

# George James Turner

Private

25053

**1st Battalion, Kings Shropshire Light Infantry**



In 1871, Kington man James Turner, married a laundress from Pembridge, Ann Evans. Their first child, Eliza arrived in 1875 and in 1877 the focus of this biography, George James Turner, was born. George was followed by Alice in 1879, Phillip in 1885 and finally Florence in 1891. James was employed as a Grocers Porter in Kington and in the 1881 and 1891 census returns the family were living at 3 Prospect Row, Common Close, just off The Square in Kington. George attended Kington Boys School, a short walk from his home up Board School Lane. By the age 14 he had left school and taken a job as a Porter/Errand Boy. Scrutiny of the 1891 and 1901 censuses suggests that at some point between the two the family moved to 6 Headbrook. In 1901, George now 24 and still living at home, was employed as a Chemists Porter. Marriage records reveal that in 1906 George married Fanny Lewis, a domestic servant from West Hope Hill a hamlet close to Canon Pyon. The 1911 census informs that George and Fanny had established their home at The Haven in Burghill on the outskirts of Hereford, where they were the proud parents of two boys, Arthur born 1908 and Phillip two years later in 1910. George had taken a job in the local area as a Domestic Gardener. This picture of domestic bliss was brought into sharp focus when war against a marauding Boche was declared in August 1914. Regrettably most of Georges service records do not survive but from those which do we know he was not one of those who first rushed to enlist in 1914/1915. Research into his service number suggests George did in fact enlist in December 1915, becoming Private, 25053 Turner of the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI). At

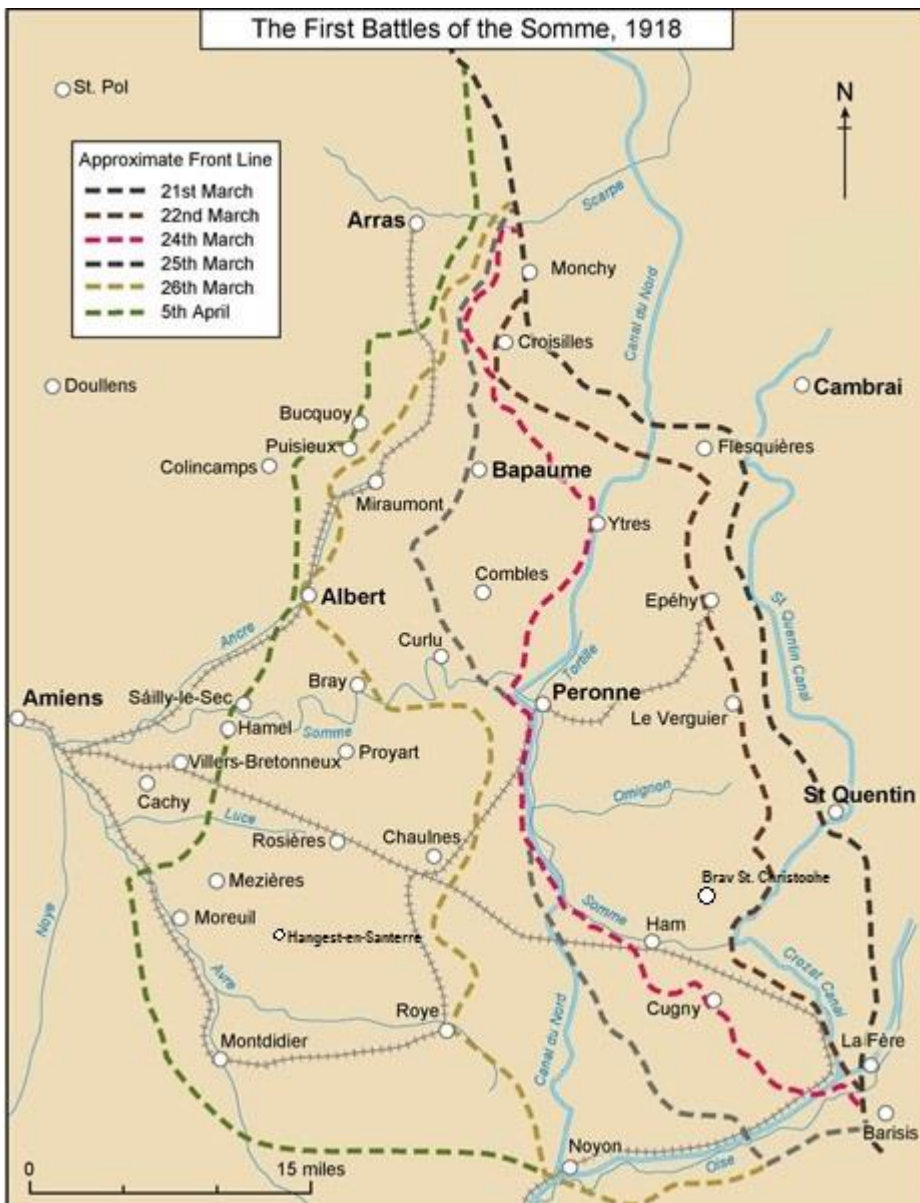
the age of 38 George would have been considered a very mature soldier when he enlisted in Hereford.

Georges initial training took him to Pembroke Dock after which he was posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion KSLI. This battalion had been one of the first wave of regular soldiers to enter into France on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1914. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion formed part of the 16th Brigade of the 6th Division and as such took part in most of the major engagements of the war.



German Reinforcements heading for the Western Front and Operation Micheal 1918

A fully established front line battalion, George would have been posted to it to replace earlier casualties.



To gain some appreciation of what George had to endure 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 overstretched 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 brought an end to the war on 11th November 1918. So, with this brief overview of the fighting in 1918 in mind, I will turn my attention more directly to the 1st Battalion the King's Shropshire Light Infantry and examine what happened to them, and more particularly George, during the German's headlong advance to the coast in March 1918.



In early 1918 the 6<sup>th</sup> Division occupied a front on the line Noreuil-Lagnicourt-Morchies, as seen in the map on the previous page. The trenches occupied by the 1st KSLI had been wrested from the enemy during the Battle of Cambrai in November 1917. Rudimentary repairs had been carried out to the trench network but generally they were in a poor state. By 1918 a shortage of manpower meant Infantry Brigades were reduced from four battalions to just three, such was the case of 16th Brigade, hence frontline defences were stretched and thin. Allied with such deficiencies was the knowledge that the enemy, following the collapse of resistance on the Russian Eastern Front, were reinforcing for an imminent massed assault, Operation Michael.

The battalion war diary reveals the rising tensions evident in the first three weeks of March. At the start of the month the battalion was positioned in frontline trenches at Lagnicourt. The weather was very cold, but conditions were described as 'quiet'. On the 5th they were relieved by the 9th Norfolk Regiment and marched from the frontline to Vaulx and into Brigade reserve. Here recuperation, training, inspections and kit cleaning were the order of the day. On the 14th what is described as 'unusual enemy activity' was witnessed and the battalion were repeatedly ordered to 'stand to', in readiness to repel the anticipated German attack. Nothing happened. The battalion were again moved into frontline trenches and relieved the 1st Buffs (1<sup>st</sup> Royal East Kent Regiment), all was quiet. The diary ably describes the palpable anxiety amongst Staff Officers who knew something was developing but did not know when the attack would come. This sense of 'uneasiness' continued until the 20th March.

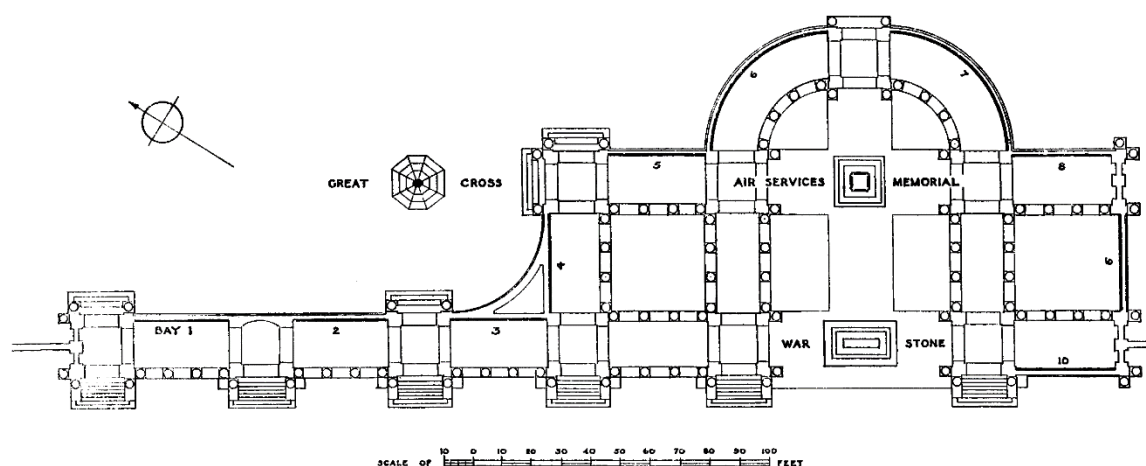
At 5am on the 21st March the period of anticipation was brought to an abrupt end when the enemy launched Operation Micheal. The initial fighting became known as the Battle of Saint-Quentin and was to prove devastating for the 1<sup>st</sup> KSLI. After five hours of intense bombardment, where high explosive and gas shells rained down on the frontlines, the German infantry advanced at speed and in overwhelming numbers. A desperate attempt to hold the line was made by the 6<sup>th</sup> Division with heavy losses inflicted upon the advancing Germans. On the left of the Shropshire's the 59th Division were forced back leaving the battalions left flank exposed. The heavy bombardment had annihilated the men in the front trenches and by 8am the enemy had forced a path through on the right also. The diary records that the battalion were virtually surrounded when an uncompromising order was given by the Battalion Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel H. M. Smith, that every man should fight to the last. Virtually surrounded, a general bayonet 'melee' ensued from which few KSLI men emerged. By sunset only a handful survived but they held their ground and a quiet night followed. The Brigade regrouped and by morning the remnants of the 1st KSLI were wedged between the 1st Buffs and the 2nd Yorkshire and Lancashire Regiments. The enemy re-engaged and desperate fighting was witnessed. Such was the press of enemy soldiers that it was clear the frontline could not hold. The artillery had been ordered to retire leaving the infantrymen to stand alone against a rampant enemy. The inevitable happened and at 3:10pm

when the enemy outflanked the allied lines who were forced to fall back or die. The battalion regrouped around Vaulx and at dusk were ordered to retire to the G.H.Q. line at Vraucourt. The War diary records that during the 21st and 22nd March 1918 the 1st King's Shropshire Light Infantry suffered the heaviest fighting the battalion had every witnessed. An unbelievable statement considering the battalion had been fighting continuously since the beginning of the war in 1914. Quite frankly, the battalion was decimated. 21 officers and 492 other ranks were killed, wounded or missing. At roll-call that evening only 77 other ranks answered their names. However, such was the 'esprit de corps' of this band of brothers the diary records that the regiment had 'earned for itself the admiration of all who fought with them and added fresh laurels to the history of a gallant regiment'. Early in the morning of the 23rd the battalion was relieved and retired into Brigade reserve at Achiet-Le-Grand. On the **22nd March 1918**, at the age of 41 and during the desperate fighting at Lagnicourt, Private 25053, George James Turner, 1st Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry, was killed in action.



George's death is remembered in Bay 7 of the Arras Memorial, which is located at the entrance to Faubourg-d'Amiens Cemetery in the western part of Arras. The memorial commemorates nearly 35000 servicemen who died in the Arras sector, between the spring of

1916 and 7<sup>th</sup> August 1918, who have no known grave. His loss is also commemorated on Burghill War Memorial and his name was read out at the



LAY-OUT OF THE PANELS (OR BAYS).

Kington Peace Service held at St. Mary's Church Kington on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1919. In recognition of his bravery and contribution to the war effort George was awarded the Victory and British War Medals. In addition, on the 12<sup>th</sup> August 1919 his final pay accounts were made up and a grand sum of £17 9s 0d was forwarded to his widow Fanny. This included a £9 War Gratuity in recognition of his sacrifice, which today equates to approximately £500, paltry recompense for the loss of a husband and father. In those desperate days of March 1918 George gave his life fighting for his country, such sacrifice must never be forgotten.

