

Horace Hitch

Private

52877

1/7th Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers



Horace Hitch was born into a large family in 1899. His father was John Hitch, a poultry dealer, originally from Darlston on the outskirts of Walsall. John was married three times, initially to Frances Lowe, with whom he had three children, Sarah Elizabeth 1867(Lizzie), Mary Adelaide 1869 and Samuel Lowe Hitch 1870. Sadly, Frances died in 1875 and for six years John brought up his three children on his own. In 1881 he remarried; a girl called Emily Hartland from West Bromwich. John and Emily appear to have had no further children and poor Emily passes away in 1894 aged just 40. Undeterred John was still looking for love and in 1896 married Mary Jane Bentley, a girl from Broseley. John was twenty-seven years older than Mary nonetheless, at the age of fifty-seven he embarked on producing his second family and what a huge family it was. Shortly after their marriage Minnie arrived (1897) followed by John Victor (1898), Priscilla (1899), Horace (1899), Kathleen Mary (1901), Violet (1902), Emily (1903), David (1904), Gladys Clarie (1907) and finally Alice who was born in 1911. By this time John was a stately seventy-one years old and Mary was a mature forty-four. Sadly, neither Kathleen nor Emily reached their first birthdays nonetheless, by any measure, this was a large family. Census returns reveal how the family grew but also how it moved around. In 1901 they were living at 34 Hergest Mill Cottages in Kington but by 1911 the family were

all living, and growing, in Combe Moor, near Byton. John was still working on a temporary basis as a poulterers' assistant. We know the family moved back to Kington after 1911 because the Kington Times records the fact Mary Jane fell afoul of the law in September 1915, the family at the time living in Baynhams Yard, Bridge Street. Mary was found guilty of stealing two pieces of meat from two different victims. On the second occasion Horace had been given a piece of meat, by Mr Thomas the butcher for deliver to the Talbot Inn. Mrs Hitch had taken the meat from her son, with the intension of keeping it for herself. Fined sixteen shillings she was told that if she failed to pay within the month the fine would be replaced by sixteen days in prison. Her fate on this occasion is unknown however, less than a year later she was again in front of the magistrates, this time as the victim of an assault. Mary claimed she had been assaulted by a neighbour in Baynhams Yard. The defendant accused Mrs Hitch of acquiring items from tradespeople using her neighbour's names, this had led to a fracas. The case was dismissed with both parties being warned that if such disturbances continued, criminal action would be taken. No further incidents were reported so we can assume neighbourly relations improved after this unfortunate incident.

The exigencies of World War One ensured both John Victor and Horace were involved, John Victor being one of the first to enlist in November 1914 and Horace, because of his tender years, towards the end of the war. Initially Horace was placed in the Liverpool Regiment as Private 86597 Hitch. As circumstances dictated, he was then moved to the 1/7th Battalion the Lancashire Regiment, his service number

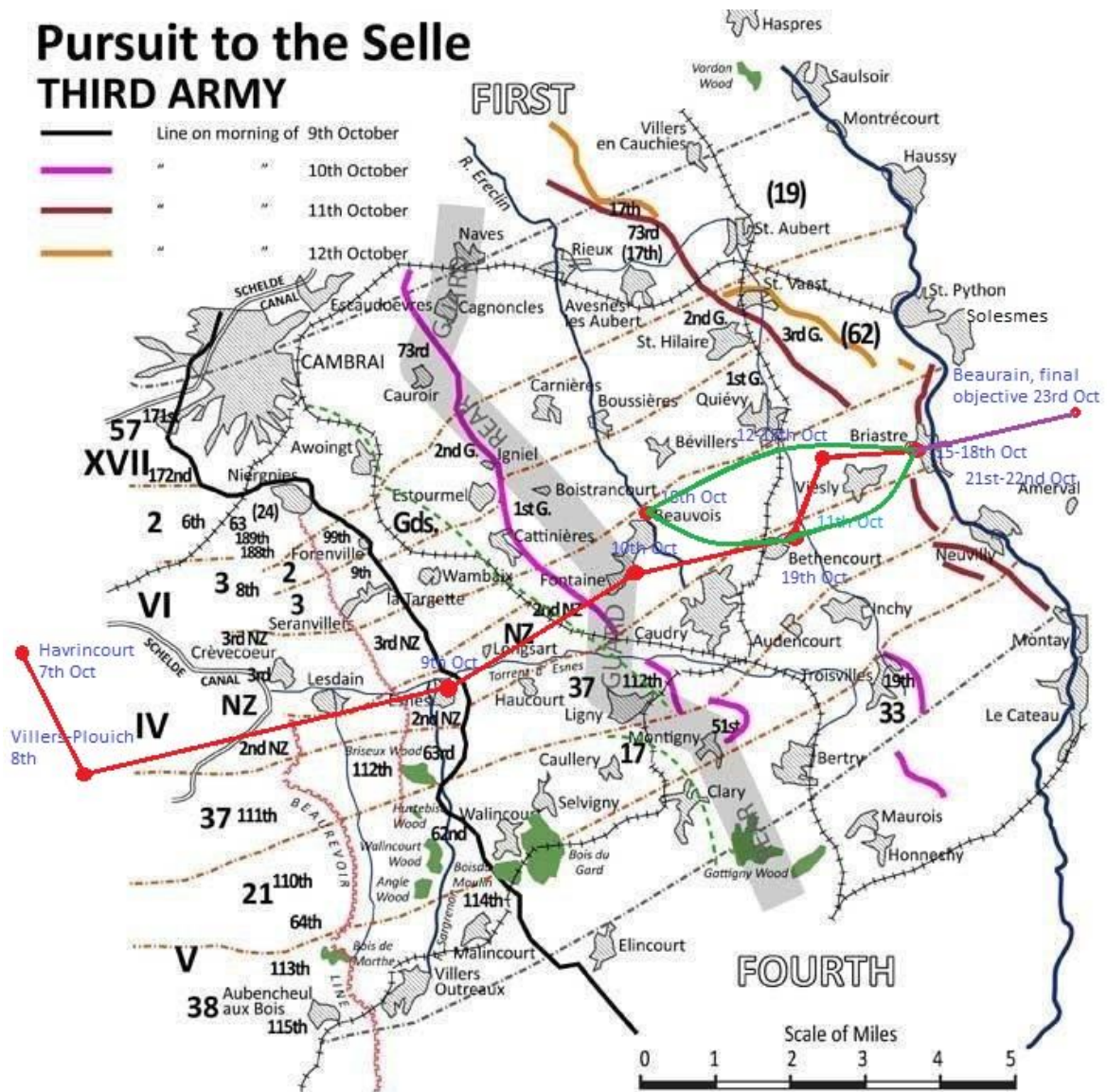


changing to 52877. The 1/7th Lancashire Regiment had been formed at the beginning of the war and served at Gallipoli. When withdrawn in December 1915 they were moved to Egypt and the Middle East theatre of war. In February 1917 the regiment were withdrawn from the middle east and sent to the Western Front, landing at Marseilles on 27th. Forming part of the 42nd (East Lancashire) Division, they were re-equipped for trench warfare and entered the frontline at Epehy, as part of III Corps in Fourth Army. In September they moved north to Flanders and saw

action at the Battle of Passchendaele before being moving to the coast at Nieuport. November 1917 had them at Givenchy constructing concrete defence works. The

German Spring Offensive, although expected, had to be halted. The 1/7th Lancashire Regiment were first involved on the Somme repelling the enemies rapid advance. Later they were involved in the counter attack on the Hindenburg Line and the final 100-day advance in Picardy, designed to eject the aggressor from foreign soil, forcing him back into his home country, Germany. When the very young Horace joined his regiment is unknown but the official war diary provides a flavour of the experiences he endured.

The Battle of Cambrai, fought between the 8th -10th October 1918, saw British and New Zealand forces eject the enemy from this strategically significant location. The action took less time than expected and casualties were thankfully low. The allies continued to pursue the enemy catching up with them on the eleventh at Le Cateau.



The above map illustrates the extent of the pursuit to the River Selle, the Lancashire Fusiliers at the centre of the Third Army advance. The 1/7th battalion war diary illuminates the pursuit of the retreating German army. At Villers-Plouich on the eighth, Esnes on the ninth, Fontaine-au-Pire on the tenth and Bethencourt by the eleventh. From the twelfth to the fifteenth they were in supporting trenches behind Briastre, while preparations were made to continue the advance. On the 15th the 1/7th Lancashire Fusiliers moved into frontline trenches and awaited the order to advance over the River Selle. The enemy were dug in on the opposite bank of the river and a mighty showdown was inevitable. Field Marshall Haig assessed the situation and, sensing the enemy were exhausted, devised a plan to attack at night, crossing the river at its narrowest points, initially using planks for infantry and later pontoons for artillery. The initial advance was undertaken by the British Fourth Army at Le Cateau, to the south of the Lancashire Fusiliers. The attack was preceded by a huge artillery barrage designed to soften up enemy positions and cut defensive barbed wire. At 5:20am on the seventeenth the British Fourth Army attacked over a ten-mile-wide front with infantry crossing the river following closely behind an orchestrated artillery barrage. By nightfall, Le Cateau had fallen. In the early hours of the twentieth it was the turn of the Third Army, who advanced across the river and attacked what was by now a battered German Army. On the twenty-third, with the river now successfully forded by allied forces, the combined First, Third and Fourth Armies attacked en-masse forcing the enemy into a full-scale but organised retreat. The 1/7th Lancashire Fusiliers were at the forefront of this attack and successfully attained their primary objective, Beaurain, by 8:40am. The Second New Zealand Brigade passed through them and continued to press the enemy. At 12 noon, their part in the battle accomplished, the 1/7th Lancashire Fusiliers were relieved and made for the relative shelter of Viesly.

At some point in this frenetic action Horace was injured and succumbed to those injuries on **19th October 1918**. It is probable he was injured in the trenches at Briastre while his battalion awaited the order to advance over the Selle River. Unbeknown to Horace, had he lived for another three weeks, it was likely he would have survived the war. Edwin John Prittie produced this graphic image of fighting on 17th and 18th October at the Selle River. The horrors of war and determination of allied troops to force the enemy back, are clearly evident.



THE BATTLE OF LA SELLE RIVER—"Thus, at the end of two days of stubborn fighting, October 17th and 18th, the Germans were pushed still further back to the line of the Sambre Canal. They were making a desperate effort to stave off defeat, but the end was inevitable."

One can only imagine the distress his death caused the family back in Kington. Horace was just nineteen when he lost his fight for life. Originally buried close to where they died on the banks of the Selle River, after the armistice twenty-three members of the 42nd (East Lancashire) Division were reinterred at St Aubert British Cemetery. Horace was one of these and now is at rest in plot V.E.22. This small, remote, cemetery is located outside the village of St. Aubert, eight miles east of Cambrai.



St. Aubert British Cemetery

It took eight months for Horace's army accounts to be finalised. On 24th June 1919 his father received £15 19s 0d, which include £6 War Gratuity as recognition of his son's sacrifice. This brave young soldier was also awarded the Victory and British War medals.

Horace was not the only Hitch boy to have served in the war. His older brother, John Victor, had enlisted into the Herefordshire Regiment in November 1914. From there he was transferred in the 6th Gloucestershire Regiment, service number 267375. John made the rank of Lance Corporal and survived the war. He was discharged from military service on 4th March 1919 with a disability pension. In 1922 he married Edith Morris in Kington and seventeen years later, in the 1939 Register, he and Edith were living at No.2 Brick Cottages, Elsdon, on Spond Lane. John Victor led a full life and lived until 1975 where he passed away in Leominster.

John Hitch, Horace's father, lived into his 82nd year, dying in Kington in 1921. Well respected and remembered, a fine epitaph was recorded in the Kington Times. John's third wife, Mary Jane, was much younger than him and in 1925 she remarried, this time to William Watkins of Kington. Sadly, she only lived for a further six years and died in Kington towards the end of 1931, having reached the admirable age of seventy-nine.

Horace Hitch's time serving his country was short lived. He died too young and his full potential was never realised. For this reason, his sacrifice must never be forgotten.

