of Arras at Sainte Catherine-lès-Arras. It provides comprehensive details about where its three Companies were employed but nothing specific about what they were involved in. This is understandable since they were under the control of 56th (London) Divisional command and were at their behest to go where ever considered necessary, to undertake engineering works and support the frontline infantry battalions of the Division. The Division were holding a line of 5000 yards just north east of Arras, from Gavrelle to Arleux-en-Gohelle. The graphic above clearly

shows this and when compared with the earlier map we can see the 56th Division were at the extreme northern sector of the German's Spring Offensive. Operation Michael had started to the south of their position on the 21st March but on the 28th attention fell upon their position in the north and the conflict which followed became known as the First Battle of Arras 1918.

The British were aware an immense attack was about to occur and were desperately preparing their defences. At 3am a huge artillery battle commenced with the Germans using high explosive and gas shells to pound the British lines. At 4am the barrage intensified and reached a peak at 6am when shells of both sides met and passed on their destructive paths. At 7.15am the barrage lifted and the enemy advanced in massed formations. They were met by stiff British resistance with artillery and machine gun fire causing havoc amongst the advancing troops. Despite this the enemy pressed on and made limited initial gains. However, the British line held and on the evening of the 28th the attackers abandoned their assault and reset their sites on other objectives. The First Battle of Arras was one isolated action in the much larger Battle of the Somme 1918. As can be seen in the earlier map the Germans had limited success in the Arras sector and accordingly the British would proclaim the Battle of Arras a success for the British Army.

Frank Harvey Parker was 'killed in action' on the **28th of March 1918**. Because of the intensity of the fighting the 'Emergency' clause in the Pioneers contract almost certainly meant Frank was fighting in the desperate attempt to defend Arras. We will never know the details for sure, but we do know that Frank was buried in Roclincourt Military



Cemetery, grave reference V.B.17. The map on the previous page shows Roclincourt as a small village to the north of Arras, not far from where Frank lost his life. The cemetery now contains 916 Commonwealth burials of the First World War, 32 of them unidentified and four German war graves.

The promising career of Frank Harvey Parker was cruelly cut short. For his sacrifice he was awarded the Victory and British War medals but also the Territorial Force War Medal. This campaign medal is the rarest of the five British Great War medals and was awarded to those who fulfilled very specific service criteria. Established in April 1920 it was awarded to members of the Territorial Force and Territorial Force Nursing Service who volunteered for service overseas on or before 30 September 1914 and served overseas. They had to have been serving with the Force on 4 August 1914; or have completed four years' service with the Force before 4 August 1914 and re-joined on or before 30 September 1914. This suggests Frank was already a member of the Territorial Force before war was declared on 4th August 1914. In addition, prior to 30th September 1914, volunteers had to agree, either verbally or by written agreement, to serve outside the United Kingdom and to have actually served overseas between 4th August 1914 and 11th November 1918. The award of this privileged medal meant they did not qualify for the 1914 Star or 1914-15 Star. In total, 33,944 Territorial Force War Medals were awarded. This included 227 to nurses of the Territorial Force Nursing Service, the only women to receive the medal.

Back home the news of Franks death must have been devastating. He had been fighting for almost four years and endured the most horrific of circumstances. The Spring Offensive of March/April 1918 was just another big push, another trial to be endured by the beleaguered allied troops. They were not to know that halting the enemy advance in April 1918 was in fact the start of the end. In August the allies counter attacked and pushed the enemy all the way back to the German border with the armistice being signed at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month 1918. Frank almost made it but was never to witness the success of all his effort.

Back home in Kington life had to continue. The local newspaper, The Kington Times, reveals that Alfred had sold the family business in June 1908, to a Mr F.W. Mitchell and we can assume this allowed Alfred and Eleanor a comfortable retirement. Alfred moved the family to Bridge Street and his early retirement allowed him time to become more actively involved in Kington life. A founding member of the Kington Masonic Lodge, in 1911 he was appointed, Vicars Warden and spells on Kington town council followed as did a position on Lady Hawkins' Grammar School Board of Governors in 1915. However, by 1919 Alfred was again on the move, this time away from Kington, to Mayfield Lodge in Worcester. Perhaps the loss of his son and the memories Kington invoked were too painful and he had to move away. Finally, in the 3rd December 1921 edition of the Kington Times, we learn of Alfred's sad demise in Worcester. Alfred's funeral was held back in his beloved Kington where numerous mourners gathered at his graveside to pay their final respects. Alfred was 73 years old.

Earlier in this peace I mentioned Franks wonderfully named older sister Milbrough Marshall Parker, whose life is well worth exploring. In the 1901 census, at the age of 15, Milbrough is found boarding at The Gothic Hall, St. Pancras Station, along with dozens of other young female students. The Gothic Hall (Midland Grand Hotel) is the seminal masterpiece of the celebrated Victorian architect Sir George Gilbert Scott and at its opening in 1868 it was lauded as an example of typically Victorian extravagant



opulence. It is quite possible this group of excited students were staying at the hotel on an organised trip to London. By 1911 Milbrough had decided upon her chosen career, nursing, and is found training in the Royal Southern Hospital in Toxteth Park, Liverpool. The following year she is certified as a qualified nurse and in 1918 as a State Registered Nurse, registration number 8227. Not to be outdone by her brave younger brother, in September 1915 she joined the British Red Cross Society and Order of St. John and volunteered for nursing service in France. She served until June 1918 and was awarded the 1914-15 Star, Victory and British War medals. Milbrough was totally dedicated to her profession and never married. She died a spinster in Exeter on 14th November 1963.

Franks name is remembered on Kington War Memorial and on Lady Hawkins' School Roll of Honour. His name was also read out at a Peace Service held on Sunday 6th July 1919 at St' Mary's Church, Kington. Every year, on Remembrance Sunday, the people of Kington gather at the memorial when once again the name of Frank Harvey Parker is remembered, along with all those who gave the ultimate sacrifice during World War One.

